Paradise of the Blind

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF DUONG THU HUONG

Duong Thu Huong was born in 1947 in the Thai Binh province in North Vietnam. She studied at the Vietnamese Ministry of Culture's Arts College and volunteered to serve in a women's youth brigade on the front lines of the Vietnam War, supporting the Communist Party. Duong spent the next seven years giving theatrical performances for the North Vietnamese troops, tending to the wounded, and burying the dead. She was one of three survivors of the 40 volunteers in the women's youth brigade. After Vietnam's reunification in 1975, Duong became increasingly critical of the Communist government, observing the conditions in South Vietnam compared with North Vietnam. She published her first book, *Journey in Childhood*, in 1985. *Paradise of the Blind* (1988) was her fourth novel. Soon after its publication, she was labeled as a "dissident writer" and was expelled from the Communist Party. She was then imprisoned in 1991 for remarks criticizing the Communist Party. Most of her fiction is now published outside Vietnam due to censorship within the country. After her imprisonment, she worked mostly as a translator in Vietnam to earn a living, while publishing her novels and stories abroad. She was then made a Chevalier of the Ordre des Arts et Des Lettres by the French government in 1994. In 2005, she earned the PEN Award, which recognizes writers who have been persecuted for their work. Duong moved to Paris in 2006 and lives there currently.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Paradise of the Blind takes place between the 1950s and 1980s in Vietnam. Vietnam was under the control of the French from the late 19th century until the 1950s. In 1945, communists and Vietnamese nationalists combined under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh, who declared Vietnam's independence and ultimately won the guerilla war for independence in 1954. Vietnam was then divided along the 17th parallel: North Vietnam became a communist state, supported by the Soviet Union, and South Vietnam became a non-communist state, backed by the U.S. From 1953 to 1956, the North Vietnamese government undertook its land reform campaign, the effects of which are seen in *Paradise of the Blind*. Privately owned land was redistributed to over 1.5 million peasants. Tens of thousands of villagers were arrested and nearly 100,000 farmers were sent to forced labor camps by courts because they were viewed as being part of a higher landowning class. Only a year later, however, the North Vietnamese government recognized that the land reform movement had been a mistake and had caused widespread social unrest. The government then began a campaign to undo it, which was called the "Rectification of Errors." People were sent home from labor camps and allowed to reclaim their land. (In *Paradise of the Blind*, it is by this campaign that Aunt Tam is able to recover her house and land.) Meanwhile, following their success against the French, the North Vietnamese then began a guerilla campaign to reunite North and South Vietnam. The United States provided financial support to the South Vietnamese, followed by military support in 1961. In 1964, President Lyndon Johnson sent even more American forces into South Vietnam, following an alleged attack on U.S. ships in the Gulf of Tonkin by North Vietnamese forces. The United States had committed over half a million troops to Vietnam by 1969 but could not defeat the Viet Cong forces. A cease-fire agreement was signed in 1973, and American forces withdrew. In 1975, North Vietnamese forces captured the South Vietnamese capital of Saigon. The country was then formally unified in 1976 as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Then, in the mid-1980s, a wave of change began to sweep over communist societies throughout the world, stimulated by President Mikhail Gorbachev's policy in the Soviet Union of *perestroika*, or "openness," and economic reform. Vietnam's ties with the Soviet Union led to many Vietnamese people becoming "exported workers" in Russia, as Hang does in *Paradise of the Blind*. In 1986, the Vietnamese government adopted a policy of "renovation," which included free market reforms and cultural liberalization.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Other works by Vietnamese writers during the same time period include Pham Thi Hoai's *The Crystal Messenger* and Bao Ninh's *The Sorrow of War*—both of which, like *Paradise of the Blind*, have also been censored by the Vietnamese government. More recent literature that examines the toll of the Communist government in Vietnam includes Nguyen Phan Que Mai's *The Mountains Sing* and Viet Thanh Nguyen's *Refugees* and *The Sympathizer*. Duong has also written many other thematically similar books, including *Novel without a Name*, *Memories of a Pure Spring*, *No Man's Land*, and *Beyond Illusions*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Paradise of the Blind
- **When Written:** 1987-1988
- **Where Written:** Vietnam
- **When Published:** 1988
- **Literary Period:** Modern Realism
- **Genre:** Political Fiction
- **Setting:** Hanoi, Vietnam; Moscow, Russia

- **Climax:** Hang's Aunt Tam dies and Hang decides to sell the family home.
- **Antagonist:** Communism; Familial Duty; Uncle Chinh
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

A First. *Paradise of the Blind* was the first Vietnamese novel published in the United States in English.

Mixed Messages. In 1987, one year before the novel was published, the Communist Party encouraged writers to reassert their role as social critics. Ironically, Duong and other writers of the time were viewed as too frank and too widely read, and many of the authors who responded to this call were subsequently banned from publishing their books in Vietnam by the Communist Party.

PLOT SUMMARY

Hang is a young Vietnamese woman living in Russia as an "exported worker" in the 1980s when she receives a telegram from her Uncle Chinh. Chinh informs her that he is sick and asks her to come visit him in Moscow. Hang is hesitant to do so, as they do not have a close relationship and she has just recovered from illness herself, but she feels a duty to her mother, Que, to support Que's only brother.

Much of *Paradise of the Blind* is told in flashbacks as Hang is on the train to Moscow. First, Hang recounts when Que told her about her father, Ton, for the first time. Ton was a schoolteacher and Que (whose parents died when she was 19) worked as a street vendor to keep her parents' house. They fell in love and married early into their courtship. But when Uncle Chinh returned from the war that liberated Vietnam from France, he informed Que that Ton (whose family were farmers) was part of the landowning class, and that they must be punished for being exploiters. Uncle Chinh was a member of the Communist Party and began to institute land reform. Ton fled the village, while his sister (Tam) and mother (Nhieu) were publicly denounced. Nhieu fell ill and died as a result, and Tam's land was taken from her and redistributed. Que, meanwhile, tried to find Ton but was unable to. Soon after, Uncle Chinh left the village to join the Land Reform Section, and the Rectification of Errors began. In this campaign, the Communist Party recognized that land reform had simply caused chaos and discontent, and the Party reclassified farmers as middle peasantry and reversed much of its land redistribution. The villagers were angry with Chinh due to his involvement in land reform, and because of their hostility towards him and Que, Que sold her parents' home and moved to Hanoi.

Ten years later, Hang is born, and she and her mother have a deeply affectionate relationship as Hang grows up in Hanoi.

One day, when Hang is nine years old, Uncle Chinh arrives in the city after not having seen Que for ten years. He tells her that as a merchant, Que is now part of the exploiting class, and he suggests she get a job as a factory worker. Que protests, saying that she needs to make enough money to support her daughter. Uncle Chinh then asks Que to give him his share of the money from the sale of their parents' house. Que tells him she will go to collect the money from their old village and bring it back to him.

When Que and Hang travel to Que's old village, Hang continues to press Que for more information about her father. Que tells her that Ton had gone to another village, had remarried, and had two sons. But when he heard about the Rectification of Errors, he returned to Que's village and they had consummated their love once more, which is how Hang had been conceived. When Hang and Que arrive in Que's old village, they meet Hang's Aunt Tam for the first time. Tam is thrilled to meet Hang and gives them a feast's worth of food. Aunt Tam also provides some information about what happened after the Rectification of Errors. Aunt Tam worked tirelessly to restore her home to its former glory and made it a goal to become rich to honor her ancestors. She criticizes Uncle Chinh for leading the land reform and also informs Que of what happened to Ton after she got pregnant. He had returned to his other wife and asked for permission to stay in the village while Que was pregnant. When his wife refused, he committed suicide in shame. Aunt Tam says that this would never have happened if Uncle Chinh hadn't persecuted Ton.

Que and Hang stay for a week in the village, and when they leave to go back to Hanoi, Aunt Tam gives Hang food, **gold earrings, and two rings** to take back with her. Hang is stunned, thinking the gifts are too extravagant for a nine-year-old. When they return to the city, Que gives Uncle Chinh the money that he requested. Tet falls soon after, and Aunt Tam visits Hanoi to give Hang huge amounts of food for the New Year's celebration, which she says is an "offering to Ton's memory." She also gives Hang a huge wad of bills to spend as she wants.

Spring and summer pass, and Que repairs a wall in their kitchen. Hang suggests they sell the earrings Aunt Tam gave her to repair their leaky roof, but Que refuses, saying that she'll be able to pay for the repairs by Tet that year. Hang notes that since she met Aunt Tam, Que had become more distant. One day soon after, Que hears that Uncle Chinh is sick. When they track him down at his house, they discover that he isn't that sick, and they meet his wife (whom they call Aunt Chinh) and his sons, Tuan and Tu. Both Uncle Chinh and Aunt Chinh are quite cold to Que, and she and Hang leave quickly. But Que notices that they don't have much to eat, and she sends Hang back to their house the next day with large amounts of food. Hang is frustrated that Que wants to do so much for Uncle Chinh's family while they care very little about her. When Tet arrives that year, Que buys enough food for a huge banquet

and gives it to Uncle Chinh and his family but makes no effort to repair their roof.

A year passes, and Que once again buys large amounts of food for Uncle Chinh for their Tet feast. A few days before Tet, Aunt Tam also arrives with her own feast for Hang. Hang is disgusted, knowing that Que had been counting on Aunt Tam to give them food so that Que could spend her savings on Uncle Chinh.

In the present, on the train to Moscow, Hang thinks about the landscape of her homeland and how different it is from the Russian countryside. She had always loved looking at the **duckweed flowers** but had also come to realize as she grew up how they masked the poverty and destitution of the ponds and cities that surrounded the flowers.

Hang then returns to her reveries, flashing back to her acceptance to the Institute for the Social Sciences. Aunt Tam decides to host a massive banquet for Aunt Tam's entire village in Hang's honor. When Hang leaves to go to the village, her mother is disdainful of the fact that she does not have the means to throw Hang a banquet. Hang protests, saying she and her mother have always lived simply and happily together. Hang thinks about how all she wants is her mother's love, while her mother wants the approval of Uncle Chinh and his family. Hang goes to Aunt Tam's for the banquet, which is very lavish. At the banquet, Hang plays the part of the "successful niece" while Aunt Tam entertains her guests. Aunt Tam also criticizes the village vice president, Mr. Duong, as she entertains her guests with stories about various government leaders.

Back on the train, Hang recalls a year prior, when Uncle Chinh demanded for her to come to Moscow the first time. She had brought him a suitcase of goods, which he then traded on the black market. She was frustrated that he hadn't told her about news of her mother and had only been interested in the contents of her suitcase. On the train to Moscow in the present, Hang befriends an older man, whom she calls her traveling companion. He defends her when two drunk men on the train try to harass her.

After the banquet at Aunt Tam's, Hang returns to her home and starts college. She and Que have a period where they are happier together until the next year, when Uncle Chinh is diagnosed with diabetes. Que starts to save money for him by cutting spending on their own food. Hang loses a substantial amount of weight, to the point where she suggests selling a ring that Aunt Tam gave her so that they can eat. In response, Que screams at her to shut up. The next day, Aunt Tam visits them, and learning of the situation, she gives Hang food and asks for the earrings and rings back. When Que lies, saying that she gave the rings to friends to invest in a business, Aunt Tam tells Que that she refuses to let Que use her money to feed Uncle Chinh. After that, things start to degenerate between Que and Hang, until one day, when Hang confronts Que about lying to Aunt Tam, Que kicks her out of the house.

Hang then stays in a dormitory at her high school and continues to attend college. Aunt Tam gives her more money and food than she could need, but Hang misses her mother. One day, however, Hang learns from a neighbor that her mother was hit by a car and had to have her leg amputated. Hang reveals that this is why she had to move to Russia; she had to work there in order to support her mother.

In the present, Hang arrives in Moscow. She finds that Uncle Chinh is no longer in the hospital but is cooking and housekeeping for Vietnamese graduate students. The students mock him, and one whom Hang calls "the Bohemian" criticizes him for espousing strict Communist Party ideals while also breaking those ideals by trading on the black market. The next morning, the Bohemian (whom Hang realizes attended university with her) tells Hang that Uncle Chinh called her there to get money from her, and to get her help selling his goods on the black market because she speaks fluent Russian. The Bohemian gives Hang money to cover Uncle Chinh's shipping expenses, which Hang gives Uncle Chinh before leaving abruptly.

When Hang returns to the dormitory where she lives with other exported workers, she immediately receives another telegram informing her that Aunt Tam is dying. Hang returns to Hanoi and stops briefly at her mother's home, but Hang is frustrated once more when Que seems more concerned about Uncle Chinh than about her. Hang then goes to Aunt Tam's house and finds that Aunt Tam is very frail. Aunt Tam gives her the key to a trunk that holds all of the jewelry she had been saving as well as a map to where she has buried Hang's inheritance. Aunt Tam tells Hang to keep up their family's home. When Aunt Tam dies, Hang arranges the three memorial ceremonies for her but decides not to live in the house. She thinks that she cannot waste her life keeping up "the legacy of past crimes," and she dreams of returning to a university auditorium and traveling to a "distant port where a plane could land and take off."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Hang – Hang is the protagonist and the narrator of *Paradise of the Blind*. Raised by her mother, Que, in Hanoi, Hang doesn't know who her father is for the first 10 years of her life. However, she thinks back on her childhood as an idyllic time because, even though she and Que are poor, Hang feels comfort and genuine love from Que. Then, when she is 10 years old, she finally learns the story of what happened to her father, Ton—he and his family had been persecuted by Que's brother (Uncle Chinh) and he ultimately committed suicide. Around the same time, Hang meets both her Aunt Tam (Ton's older sister) and her Uncle Chinh for the first time, both of whom introduce

more complicated dynamics into her family. Aunt Tam gives her **jewelry** and food, wanting to provide for Hang because she considers Hang to be the heir of her family line. Hang is grateful for these gifts, but also knows that they don't represent genuine love or emotional support. Meanwhile, after reconnecting with Uncle Chinh, Que devotes more and more of her energy and money to his family, particularly as she becomes jealous of Aunt Tam's ability to spend money on Hang. Hang becomes more and more upset as this goes on, increasingly missing her mother's love. However, Hang's path drastically changes when her mother loses a leg in a car accident, and Hang is forced to drop out of college and work in a textile factory in Russia. By the end of the book, when Hang returns to Vietnam, she finds herself disillusioned about many things she once thought beautiful in her childhood, able to see the poverty and stagnation that this beauty masked. When Aunt Tam dies in the book's final pages, Hang ultimately decides to turn away from her family entirely. Seeing how debilitating the sacrifices that Que and Aunt Tam have made for their family, Hang finds liberation in choosing her own path and pursuing a life that will make her happy.

Que – Que is Hang's mother, Uncle Chinh's older sister, and Ton's wife. Que's parents die when she is 19 years old. Soon after, she marries Ton, but when Uncle Chinh returns from the war against the French and persecutes Ton during land reform, Ton flees. They reunite years later and conceive Hang, but afterwards Ton disappears (Que only learns later that he committed suicide). Que then raises Hang as a single mother in Hanoi, supporting her daughter by working as a street vendor. Hang frequently describes how the only part of Que's beauty and youth that remained in adulthood was her white teeth. When Hang is 10 years old, Que and Uncle Chinh reconnect after not having seen each other for 10 years. Despite Uncle Chinh's persecution of her husband, Que feels that she has to support him as the heir to the family. While Aunt Tam gives lavish amounts of food, money, and **jewelry** to Hang, Que spends her money to buy food and medicine for Uncle Chinh and his family, and she and Hang become more distant as a result. Their relationship hits a breaking point when Que sells jewelry that Aunt Tam gave to Hang in order to pay for Uncle Chinh's diabetes medication, while spending so little money on food for herself and Hang. Hang tells her mother she is hungry, they argue, and Que kicks Hang out of the house. Soon after, however, Que loses a leg when she is hit by a car, and Hang sacrifices her education to work in Russia in order to support her mother. When Hang returns to Vietnam, however, they become estranged yet again. This is largely due to the fact that Que seemed more concerned about Uncle Chinh's well-being in Russia than Que's own, and Hang chooses to spend three months in Aunt Tam's home after her death rather than returning to Hanoi with her mother. Ultimately, Duong questions the value of Que's sacrifices for her family at her own expense, as Hang chooses to forego her family.

Aunt Tam – Aunt Tam is Hang's aunt and Ton's older sister. She is an educated, hardworking woman who keeps up the rice paddies for Ton's mother, Nhieu. During land reform, she and Nhieu are publicly denounced, and Nhieu falls ill and dies. Later, Aunt Tam learns that Ton committed suicide as a result of the fallout of land reform. Having her land stripped away, Aunt Tam works exceptionally hard to make a living for herself. She lives only off of potatoes, cultivates a bad piece of land that she is given during redistribution, and invents a machine to make flour. Her body is broken and gnarled from the labor that she had to do to survive. When her land is restored to her following the Rectification of Errors, she works even harder to build up her wealth as a way to honor her ancestors. This is also the reason that she gives enormous amounts of food, money, and **jewelry** to Hang, because Hang is her closest relative and is therefore the heir to the family line. This causes tension between Aunt Tam and Que, as Que is upset that Aunt Tam is able to provide more for her daughter than she is. Aunt Tam returns the hatred, particularly because she sees how loyal Que is to Uncle Chinh, whom she views as the enemy of her family. At the end of the novel, Aunt Tam is very ill and tells Hang she is leaving her everything she has and asks Hang to keep the house as the "altar to their ancestors." Yet Hang sees how even though Aunt Tam had amassed a great deal of wealth, the sacrifices that she made in order to honor her ancestors have not made her happy—which is why Hang chooses not to honor her Aunt's wishes after she passes away and instead tries to find happiness elsewhere.

Uncle Chinh – Uncle Chinh is Hang's uncle and Que's younger brother. He is one year younger than Que but is considered the heir to the family because he is the oldest male. After their parents die when he is 18, Chinh goes off to fight with the Liberation Army to gain Vietnamese independence from France. After the war, Chinh becomes a Communist Party official and a leader of the land reform movement in his and Que's village. When he learns that Que is now married to Ton, whose family are farmers and therefore members of the "landowning class," he tells her to find another husband and persecutes Ton, Aunt Tam, and Nhieu mercilessly. Following land reform and the Rectification of Errors, Chinh leaves the village and becomes reviled there for the tyranny he carried out. When he reconnects with Que 10 years after Hang is born, he is married to Thanh and has two sons, Tuan and Tu. He is a strict adherent of communist ideology and is often cruel to Que, whom he degradingly calls a "businesswoman" because she is a street vendor. Although Chinh uses harsh language and presents himself as an ideological purist, Duong illustrates that his words are simply a mask, and in reality he is greedy and hypocritical. For instance, he accepts money and food from Que and doesn't reciprocate, even when she is hit by a car. And when he visits Moscow while Hang is living in Russia, he manipulates her into taking long journeys to Moscow in an attempt to enlist her help in trading on the black market there.

Hang sees through his greed and is constantly frustrated by her mother's continued efforts to support him, despite the fact that he seems to care very little about Que. As the primary representative of the Communist Party in the book, Ching illustrates how the Party is more concerned with the appearance of being ethical than actually being so.

Ton – Ton is Hang's father, Que's husband and Aunt Tam's younger brother. Hang only learns of Ton's identity and the story of what happened to him when she is 10 years old. Ton was a teacher who was posted to Que's village just after her parents died, and they married within the year. When Uncle Chinh returned from the war, however, he told Que that Ton's family was part of the landowning class because they were farmers, and that they should be denounced and punished. Afraid of Chinh's persecution, Ton fled the village, remarried, and had two sons. But when he heard about the Rectification of Errors, and that Chinh had left the village, he returned to find Que and they conceived Hang. Later, however, when he tries to get permission from his second wife to help Que during her pregnancy, his wife forbade him from doing so. In shame, Ton then drowned himself in a river. Hang spends the first 10 years of her life knowing nothing about her father, and she feels his absence in her life keenly. Additionally, much of Aunt Tam's affection for Hang is born of her desire to honor Ton's memory and continue his family line.

The Bohemian – The Bohemian is a classmate of Hang's at the Institute for the Social Sciences. Hang nicknames him in this way because of his resemblance to a famous movie character. After Hang drops out of school, she reunites with the Bohemian in Moscow, where Uncle Chinh is working for him and a group of his friends. The Bohemian criticizes Uncle Chinh for his espousal of ideological purity in the Communist Party even while trading on the black market. He also becomes a good friend to Hang, helping her with her exit visa when she leaves Russia and returns to Vietnam.

Hang's Traveling Companion – The traveling companion is an older gentleman who sits next to Hang on the train to Moscow. Although they don't speak much, he is a comforting presence for Hang and protects her from two drunk men who harass her on the train. As they part ways in Moscow, Hang thinks that they could be father and daughter. He serves as an example of the fact that one can rely on people outside of their own family, and that adhering to familial duty at the expense of other relationships is not the only way to live.

Thanh/Aunt Chinh – Thanh is Uncle Chinh's wife and Tuan and Tu's mother. She is an intimidating woman and a teacher at the Communist Youth League School. Hang describes her as a bully and points out that, despite being a teacher, she has little education herself. Like Uncle Chinh, Aunt Chinh outwardly adheres to and espouses strict Communist Party policies. Yet in reality, she greedily appreciates the food that Que buys for them and hides it from her comrades.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The Cripple – Madame Mieu's son, who sings all day in the streets of Hanoi, is known as "the cripple" throughout the book. Hang comes to realize that his **song** represents unfulfilled dreams, as his (unspecified) disability and his poverty prevent him from achieving much.

Mr. Duong – Mr. Duong is the vice president of Aunt Tam's village. He attends the banquet for Hang that Aunt Tam hosts, but she criticizes him for his hypocrisy of allowing his daughter to live off of his salary rather than working herself.

The Motorcycle Driver – The motorcycle driver is a man who works for Aunt Tam and frequently transports both her and Hang on his motorcycle. Towards the end of the novel, he tries to get Hang to sell Aunt Tam's house to him.

Tuan – Tuan is Uncle Chinh's older son, who is about seven when Hang meets him for the first time. Que fawns over him and his brother Tu because they represent the heirs to the Do family.

Tu – Tu is Uncle Chinh's younger son, who is about three when Hang meets him for the first time. Que fawns over him and his brother Tuan because they represent the heirs to the Do family.

Nan – Nan is one of the peasants put in charge of the land reform campaign in Que's village, along with Bich. Nan is notorious for her sweet tooth and her laziness.

Bich – Bich is one of the peasants put in charge of the land reform campaign in Que's village, along with Nan. He is infamous for his laziness and debauchery, which got him kicked out of the army.

Neighbor Vi – Neighbor Vi is one of Hang and Que's neighbors in Hanoi. She is a close confidante of Que and speaks to her about her problems.

Nhieu – Nhieu is Ton and Aunt Tam's mother, who dies after being persecuted during the land reform campaign.

Madame Mieu – Madame Mieu is one of Que and Hang's neighbors in Hanoi. She is the mother of the boy whom Hang calles the cripple.

Mr. Khoa – Mr. Khoa is a Vietnamese graduate student in Moscow. Uncle Chinh works for him.

Madam Vera – Madam Vera is the landlady of Hang's dormitory in Russia.

Madame Dua – Madame Dua is a woman who works for Aunt Tam.

TERMS

Land Reform – Land reform refers to a policy that the Communist Party of Vietnam carried out between 1954 and

1956. This program, which involved redistributing land owned by landlords or farmers to peasants, resulted in the execution of many people within the landowning class. Because the redistribution was largely seen as a failure, the Party attempted to remedy the policy with the Rectification of Errors. In *Paradise of the Blind*, **Uncle Chinh** is a fierce advocate for the land reform movement in his village. The campaign also results in **Ton**'s family losing their farm, Ton fleeing the village due to persecution, and his mother **Nhieu**'s death.

Rectification of Errors – Rectification of Errors refers to the Communist Party of Vietnam's attempt to correct the land redistribution that they carried out via the earlier land reform campaign. Because land reform was largely seen as chaotic and excessive, the Communist Party sought to correct it. Many farmers (like **Aunt Tam** in *Paradise of the Blind*) were reclassified from the landowning class to the middle peasantry and their land was returned to them, although often in much worse condition than it had been prior to the reform.

Tet – Tet is a Vietnamese holiday celebrating the lunar New Year, as well as an occasion on which Vietnamese people pay their respects to their ancestors. Festivals and offerings for the holiday usually take place in the two weeks leading up to and immediately after the Lunar New Year. The occasion is marked by large meals with family members, decorating the altars or graves of ancestors, and gift-giving. In *Paradise of the Blind*, **Hang** recalls many Tet celebrations throughout her childhood.

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.

TRADITIONAL VALUES AND SACRIFICE

Paradise of the Blind centers on the life of the young protagonist, Hang, as she grows up in North Vietnam between the 1950s and 1980s. In the book, Duong depicts some of the key values of Hang's culture: women's deference to men, young people's deference to their elders, and loyalty to one's family over all else. Hang observes how the two central figures in her life (her mother, Que, and her Aunt Tam) embody these values. Both Aunt Tam and Que give up everything they have in order to support their families—particularly relatives who are viewed as the "heirs" to the family. Hang feels constant pressure to do the same, but she ultimately recognizes the need to find happiness as an individual rather than sacrificing everything for the sake of family. By demonstrating how debilitating supporting the family is for Aunt Tam, Que, and even Hang—and by emphasizing the freedom that Hang feels in ultimately turning away from her family—Duong questions the value of upholding family values simply for tradition's sake.

Aunt Tam, who has no children of her own, works herself ragged in order to honor her family's memory and ultimately to pass down their legacy to Hang. Thus, she provides evidence for the idea that putting one's family over oneself can hamper one's own happiness. Aunt Tam is the older sister of Que's late husband, Ton. During the communist land reform, the Communist Party had classified Aunt Tam, Ton, and their mother Nhieu as being part of the "exploiting class" because they were farmers and held land. As a direct result of being stripped of their land and possessions and the humiliation they endure, Nhieu dies, and Ton commits suicide. Aunt Tam then labors for years, subsisting only on potatoes and turning a "wasteland" to which she was relocated into a prosperous rice paddy. Ultimately, when the "Rectification of Errors" campaign returns her now-destroyed family home to her, she works herself to make it as prosperous as possible in order to honor her family's memory. Yet because Aunt Tam is never satisfied with how much she has earned or how much work she has done, Duong illustrates how Aunt Tam's dedication to her family does not actually bring her happiness. When Que brings Hang to see Aunt Tam for the first time, Hang's aunt is thrilled to meet her, as she views Hang as the heir to her family's lineage. From then on, Aunt Tam gives Hang massive amount of food, money, and **jewelry** so that she can eat properly and buy what she wants. Yet Hang constantly comments on how old and gnarled Tam looks: she observes that the cost of what she has earned is "a life deprived of youth and love." Thus, even though Aunt Tam has been able to amass great wealth for herself and Hang, sacrificing everything for the sake of family has seemingly led to a life unfulfilled.

Hang's mother, Que, upholds the same values as Aunt Tam, putting her family over everything else. However, Que illustrates another dimension of Vietnamese cultural values that plays into this dynamic: the supremacy of men over women. Que prioritizes her brother Chinh and his sons to the detriment of her relationship with Hang, proving how these traditional family values can even cause misery within families. When Hang is almost 10 years old, Que reconnects with Uncle Chinh after not seeing him since Hang was born. Que starts giving gifts and money to Uncle Chinh and his sons Tu and Tuan, exhausting her savings. Hang writes about how her mother would "gaze[] adoringly at the heirs to the Do family lineage," while at the same time becoming increasingly reserved toward Hang. In emphasizing the Do family lineage (the line that Que's brother carries on, but which Hang does not), Duong emphasizes how the men in the family are given support over the women and how this deprives Hang of her own mother's love. Later, when Hang is older, this dynamic worsens as Que does everything she can to support Uncle Chinh. When Uncle

Chinh is diagnosed with diabetes, Que spends less and less on food for herself and Hang in order to pay for Uncle Chinh's treatment. Hang's starvation starts to wear on her, so she asks her mother to sell a ring Aunt Tam gave to Hang because she is hungry. In response, her mother only snaps at her to shut up. The love between them eventually deteriorates to the point where Que kicks Hang out of the house. Even though they still love each other, the tension created by these traditional values and Que's sacrifices literally rips their family apart.

Growing up, Hang follows her mother's suit and does everything she can for her family. But in seeing how much misery these sacrifices brought upon her mother and Aunt, she realizes that she can only find freedom and happiness in turning away from her family altogether. While at university, Hang learns that her mother was hit by a car and lost one of her legs. As a result, Hang immediately drops out of school and moves to Russia to become an "exported worker" so that she can send what little money she can make back to her mother. Just like Que and Aunt Tam, Hang's sacrifice comes at the expense of her personal happiness. By the end of the novel, however, Hang refuses to cede her happiness to her family. In the final chapters, a dying Aunt Tam leaves Hang everything and tells her to keep the house as an "altar to [their] ancestors." But after Aunt Tam passes away, Hang instead decides to leave it all behind, dreaming happily of returning to "the cool shade of a university auditorium." Duong thus reinforces the extent to which traditional values have forced Hang and her relatives to sacrifice, contrasting it with the liberation and optimism that Hang feels when she refuses to carry on the same sacrifices.

COMMUNISM, HYPOCRISY, AND CORRUPTION

In *Paradise of the Blind*'s North Vietnam setting, communist ideology is central to the society. The protagonist, Hang, understands firsthand the ideas of communism from her uncle Chinh, who is a key leader of the communist reforms in her mother Que's village. At first, communist ideology—with its emphasis on ending exploitation and its aim of benefitting the poorest workers—helps liberate Vietnam from the French colonialist government. But as the book goes on, the Communist Party of Vietnam's actions do not lead to equalization and harmony between classes but instead simply sow more dissatisfaction and disorder. In highlighting the hypocrisy and the harm that communism entails, Duong argues that even if the ideology might be a noble one, the implementation of those ideas reveal the Party and its members to be corrupt and ineffectual.

Duong uses the real-life land reform campaign to introduce the hypocrisy and ineffectiveness of the Communist Party. Before Hang is born, Chinh returns to his family's village following Vietnam's liberation France in order to institute land reform. This involves categorizing villagers into different classes and redistributing land and wealth. Chinh's sister (and Hang's mother) Que is married to a man named Ton. Chinh tells Que that Ton's family belongs to the "exploiting class" because they hire people to help on their farm. Yet the reforms become bitterly hypocritical: Bich and Nan, two people who are notorious for being lazy, are given authority over people like Ton's sister Tam, who is known to work extremely hard to keep up the rice paddies. Bich and Nan are given Tam's home and land, while Tam is left with nothing. Thus, the reforms are not equalizers for hard-working citizens—they simply become a way for opportunistic people to take advantage of the political situation. After the Party begins to forcibly remove people from their homes, Ton flees the village. Tam and her mother, Nhieu, are then humiliated and degraded in front of their entire village. The villagers yell at them, "down with the landowning class!" out of fear that they might be targeted if they do not comply with the Party. Nhieu, who is sick and elderly, dies as a direct result of this degradation, and later in the story Ton commits suicide due to the fallout of these reforms. Duong thus reinforces that the Communist Party is actually propagating more injustice and creating fear even among the people that it is proclaiming to protect. The ineffectiveness of the Party's policies is only further proven by the subsequent fallout from them. Less than a year after "land reform had [...] sow[ed] only chaos and misery in its wake," another campaign begins called the "Rectification of Errors." Seeing how devastating land reform had been, it attempts to reclassify people like Ton's family as "middle peasantry" and reverse its policies. Tam returns to her home (having lost a brother and mother) and aspires to become as wealthy as possible in order to get revenge for what has happened to her. Thus, not only does the Party admit its own failures in land reform, but those failures also directly instigate people like Tam to actively oppose the party's ideology—reinforcing the Party's ineffectiveness.

Duong also illustrates the hypocrisy and corruption not only of the Communist Party as a whole, but even of those who are its largest proponents. By demonstrating Chinh's own corruption even as he is the most vocal supporter of the Party, Duong reveals the hollowness of his words and actions. Hang meets Chinh for the first time when she is almost 10 years old; he has not seen Que since before Hang was born. When Que reveals that she works at a vendor's market, Chinh calls her a "businesswoman" and says that merchants are "exploiters" and "parasites." When he suggests that Que work in a factory, she argues that a position in a factory would give her no way of saving anything or supporting Hang. Thus, Duong highlights how joining a movement meant to expand opportunity for people of Que's status actually leaves them in direr straits. What is particularly ironic about Chinh's visit is that after calling Que the "enemy of the revolution," he then immediately asks Que for his share of the money that she received for selling their parents' house. He explains that he needs it in order to furnish the apartment that he's been transferred to.

Thus, Chinh's illustrates that joining the Party and even becoming a high-ranking official does not actually provide him with enough income to maintain that lifestyle. The request also demonstrates his own complicity in the system he is trying to overcome, as only through his parents' owning land is he able to receive this money. Thus, even though Chinh is a vocal supporter of communism, his actions don't fully bolster the ideology he espouses. By the end of the book, Chinh's corruption is further displayed: he uses money that Que gives him in order to a Japanese television set, but he keeps it hidden so that other Party members won't see that he has it. Chinh also uses official party visits to Russia to trade luxury items on the black market. Thus, even while he espouses ideals of overthrowing greedy oppressors, at heart he is more ruled by greed than any other character.

During her early adulthood, Duong Thu Huong herself was a major proponent of the Communist Party and its ideals. Over time, however, she became disillusioned by the Party's hypocrisy and corruption. *Paradise of the Blind* thus demonstrates Duong's own beliefs about the Communist Party, as she emphasizes the empty language of its members and how its lofty ideals are used as a tool for corruption and greed.

LOVE AND WEALTH

Growing up, Hang has few connections with adult figures who love her. Her two primary caregivers are her mother, Que, and her Aunt Tam, both of whom use money and food to try and express their affections. But while Hang appreciates the things that she is given, she longs for them to support her emotionally, not just materially. Ironically, Que views Aunt Tam's monetary gifts as an insult to her ability to take care of her daughter and competition for Hang's affection, and Que and her daughter grow more distant as a result. Thus, Duong argues that while wealth can be used as a means of care, it is not a substitute for genuine love and emotional support.

Hang recounts how she and her mother have a very close relationship when Hang is growing up in Hanoi. Even in these initial stories, Duong connects food with love, but Duong also emphasizes that what Hang truly values is the palpable sense that her mother loves her outside of these material goods. For the first 10 years of Hang's life, Que prepares food and a packet of candy for Hang every morning before she goes off to school. Yet Hang takes real notice of the fact that her mother looks at "tenderly, with a sort of admiration in her gaze." While the food is certainly an expression of the love that Que has for her daughter, in reality what Hang values most is the feeling that her mother bears real affection for her. Later, when Hang and Que go to a peasant market and a traveling bazaar, Hang's value of love over gifts and food is reinforced. Que buys little statuettes and food for Hang there, but Hang feels closest to her mother afterward, when they sit at the roots of a nearby tree and Hang "snuggle[s] up to her mother." Feeling Que's arms around her gives Hang a greater sense of protection and love than anything her mother could buy.

Aunt Tam also uses wealth and food to express her love to an even greater degree than Que does. While Hang appreciates and politely accepts the gestures, she often finds them empty or even terrifying because Tam's love is borne of Hang's connection to her father, Ton, rather than Hang herself. When Aunt Tam meets Hang for the first time, Aunt Tam gives Hang **gold earrings and rings** to wear, even though the gifts are "unbefitting a nine-year-old." Hang knows that Aunt Tam means well, but it is an uncomfortable gesture for Hang. She describes how she loves her aunt but sometimes tries to avoid her to evade these intense gifts and attention. Thus, while Hang appreciates the gifts as a sense of affection, she recognizes that they have little to do with how much her aunt actually loves her and more to do with their shared family history. In later years, Aunt Tam visits Hang and Que in Hanoi, and Aunt Tam gives Hang enormous amounts of food for Tet, the Vietnamese New Year. Hang describes how her mother is "stunned and embarrassed to receive the gift, but Tam asserts, "I'm not giving this food to you. This is my offering to my brother's memory. It's all for Hang." Even early on, Duong hints at the fact that the gifts of food are purely symbolic. The tension between Que and Aunt Tam also foreshadows the wedge that this wealth will drive between Hang and her mother, underscoring how the potential harm of showing affection in this way can outweigh its benefits.

The irony of Aunt Tam's gifts is that even if Hang doesn't see the gestures as proof of real love, Que worries that Aunt Tam's gestures are indicative of a greater love than she can give to her daughter. This, in turn, causes Que and Hang's relationship to become strained. After Hang meets Aunt Tam, she starts to notice that Que stops "doting on [her] and calling [Hang] her 'dear child.'" This distance that Hang perceives is only accelerated when she suggests that they sell one of the rings Aunt Tam gave her so that they can repair their leaking roof. Que responds, "You don't know what it's like for me, that I can't even provide a decent roof for us. I can't face them anymore—your aunt Tam, our family, the neighbors." She becomes cold toward Hang, feeling that Hang's suggestion is critical of her, and that Hang loves Tam more because of the money (and well-being) that she is able to provide for Hang. Even though the rings were meant to help Hang, they are instead causing friction between her and her mother, illustrating their greater harm. When Hang is accepted to university at the Institute for the Social Sciences, Aunt Tam throws a massive banquet for her entire village in honor of Hang. When Hang tells her mother that she's staying for a week at Aunt Tam's leading up to the banquet, Que becomes bitter because she's not rich enough to throw Hang a feast. Hang protests, saying, "Don't say that. We've always lived simply but

happily together." Hang emphasizes that it is not the money or food that is important to her, but a sense of being happy with someone she loves. But because Aunt Tam has been so lavish, Duong illustrates how this dynamic unfortunately creates conflict between Hang and her mother.

Ultimately, when Hang thinks back on her childhood with her mother, she thinks of it as a "unique paradise." Although the wealth and food that her aunt provides gives her greater material comforts, they do not make her feel loved and supported in the same way that her mother's love did. The tragic irony of the novel, then, is that this perception of needing money and food to show love actually erodes the happiness that Hang and her mother had—reinforcing the idea that wealth cannot take the place of love.

BEAUTY, DISILLUSIONMENT, AND COMING OF AGE

Paradise of the Blind is filled with rich imagery conveying the beauty of the villages and cities in which Hang spends her childhood. But because most of the book is told as a flashback while Hang is on a train to Moscow, these recollections take on both a sense of nostalgia and a feeling of disenchantment. In addition to recognizing the beauty in her childhood, Hang also understands how that beauty frequently masked the poverty and the stagnation of the society. Duong thus explores how coming of age can change a person's memories as a person become more aware of the hardships and more disillusioned about the beautiful parts of their childhood.

Hang's changing view of her homeland is encapsulated in the symbol of the **duckweed flower**, illustrating how, as an adult, she recognizes the poverty of which she had been ignorant as a child. When Hang is on the train to Moscow, she thinks of how she is "haunted" by the vision of a purple duckweed flower floating on swamp. When she was young, she loved looking at the duckweed flowers and would go out of her way to find them. But reflecting on the flower, she understands that it distracted her from the swamp itself: "stagnant, oily bogs flecked with bubbles from rotting algae; murky pools surrounded by a clutter of miserable hovels, ramshackle gardens, and outhouses stinking in the summer sun." Duong illustrates how Hang's coming of age led to this increased recognition: as a child, she was taken by the beauty of the flower, but now she sees that this simply masked the poverty and dinginess of her and her mother Que's lives. Later in Hang's recollections, she recounts the flowers once more as she thinks nostalgically about the villages outside of Hanoi. She describes how "at the center of these stifling landscapes, on a green carpet of weed, those purple flowers always glistened, radiant in the middle of the filth: the atrocious ornament of a life snuffed out." This metaphor illustrates that there is beauty in their lives that is worth trying to hold onto and foster, but it also deeply contrasts with the stagnation of the lives of many Vietnamese people and the inability to escape the poverty of the country.

One of Hang's neighbors (whom Hang only refers to as "the cripple") serves as another example of how Hang's perspective changes as she grows up, recognizing how something that once had beauty for her actually masks a kind of tragedy. Every day, the cripple sings the same **song** about autumn leaves. The beauty of his "falsetto voice" makes Hang emotional, even as a child. Yet it is only when Hang returns to Vietnam following her time in Russia at the end of the book does she have a revelation about the song and the singer. She thinks, repeating the language she used about the duckweed, that it signifies "A life snuffed out, aborted, without a whisper of a dream." She concludes, "You survived life here, but you never really lived it." She recognizes that even though there is beauty in her world, the stagnation in some ways makes it an unrealized beauty because it has no hope of escaping the village.

Growing up also leads to an evolution in Hang's thoughts on beauty itself. In contrast with the beauty of some of the sights and sounds in Vietnam, Hang sees how the Vietnamese people have lost their beauty as a result of this poverty and stagnation. Part of Hang's coming-of-age process, then, is also recognizing her own desire to avoid becoming faded and ravaged like so many of the people that she has encountered, and understanding that true beauty is derived from happiness and liberation. Hang frequently observes that her mother, Que's, teeth are beautiful and very white—the "last trace of her beauty," she thinks. Later on in Hang's memories, she recounts her worry that she would end up repeating the life of her mother. Seeing the toll that Que's life has taken on her, Hang recognizes that she does not want to repeat the same fate. The beauty that her mother has lost is representative of the struggles and hardships that she has endured. This is one of the reasons that Hang chooses to abandon her family and pursue her own dreams, knowing that the stagnation and poverty of Vietnam threatens to deprive her of that same beauty and happiness. This relationship between beauty and poverty is reinforced at the end of the novel: when Hang returns from Moscow, she notices a group of young Japanese people who have "smooth, healthy skin, the glow of well-nourished people." She thinks about them in contrast to Vietnamese people whom she describes as having faces "gnawed with worry, shattered faces, twisted, ravaged, sooty, frantic faces." The contrast between them illustrates how Hang's idea of beauty has shifted. Instead of finding beauty in sights and sounds, which frequently mask the hardships the Vietnamese people endure, Hang recognizes that true beauty is derived from the ability to be free from fear and poverty.

Even the title of *Paradise of the Blind* communicates this central idea: Hang viewed her childhood as a kind of paradise, in which she had a loving relationship with her mother and was deeply

affected by the beauty around her. But the innocence of her youth resulted in a kind of blindness, wherein she could not fully appreciate how much the beauty masked the poverty and stagnation of where she lived. Only through coming of age and experiencing a degree of disillusionment does Hang understand that while she can still appreciate the beauty of where she grew up, she's no longer ignorant of the pain and sorrow that so many people experience in her homeland. This recognition, then, is what allows her to try and break that cycle of stagnation.

SYMBOLS

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

DUCKWEED FLOWER

The duckweed flower represents Hang's disillusionment with her seemingly idyllic childhood. She recounts how, as a child, she would actively seek out the purple duckweed flowers because she admired their beauty. But as Hang grows up, she begins to notice not just the individual flowers dotting the landscape but also the ponds and the surrounding areas, which she describes as "oily bogs" and "miserable hovels." This broader and more nuanced understanding of the landscape—that it contains both beautiful and ugly elements—parallels Hang's thinking about her own life, as she progresses from a childhood that she views as a kind of "paradise" to an adulthood that is filled with pain, poverty, and suffering. While the beauty of her home hasn't been fully eradicated, Hang also comes to recognize the stagnation and the hardships that so many people experience in Vietnam. Thus, by charting Hang's pursuit of the duckweed flowers to her growing understanding of the landscape, Duong emphasizes the fact that growing up has made Hang reflect on her memories and surroundings in a more complicated and nuanced way, acknowledging both hardships and beauty.

THE CRIPPLE'S SONG

Similar to the **duckweed flower**, the cripple's song symbolizes the evolution in Hang's understanding of the suffering and pain in her society. As Hang is growing up, her neighbor (whom she calls the cripple) sings every day. Hang relays the first two lyrics, which are "Hail autumn and its procession of dead leaves, the rows of barren poplars stand silent on the hillside." The cripple's falsetto voice rings out, and even though the song is sad, Hang appreciates the beauty and the constancy of his song. But after she leaves for Moscow and then returns to Vietnam at the end of the novel, she remarks on her newfound understanding of what the song means: to her, it represents a "life snuffed out." The leaves in the song signify the unrealized dreams of someone like the cripple, who might want to find better opportunity but cannot find a means of escaping their current situation. The fact that Hang only appreciates this meaning once she has grown up also serves as another example of how coming of age can alter the meaning of one's memories, as she sees how she used to recognize only the beauty of the song but now recognizes the pain and sadness from which it is derived.

JEWELRY

In the book, jewelry—particularly the gold earrings and rings that Aunt Tam gives to Hang—exemplifies the way that wealth is an expression of love for Hang's family. Aunt Tam gives the earrings and rings to Hang after they meet for the first time. Though this gift, Aunt Tam hopes to express her affection and demonstrate her desire to provide for Hang, whom she views as the heir to her family. Yet the fact that Aunt Tam gives Hang this jewelry drives a wedge between Hang and Que—something that becomes deeply upsetting to Hang because she values the love of her mother over everything else. Duong thus uses the jewelry to illustrate that even though such a lavish gift may be an expression of affection, it cannot take the place of genuine love.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the HarperCollins edition of *Paradise of the Blind* published in 1988.

Chapter 1 Quotes

"To live with dignity, the important thing is never to despair. You give up once, and everything gives way. They say ginger root becomes stringy, but pungent with age. Unhappiness forges a woman, makes her selfless, compassionate."

My mother had lived like this, according to proverbs and duties. She wanted me to show the same selflessness. And what had I done? My uncle, her younger brother—her only brother—had asked for my help. He was sick, and here I was, preparing to abandon him.

Related Characters: Hang, Que (speaker), Uncle Chinh

Related Themes:

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

In the opening of *Paradise of the Blind*, Hang, the book's protagonist receives a telegram from her Uncle Chinh, who writes to inform her that he is very sick asks her to visit him in Moscow. At first Hang resolves not to go, but when she recalls what her mother, Que, would do, she feels guilty about abandoning him and changes her mind. This passage encapsulates the primary theme of the novel: sacrificing one's own personal happiness to support one's family. Even though readers do not yet know the full history between Hang, Que, and Uncle Chinh, this simple proverb communicates that Que is the type of person who will gladly give up her own happiness for the sake of her family. The proverb also brings in gender roles as another aspect of the dynamic between Que and her brother, as Que is expected to be even more selfless because she is a woman. Over the course of the book, Que demonstrates her willingness to support the male heir to her family's line, even at the expense of other members of her family like Hang.

Duong sets up this same tension for Hang: immediately, Hang reveals that she has no interest in visiting Uncle Chinh. However, even if she does not feel the same duty toward Uncle Chinh that Que does, it is clear that Hang does feel a sense of duty toward her mother and must therefore help her mother's brother. Hang recognizes that choosing her family over herself would come at the expense of her happiness just as it has with her mother. From this point on, the book tracks Hang's progression from making these same sacrifices (which she does in this instance) to ultimately turning away from her family and finding a greater degree of liberation and happiness.

❝ When she smiled, I always noticed the sparkling whiteness of her teeth, aligned in perfect rows, and it made me sad. This was the last trace of her beauty, her youth, of a whole life lived for nothing, for no one.

Related Characters: Que, Hang (speaker), Ton, Uncle Chinh

Related Themes:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

Hang returns to a memory when she is just shy of 10: she and her mother Que visit Que's village for the first time in Hang's life. Hang recalls Que laughing as they travel and distinctly remembers the whiteness of her mother's teeth.

This is Duong's introduction to the theme of beauty and poverty. Even at 10 years old, Hang recognizes something inherently sad in the fact that her mother's physical beauty has faded; all that is left of it is her smile. Like the reader, Hang does not yet know the full history of what her mother has endured, and thus she simply sees the result of her mother's struggles.

Over time, however, Hang gradually learns the details of Que's life: how Uncle Chinh terrorized her, prosecuted her husband Ton, and ultimately led to Ton's committing suicide. As Hang grows up and learns of these tragedies, she sees how interrelated hardship is with a lack of beauty—how fear, poverty, and unnecessary pain have led to the loss of Que's beauty. Thus, this mention of Que's bright smile becomes the first hint at how coming of age will ultimately lead Hang to become disillusioned about the beauty in her childhood, as it simply masked the fear, poverty, and suffering that surrounded her.

Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ "Ton's family has always lived in peace with everyone," my mother stammered. "They've never laid a finger on anyone here. You know that. Here in the village, everyone knows who's bad and who's good."

Uncle Chinh interrupted, correcting her sternly: "You must not let yourself be influenced by others, or betray your class. We must crush the landowning classes, these cruel oppressors, and return the land to the peasants. If you don't listen to me, you'll be forced out of the community and punished according to revolutionary sanctions."

Related Characters: Hang, Uncle Chinh, Que (speaker), Bich, Nan, Nhieu, Aunt Tam, Ton

Related Themes:

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

Shortly after Ton and Que marry, Uncle Chinh returns from the war against the French. Fully instructed in communist ideology, Uncle Chinh argues that Que should not have married Ton because Ton's family is part of the "exploitative" landowning class that Que shouldn't want to associate with. Yet Uncle Chinh's language is ironic and hypocritical, qualities which will be emblematic of the Communist Party of Vietnam throughout the book. While Uncle Chinh argues that Ton and his family are cruel oppressors, Que argues

that people in the village knows who is bad and who is good. This becomes even more evident later, when land is given to Nan and Bich, two people who are notorious for being lazy. The Communist Party is so cruel to Ton's family during land reform that Nhieu eventually dies from the persecution that she endures, and Aunt Tam lives in fear and survives off of nothing but potatoes.

This, in effect, illustrates that it is actually members of the Communist Party who become "cruel oppressors." The Party's lack of clarity in their purpose becomes even more evident after land reform is revoked with the Rectification of Errors campaign, which also proves the Party's ineffectiveness. Additionally, Que is still a member of the peasant class, yet Uncle Chinh threatens her with being forced out of that community. This illustrates that the Party is less concerned with actually supporting the peasants and more concerned with gaining political power through fear tactics and threats.

❝ She too must have known this weariness, this despair. Like us, she must have had to reinvent hope and a yearning for life. The song crackled forth like the wing of a bird lost in the limitless blue of space, like a spark from an inferno.

I listened in silence. The evening's repugnant scene flashed through my mind. The music had come from that bastard's room. So this was life, this strange muddle, this flower plucked from a swamp.

Related Characters: Hang (speaker), Hang's Traveling Companion

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

When Hang is on the train to Moscow, her traveling companion begins to play music from a popular singer. Hang recounts how the first time she heard this singer was a few years earlier, on a night when she was almost sexually assaulted by the uncle of a friend of hers; these thoughts conclude that episode. Hang's observations here foreshadow the eventual metaphor of the duckweed flower: Hang eventually recounts how as a child, she loved duckweed flowers but gradually recognized that their beauty simply masked the poverty and stagnation of the towns and cities around the ponds. It follows that Hang would refer to this for the first time after being nearly sexually assaulted, as this episode also comes with an increased maturation and disillusionment about not being able to trust the people around her.

Yet even though Hang admits that life is a "swamp," she also affirms that there is still beauty amid fear, poverty and sadness. Hang states here that the singer must also have understood this despair and still found that yearning for life. Thus, for Hang, the flower represents holding onto that same sort of optimism. Even though she has experienced many hardships that have given her greater maturity, and even though her worldview has changed as a result, she still holds onto the idea that she can make a better life for herself.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ "How about some more of those green-tea toffees? I'll buy some for you tomorrow."

"Mr. Tao flavors his flour candies with ginger. Can't you taste it?"

Mother would bend over me, murmuring these things. She looked at me tenderly, with a sort of admiration in her gaze. It frightened me. The other women in our neighborhood never looked at their children this way.

Related Characters: Hang, Que (speaker), Aunt Tam

Related Themes:

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

Hang describes a typical morning when she is growing up, wherein her mother would make her breakfast and provide her with a piece of candy before she left for the marketplace. This suggests some of the ties between money, food and love, as Que expresses her affection by providing this food for Hang. However, from Hang's description, it becomes clear that it is really the admiration that Que feels for Hang that truly makes her feel loved. In fact, this sense of admiration is so remarkable to Hang that she is actually somewhat frightened by it, because she does not see this same kind of love between other parents and children. Thus, Duong establishes the unique love between Hang and her mother and illustrates that Hang recognizes this love even when she is young.

This quote contrasts with Hang and Que's relationship later in the book, however. When Hang is older, she notes that her mother has become quite reserved due to the generous gifts Aunt Tam gives to Hang, because Que views this as a

competition for Hang's love. By emphasizing the closeness of their relationship early on, Duong is then able to highlight the tragedy of losing that strong bond.

Chapter 5 Quotes

"Mother, when you were little, was there always someone like this?"

"Mmh. She's dead now. This one is her daughter."

I was mesmerized by her huge, splayed feet. They were scored with tiny cracks, encrusted with gray patches of dead skin. Decades before her, another woman, just like her, had crisscrossed the same village, plodded along with the same feet.

[...] I didn't dare ask her if, in another ten years, I would live her life, this life. The thought made me shiver.

Related Characters: Que, Hang (speaker), Aunt Tam

Related Themes:

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis

When Hang and Que return to her mother's village, they see a barley sugar vendor, whom Que notes is the daughter of the woman who used to sell barley there when Que herself was a child. This thought is distressing to Hang, who worries that she may be similarly doomed to repeat the life of her mother. Here, Duong once again connects the concepts of ugliness, poverty, and stagnation.

The cracked feet of the vendor symbolize how the simple need to survive has led to people ruining their bodies. Like Aunt Tam and so many other people in the villages and cities, this woman has endured back-breaking and feet-splitting work just to keep their heads above water. In pointing out that this trait was likely shared by the woman who came before this vendor, Hang recognizes how the economic circumstances of her society have led to the inertia of generations of people. And through Hang's fear that the same cyclical poverty might befall her as well, Duong starts to plant the idea that Hang wants to escape this fear and poverty that so many others experience, which is in part what fuels her decision not to stay in Aunt Tam's home at the end of the novel.

This voraciousness put me ill at ease. I knew she was my blood, the link to my father. This was the love that had been buried, impossible to imagine.

I stood very still, letting her touch me, caress me. Her wizened face, which ordinarily must have been quite severe, was ecstatic, reverent. "She's a drop of his blood. My niece," she murmured.

Related Characters: Hang, Aunt Tam (speaker), Ton, Que

Related Themes:

Page Number: 72

Explanation and Analysis

Hang meets Aunt Tam for the first time while they are visiting Que's village. Aunt Tam examines Hang with a discomfiting intensity, fawning over her as Hang relays here. The way Aunt Tam relates to Hang here is symbolic of their interaction throughout the rest of the book. In calling Hang "a drop of his blood," Aunt Tam communicates that she sees Hang only through the lens of her connection to Aunt Tam's brother, Ton (who is Hang's father).

It is notable that Hang, too, views Aunt Tam in this way, calling her "the link to [her] father." Yet it is also clear that Hang hopes Tam will fulfill the role of someone who can genuinely love her, just as her father would have. Because Hang has so few connections to adults who want to take care of her, the introduction to Aunt Tam holds a degree of hope that she might be able to forge another relationship like the one that she has with Que. However, Aunt Tam only sees Hang as the heir to the family—this is evidenced by her comment about their blood and her examination of Hang's face, in which she is actively looking for similarities between Hang and Ton. This is part of the reason why Hang feels "ill at ease" from Aunt Tam's stares: Hang recognizes that Tam is not looking at Hang for herself but rather for what Hang represents. Thus, while Hang is happy to have this connection to her family and while Aunt Tam is very generous toward Hang throughout the book, Hang never truly feels at ease in their relationship because she does not feel emotionally supported within it.

Someday I'll be even richer. This ancestral house will be renovated. It's going to be even more opulent than before. I'll show people. Even if I have to tear this body of mine apart. [...]

People say I'm extravagant. I tell them, "Yes, that's right, and I'm offering this to myself in memory of all my suffering."

Related Characters: Aunt Tam (speaker), Nhieu, Ton, Uncle Chinh, Que, Hang

Related Themes:

Page Number: 79

Explanation and Analysis

As Aunt Tam reveals the toll that land reform took on her and her home, she concludes with her resolve to make as much money as possible in the wake of her suffering. Her statement here emphasizes two primary themes within the story: first, it shows how Aunt Tam is willing to sacrifice her own happiness for the sake of restoring her family's home and earning as much wealth as possible. As she says, she is willing to do this even if it means tearing her body apart, illustrating her intense commitment and how debilitating her drive can be. That drive is only increased by meeting Hang and Tam's subsequent realization that she not only has something to recover from the past, but a legacy that she can leave behind after her death.

Additionally, Aunt Tam's statement provides another dimension as to how woefully ineffectual the Communist Party's policies of land reform were. First, it outright admitted its failures in carrying out land reform through the Rectification of Errors. In so doing, the Party pushed people like Aunt Tam even further away from its ideology. Whereas before Aunt Tam simply liked working, now she actively tries to amass wealth simply for the sake of it. Thus, the policies were so ineffectual that they turned people against the ideology in its entirety and actually led to greater wealth inequality in this instance.

She stepped back to inspect me. The jewelry was unbefitting a nine-year-old girl, but Aunt Tam had the gaze of a painter before a portrait. These jewels had been locked in their hiding place since the day of their purchase. I should have been delighted; instead, I was paralyzed with fear. I touched my earlobe, tracing the sharp edges of the lozenge-shaped stone. I pulled my hand back and stuffed it in my pocket. I felt chilled, numb. I didn't know why, but there was something sinister about all this finery, like throwing flower petals on an abandoned grave.

Related Characters: Hang (speaker), Que, Aunt Tam

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 88

Explanation and Analysis

After Que and Hang have spent a week in Que's old village while she collects the money from the sale of her parents' house, Hang and Que head back to Hanoi. Before they go, Aunt Tam says goodbye to Hang and gives her gold earrings and rings. This is the first example of Aunt Tam's tendency to express her love through shows of wealth. Even though Hang appreciates the gesture, her gratitude belies her fear and anxiety at receiving the gift. The intensity of Aunt Tam's gifts and attention do not feel like genuine affection for Hang; instead they simply feel like empty gestures. Hang's description that it is like "throwing flower petals on an abandoned grave" illustrates Hang's acknowledgement that Aunt Tam is simply giving Hang this jewelry because of their mutual connection to their ancestors, and the fact that Hang represents the heir to their family.

Hang does put the earrings on as she travels back to Hanoi, but in order to do so, she must take off the red plastic earrings that her mother had bought her. This symbolic exchange also foreshadows the tension between Aunt Tam and Que, as Que sees the fact that Aunt Tam can provide better things for Hang as evidence that Hang thinks Aunt Tam loves her more. This sows discontent in Hang and Que's relationship and ironically deprives Hang of love even further, affirming again that wealth is not a substitute for love.

Chapter 6 Quotes

My mother was stunned and embarrassed. "I can't accept all this. I've got enough to celebrate Tet already. This is too much. How could we eat it all?"

Aunt Tam replied coldly, "I'm not giving this food to you. This is my offering to my brother's memory. It's all for Hang. She can offer the food to her teachers, her friends, anyone she likes."

Related Characters: Aunt Tam, Que, Hang (speaker), Uncle Chinh, Ton

Related Themes:

Page Number: 98

Explanation and Analysis

During Hang and Que's first Tet (lunar New Year) after Hang has met Aunt Tam, Aunt Tam visits them in Hanoi bearing a huge amount of food for their Tet celebrations.

Like the food and money that she provided to Hang when they visited Aunt Tam for the first time in her village, this is meant to be an expression of affection for Hang. Yet Aunt Tam also makes it clear that it's an offering to her brother's memory, and that the only reason she is giving it to Hang is as a show of familial duty. Thus, while Hang appreciates the food, she recognizes that it is not a show of genuine love.

This passage also foreshadows how these displays of wealth and food will be a source of contention between Que and Tam. The way in which Que responds to Aunt Tam's food implies that she views it as a subtle insult. In saying that she has enough food, she affirms that she doesn't need help to properly provide Hang with a Tet celebration. Aunt Tam's response, on the other hand, drives a further wedge between them in stating that the food is only for Hang to do with as she wants. Because Aunt Tam is sidestepping Que's wishes and lavishing food and money onto Hang, Que starts to worry that Hang will believe Aunt Tam loves her more. This drives further distance between her and Hang, emphasizing how displays of wealth are not substitutes for love and actually cause additional harm in the relationship that Hang most values.

❝ "He's all the family I have left. He's so unhappy. Needs so much." She went on, indignant. "And your poor cousins…they looked so straggly, like potato vines."

I thought to myself, Mother, why don't you just say what you mean: "My two nephews, my two little drops of Do blood." At bottom, she was just like Aunt Tam. These were the only two loving women I had in my life. I said nothing.

Related Characters: Hang, Que (speaker), Aunt Tam, Tu, Tuan, Uncle Chinh

Related Themes:

Page Number: 102

Explanation and Analysis

After Que and Hang visit Uncle Chinh in his home for the first time, Que notices how skinny his two sons, Tuan and Tu, are. This initiates Que's desire to provide for them; from this point on, she begins to buy food for them whenever she is able, even if it is at the expense of buying things for herself or Hang (such as fixing their leaky roof). Here, Hang recognizes the source of this desire: the boys are the heirs to the Do family.

Hang acknowledges that Aunt Tam (who spends money on and buys food for Hang at every possible opportunity) and her mother are in effect doing the same thing. Both are sacrificing everything they can of their own happiness in order to support that of their family—particularly those who are viewed as heirs to their respective family lines. In commenting on the fact that these are the only two loving women in her life, Hang sees how stifling the expectation is for women to support their families no matter what. Having no other examples of what healthy family relationships look like, Hang spends much of the novel trying to achieve the same thing, supporting her family no matter what the cost to her own happiness. It is only when she decides to turn away from that idea, however, that Hang truly finds happiness.

❝ I knew she had been counting on Aunt Tam to offer me the Tet banquet. That suited her just fine, since it left her free to put her savings toward her brother's family.

"It's just splendid, our Tet. Thank your lucky star." She kissed me. I couldn't stand the indignity of it, and I turned away.

How could my mother accept this humiliation? Why did she lower herself in front of my uncle and his pockmarked wife, before their children? Why did she love people who enslaved her?

Related Characters: Que, Hang (speaker), Tu, Tuan, Thanh/Aunt Chinh, Uncle Chinh, Aunt Tam

Related Themes:

Page Number: 126-127

Explanation and Analysis

One year during Tet (lunar New Year), Que spends all of her saving on Uncle Chinh and his family's Tet feast, betting on the possibility that Aunt Tam will bring over food for Hang to enjoy. When Aunt Tam does so, Hang is disgusted at the fact that her mother is rewarded for her gamble. In this passage, Duong again reinforces this idea of wealth and food as expressions of love, as both Aunt Tam and Que buy food in order to show how much they love their families. Duong also highlights the similarities between Aunt Tam and Que in choosing to work hard to support other people rather than supporting themselves.

Additionally, however, Duong highlights a turning point in Hang and her mother's relationship here. Hang is frustrated and upset not at the idea that Que wants to support her family. Instead, she is frustrated that Que is supporting people who do not seem to love her at all, and whom she

knows would not return Que's gestures. In this way, Duong shows how receiving these gifts is also an expression of love that requires a degree of reciprocity. Even though Hang is sometimes uncomfortable with all that her Aunt is giving her, she is appreciative and tries to return her Aunt's affection in whatever way she can. Uncle Chinh, on the other hand, merely takes advantage of what Que is giving them, and Que is taking advantage of Aunt Tam's wealth. Duong thus demonstrates not only how providing wealth is not a substitute for love, but also that receiving wealth without reciprocating is a way in which family members can take advantage of one another.

Chapter 7 Quotes

❝ Years later, whenever I traveled in the Vietnamese countryside again, I always stopped to contemplate these flowers: in real ponds, in real villages. Ponds just like we had near Hanoi: stagnant, oily bogs flecked with bubbles from rotting algae; murky pools surrounded by a clutter of miserable hovels, ramshackle gardens, and outhouses stinking in the summer sun [...]

At the center of these stifling landscapes, on a green carpet of weed, those purple flowers always glistened, radiant in the middle of the filth: the atrocious ornament of a life snuffed out.

Related Characters: Hang (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 131

Explanation and Analysis

As Hang observes the Russian landscape on the train to Moscow, she thinks about the things she had appreciated in the landscape growing up in Vietnam. She particularly points out the duckweed flower, which her mother would seek out, knowing how much Hang loved looking at them. In retrospect, however, Hang focuses on a different aspect of the flowers, chooses to highlight not the beauty of the flowers but rather the ugliness and poverty of the surrounding ponds, cities, and landscapes. This change in perspective reflects how Hang has grown up and is now coming to appreciate not only the beauty that existed in her childhood, but also what that beauty masked.

In commenting that the flower is the "ornament of a life snuffed out," Hang emphasizes that focusing simply on the flower makes people ignorant of how stifling and stagnant the places in which she grew up were. In this way, she recognizes that true beauty does not simply lie in a pretty flower but instead should be present in one's ability to live a life free from poverty or from experiences like playing in trash-filled streets or oil-filled ponds. Thus, with Hang's changing perspective, Duong illustrates how coming of age can change a person's memories of the things they appreciated in childhood.

Chapter 9 Quotes

❝ Cadres in my country lived for these moments, for their luxury goods. They were good at this sordid secondhand trade in scarce imports. Some even lived off it. My uncle was no exception. All he cared about was the contents of my suitcase.

Related Characters: Hang (speaker), Que, Uncle Chinh

Related Themes:

Page Number: 169

Explanation and Analysis

While Hang is on the train to Moscow, she describes a time when she visited Uncle Chinh in Moscow a year prior. At that time, she had brought him a set of luxury goods to sell on the black market. Once again, Duong highlights Uncle Chinh's hypocrisy and the corruption of the Communist Party of Vietnam. For so long, Uncle Chinh criticized Que for being a street vendor and a "businesswoman," because she traded goods in the market. And yet here, Uncle Chinh has few qualms about trading his own goods on the black market in the Soviet Union for profit. Thus, for all of Uncle Chinh's harsh language and his persecution of people who do not subscribe to the Party ideals, he (and his comrades, as Hang implies) do not fully adhere to those values.

Hang is additionally frustrated because, as she notes here, Uncle Chinh cares very little about her or about Que, only focusing on the contents of Hang's suitcase. Soon after, she chides him for not giving her news of Vietnam or of Que. This once again highlights the disparity between Uncle Chinh and Que. As a woman, Que feels an obligation to put the family first and to support the male heirs of her family line (Uncle Chinh and his sons). Yet as the patriarch of the family, Uncle Chinh does not feel the same obligation and frequently prioritizes his work in the Party and his greed rather than helping Que or Hang in any way. It is for this reason that Hang is so frustrated at Uncle Chinh's treatment, as she is expected to place the same priority on her uncle while receiving nothing in return.

Chapter 10 Quotes

❝ One night, when I couldn't stand it anymore, I said to my mother, "I don't even have the energy to study. Let's sell one of the rings."

"We can't. They're Aunt Tam's," my mother said, irritated.

I tried to keep calm. "She gave them to me. I need to survive and study before I can wear any ring."

"No," she snapped.

"Mother, I'm hungry," I pleaded, biting back my tears. She went white and glowered at me. Suddenly, she jumped up, screaming like a madwoman, "No! Shut up! I said NO."

Related Characters: Que, Hang (speaker), Uncle Chinh, Aunt Tam

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 180

Explanation and Analysis

After Uncle Chinh is diagnosed with diabetes, Que saves up money to help pay for his medication. This entails spending less and less money on food for both Hang and herself, until one night Hang expresses how hungry she is and asks if they can sell a ring to pay for food. This exchange becomes a breaking point between Hang and Que, as Hang is frustrated over the way that Que is spending the money, and Que is frustrated at the implicit criticism of her choice to support her brother.

Here, Duong illustrates the two major factors that are causing the divide between Hang and Que. First, Que is putting her brother and his family (who represent the heirs to her family line) over everything else, including her own life and the life of her daughter. The fact that this issue leads to a severe falling out between Hang and Que and a great deal of misery in both women illustrates that people often prioritize traditional values to the detriment of their own happiness.

Second, Duong again highlights wealth as a dividing factor between Hang and Que. Hang's suggestion that they sell a ring becomes an implicit insult for Que, because she equates the ability to provide for Hang with love. In relying more on Aunt Tam's wealth than Que's, Hang seems to appreciate Aunt Tam more than Que—at least in Que's mind. This is not actually true, however; Hang merely wishes to be able to eat and still share a life of love with Que, like they once had. Thus, wealth is shown not to be a substitute for love—instead, it's shown to be an instigator of conflict.

Chapter 11 Quotes

❝ "So there you have it, Mr. Uncle Chinh. The old child molester had never set foot on a dance floor. Of course, he did like to lecture his workers about how dancing was decadent, how their generation indulged in shameful pleasures, and how everyone should devote himself to the revolution. He had the same worldview as you, the same tastes. Don't get me wrong, I don't mean to insult you. I know you don't have the same vices. But I must say, the resemblance is somewhat troubling."

Related Characters: The Bohemian (speaker), Ton, Que, Hang, Uncle Chinh

Related Themes:

Page Number: 214

Explanation and Analysis

When Hang finally arrives in Moscow, she finds Uncle Chinh working for a few graduate students to make some extra money. But when Uncle Chinh criticizes their generation's "decadent" music, one of them (whom Hang calls "the Bohemian") tells a story of a deputy director who gave strict morality lectures and yet secretly molested young girls. The Bohemian's monologue highlights Duong's points throughout the book as a whole about the Communist Party of Vietnam. She has shown Uncle Chinh to be the same kind of ideological purist as this deputy director, as he denounced Que and Ton's family. At the same time, however, Chinh has proven himself to be hypocritical and greedy, taking advantage of the money Que gives him and trading on the black market in Moscow.

The Bohemian specifically calls out the backwards priorities held by Party members of Uncle Chinh's generation. While Uncle Chinh considers their music and their dancing "decadent," the Bohemian argues that dancing doesn't make someone immoral. Instead, behavior like molesting children or trading on the black market—especially while that same person is adamant about maintaining strict moral purity—is much more obviously immoral. The Bohemian also emphasizes here that this is not an isolated incident (even if the deputy director's crimes are particular to him). So much of the Communist Party is built on these ideals and railing against anyone who deviates even slightly from them, while behind the scenes its members don't abide by these principles at all.

"The Saratov is mine. I paid for that refrigerator with my study-grant money while I was in the Soviet Union. In this house, only the television is yours. Sell it if you like. But try and explain that to the boys."

I drifted off in silence; the couple, lost in their calculations, probably didn't even notice my departure.

Related Characters: Uncle Chinh, Thanh/Aunt Chinh (speaker), Que, Hang

Related Themes:

Page Number: 223

Explanation and Analysis

After Que is hit by a car and her leg is amputated, Hang visits Uncle Chinh and Aunt Chinh to inform them of what has happened. Uncle Chinh wants to try and help Que, and he tries to come up with ways that they can provide her with money. He and Aunt Chinh bicker about the different things they can sell or whether they can borrow money, and this goes on so long that Hang simply decides to leave. This episode highlights again the sheer greed of Chinh and his family, despite the fact that they subscribe to ideology that condemns greed.

Chinh's corruption is apparent: Que has been sacrificing her own well-being to provide money for Chinh's diabetes medication. Because of this, Que and Hang have never been able to afford a new refrigerator or a television like Aunt and Uncle Chinh are able to do. When the situation is reversed, however, and Que desperately needs financial support due to her health, Chinh isn't able to come up with anything. This again supports Hang's beliefs that sacrificing everything for one's family isn't worthwhile, because such efforts are often unreciprocated.

What did these people have that we didn't have? Hundreds of faces rose in my memory: those of my friends, people of my generation, faces gnawed with worry, shattered faces, twisted, ravaged, sooty, frantic faces.

Our faces were always taut, lean with fear. The fear that we might not be able to pay for food, or not send it in time, the fear of learning that an aging father or mother had passed away while waiting for our miserable subsidies; the fear that some embassy official just might not.

Related Characters: Hang (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 229

Explanation and Analysis

As Hang is returning following her trip to Moscow, on the way home from the train station she notices a group of young Japanese people in a park. As she observes how nice and carefree they look, she starts to make comparisons between these young people and people of her generation from her own homeland. This comparison again investigates the meaning of beauty and how that meaning changes for Hang as she grows up. Over the course of the book, she describes how much beauty she found in Vietnam's landscapes when she was young, and how this contributed to her understanding of her childhood as an idyllic one.

But as Hang comes of age, her idea of beauty changes. Here, she recognizes beauty in young people—but not in young people from Vietnam. True beauty, she comes to understand, is not found in landscapes but is instead found in the ability to be free from fear and poverty. Those worries are borne of a society that isn't able to fully support its citizens. It is this recognition that contributes to Hang's decision to turn away from her country, as she understands the necessity of making a life in a place that will allow her to escape the worry and poverty that she has felt her whole life.

I had never met a man so gentle and yet so firm. He had helped me. This was the first time in my life I had accepted help from someone outside my family. With him, my problems seemed to melt into thin air.

Related Characters: Hang (speaker), Uncle Chinh, Que, Aunt Tam, The Bohemian

Related Themes:

Page Number: 232

Explanation and Analysis

After Hang receives a telegram informing her that Aunt Tam is dying, she quickly returns to Moscow and applies for an exit visa. At first her application is held up in the Russian bureaucracy, but when she tells the Bohemian about her ordeals, he helps her get her visa as well as a plane ticket. Here, Hang remarks on how grateful she is for his help. Her remarks illustrate the contrast between the burden that she sometimes feels in being responsible for her family versus the lightness that she feels in receiving help from the

Bohemian. Hang has had to sacrifice so much for her mother, Que, in becoming an exported worker in Russia. She particularly resents what she has had to do for her Uncle Chinh, because he frequently takes advantage of all that Que and Hang do for him.

The Bohemian, however, actively tries to mitigate the burdens that Hang feels. And in contrast to Que or to family members like Aunt Tam, Hang finds comfort in the fact that the Bohemian isn't helping her out of a sense of obligation due to family values, but instead because he simply wants to be a friend. Thus, this contrast helps illuminate the idea that there is an alternate way to live than simply adhering to traditional values and sacrificing everything for family—something that motivates Hang's final decision to forego those kinds of sacrifices.

> It had taken time to grow up, to leave this place, finally to understand this song, the refrains that had haunted our miserable little streets for as long as I could remember. This same voice, this same unchanging sadness. A life snuffed out, aborted, without a whisper of a dream. It was a life unlived, a vegetable existence suckled on rubbish heaps and water lilies, fed on the brackish surface of a bog. You survived life here, but you never really lived it.

Related Characters: Hang (speaker), The Cripple

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 234-235

Explanation and Analysis

Near the end of the novel, Hang returns to Hanoi and hears the cripple's song for a final time. This passage indicates another way in which Hang has grown up, armed with newfound understanding of the song. Whereas before, she had simply appreciated the beauty of the cripple's voice and the plaintiveness of his song as it mixed with the city soundscape, now she recognizes a new dimension within it. While she is still able to hear the beauty in the song, she also understands that the song represents the stagnation of a "life unlived," as she describes here. Even though there is beauty in the cripple's life, it is an unrealized beauty because the cripple has no chance of escaping the poverty in which he lives.

The song is also deeply connected to the symbol of the duckweed flower, because Hang undergoes a similar realization about the flower's beauty as she comes of age. Even though there is beauty in her world, she also starts to appreciate the less-than-beautiful aspects of life in Vietnam. Hang even connects the song and the flower explicitly, comparing the cripple's life to "a vegetable existence suckled on rubbish heaps," which is similar to her previous descriptions of the duckweed flower in the midst of a trash-filled pond. The beauty is sad, because it springs from a place of such suffering. Thus, Duong illustrates how growing up has changed Hang's understanding of things that were once beautiful to her as she becomes more and more disillusioned about her childhood.

> It had been an evening like this when I "returned" to my village for the first time, when I had a mother I could still run to, who would hide me in her arms. I had been happy, confident. I had yet to meet Aunt Tam. [...] This was my corner of the earth, my own paradise etched into the final evening of my childhood. The lapping of waves, a sunset glowing violet over the horizon, a bleached-out mayfly shell floating on the surface of the water. And I had my mother then, the magical, unique paradise of childhood.

Related Characters: Hang (speaker), Aunt Tam, Que

Related Themes:

Page Number: 239

Explanation and Analysis

In the final chapters of the novel, Hang returns to Aunt Tam's village to take care of Tam as she is dying. As Hang is traveling, she recalls the first time that she made this same trip years earlier. In this memory, she recognizes how much has changed and hints at the title of the novel itself: childhood was a kind of "paradise," particularly because Hang focused only on the beauty in the landscape rather than the poverty and stagnation. She also had her mother's love, which made it seem even more idyllic. But now that she has grown distant from her mother, Hang has become much more disillusioned about her life and the potential for happiness (or lack thereof) that exists for her in Vietnam.

The passage also reinforces how wealth is not a substitute for love in Hang's eyes. She is objectively wealthier now that she has Aunt Tam in her life, because Aunt Tam has provided her with so much food and money. Yet she yearns for this period of her life before she meets Aunt Tam, because in reality all she ever really wanted was genuine love and

emotional support—something which she had only received from her mother.

❝ "When…" she whispered. "When I am dead… stay here… keep this house… the altar to our ancestors. Remember to think of replacing the orange trees… and…"

[…]

This was her legacy to me, I thought. Its price was a life deprived of youth and love, a victory born of the renunciation of existence.

Related Characters: Hang, Aunt Tam (speaker), Ton, Nhieu

Related Themes:

Page Number: 248

Explanation and Analysis

When Aunt Tam is dying and Hang returns to her house, Aunt Tam instructs Hang to remain in the village and keep up the estate for which Tam has worked so hard. Aunt Tam's words highlight the fact that the house is an extension of her sense of duty to her family, as she calls it the "altar to our ancestors." She has worked herself ragged to earn enough money to make it as extravagant as it is, and yet the fact that she still wants to make replacements and improvements upon it show that she will never fully be satisfied with her accomplishments, and she's not truly happy even on her deathbed.

Hang thus recognizes how Aunt Tam's work has been to the detriment of Tam's own happiness. She has spent her entire life working debilitatingly hard, but her life has been largely devoid of love, particularly after the deaths of Nhieu and Ton. Thus, Duong questions the idea of upholding these altars or sacrificing oneself for one's family simply for the sake of doing so. The fact that Hang recognizes this dynamic, and that she is hesitant to repeat the life that Aunt Tam has lived, is ultimately what spurs Hang to turn away from her family and prioritize her own happiness instead.

Chapter 12 Quotes

❝ Forgive me, my aunt: I'm going to sell this house and leave all this behind. We can honor the wishes of the dead with a few flowers on a grave somewhere. I can't squander my life tending these faded flowers, these shadows, the legacy of past crimes.

[...] I sat down, cupping my chin in my hands, and dreamed of different worlds, of the cool shade of a university auditorium, of a distant port where a plane could land and take off…

Related Characters: Hang (speaker), Que, Aunt Tam

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 258

Explanation and Analysis

The final paragraphs of the novel see Hang resolve not to remain in her Aunt Tam's house following Tam's death. This is a crucial resolution to one of Duong's major arguments in the novel: that one should not hold up traditional values simply for values' sake. Having seen Aunt Tam and Que sacrifice their entire lives in order to try and fulfill some unspoken duty to their family members, Hang feels liberated in turning away from those choices and instead looking to a future of her own making. Rather than "squandering" her life at the behest of family members she largely never knew, Hang instead wants to feel the liberation of choosing her own fate. She returns to the metaphor of the flower, not wanting to get wrapped up in the beauty of its familiarity—knowing that it could easily lead her to waste her life.

Part of the profound joy that Hang is experiencing is in the fact that the world is open to her: even if she doesn't know exactly what her future holds, she has an opportunity to explore "distant ports." The freeing image of a plane landing and taking off contrasts with the burdened phrase of being tied down to the "legacy of past crimes." In resolving not to put family over herself, Hang feels that same liberation.

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

Hang receives a telegram that says "Very ill. Come immediately." Hang curses her luck: for the past few days she has been very sick as well. She only had 800 rubles left in savings and has spent 500 on medicine and food. Hang tells her roommate that her uncle (Uncle Chinh) is sick; he lives in Moscow and wants her to visit. Her roommate argues that she shouldn't go, as she still looks very sick. Hang resolves not to go.

The opening of Paradise of the Blind immediately introduces the central tension of Hang's life: duty to family versus duty to oneself. Hang feels obligated to visit her Uncle Chinh in Moscow, but she has also been ill and has very little money with which to do so. This dilemma will likely cause a great deal of guilt for Hang—and although she decides for the time being not to go, it remains to be seen whether she'll change her mind and sacrifice her happiness for family values.

As Hang's roommate makes Vietnamese noodles, she also puts on a record player that she had just bought. They listen to the singer: "At the end of the Red River, do you know? In the land of my birth, is another river. My heart weeps with nostalgia: Vam co Dong! Vam co Dong!" Hang slips back into bed, thinking about the river of her childhood in Hanoi.

The record evokes the landscape of the Red River, the river next to which Hang grew up. Like the singer, Hang understands the nostalgia for its beauty; but now, having grown up, she understands that the beauty of the river simply hid the poverty and the stagnation of so much of their lives.

Hang continues her reverie, thinking of the "shack" in which she lived in Hanoi, which was made of sheet metal and tar paper. It stunk, and the gutters flowed into the streets where children played. Hang sees her mother, Que's, face: "pain and infinite perseverance." She thinks of a proverb her mother would say: "Unhappiness forges a woman, makes her selfless, compassionate." Remembering these words, Hang feels guilty that she is turning away from her mother's younger brother, Uncle Chinh.

In contrast to the beauty of the river, Hang remembers the less attractive parts of their lives and the toll that they took on her mother's beauty. The proverb that Hang remembers also hints at the family values to which Que subscribed. Duong foreshadows how much Que has sacrificed for her family and also hints at the fact that Hang visiting her uncle would not be out of love for him, but rather out of respect and familial duty to her mother.

Hang tells Madame Vera, the landlady, that she's going to Moscow. Madame Vera gives her a wool shawl for the journey, and Hang thanks her. Hang catches a bus and arrives in time to make the only express train to Moscow. At the station, she catches her reflection in a window: "a pale young woman with a lost, worried expression, stooped shoulders, and cheap maroon suit." She feels hatred running through her for Uncle Chinh.

Hang decides to support her family by visiting her uncle. However, this comes at the expense of Hang's own personal happiness: even to herself, she appears "lost" and "worried" rather than youthful and vibrant as one would expect a young woman to look. This dynamic of self-sacrifice for the sake of her family member only results in Hang resenting her uncle even more.

Que's parents both died of illness when Que was 19 and Uncle Chinh was 18. Uncle Chinh immediately joined the anti-French resistance movement in the north, and Que stayed behind in the village. She worked as a street vendor, living off the sales of snacks and goods. She used the money to keep up her parents' house.

Losing their parents is what introduces this dynamic of sacrifice for Que, as she comments throughout Hang's recollections that Uncle Chinh is the only family she has left. It is for this reason that she feels she has to do whatever she can to support him and honor their family.

The narration flashes back. One afternoon, when Hang is almost 10, she stands in Que's parents' house. It is rotting, with creepy sculptures and spider's webs. Hang confesses to her mother, who is sitting in the courtyard with a group of neighbors, that she is scared of the house. Que laughs. Hang thinks that Que's shining teeth are "the last trace of her beauty, her youth, of a whole life lived for nothing, for no one."

Hang's being scared of her grandparents' house is symbolic of the idea that the past is constantly haunting her. While Hang simply wants to move forward with her life, instead she feels constantly chained to family expectations. The loss of her mother's youthful beauty is another illustration of how much suffering she has endured because of her family's poverty: Hang believes that Que's "whole life" was "lived for nothing, for no one" due to her lack of opportunity.

Hang asks Que if she had been scared, living alone in the house. A neighbor tells Hang that Que was bored, and that's why she couldn't wait until the end of the mourning period to marry Ton. The women laugh, and Hang asks who Ton is. The neighbor snaps at her, saying that Ton is her father. The women laugh, and Hang runs away, sobbing and hiding from them. Que comes after Hang and comforts her, though Hang still cries herself to sleep. The next day, Que buys Hang two sticks of barley sugar and tells her about her father for the first time.

Not knowing the identity of her father is one of the most difficult aspects of Hang's childhood, because she feels the absence of a father's love in her life. Despite the fact that this is not her fault, she is criticized for not knowing who her father is by those who hold more traditional values.

CHAPTER 2

Que tells Hang the story of Ton. After her parents pass away, Que lives alone for a year. She feeds herself meagerly: a hard-boiled egg or a clear soup. At night, she listens to the neighbors cooking for their loved ones, while she is intensely lonely. She prays to her ancestors, imploring them to protect her.

Here Duong introduces the idea that food can be expressions of love. Other people have families to care for and meals to cook, and yet Que has very little. She has no one whom she can care for nor who can express their love to her.

During this year, Que meets Ton, a schoolteacher who had just been posted to the village. Their courtship begins quickly, much to the disapproval of fellow villagers. According to tradition, Que should have observed a three year mourning period following the death of her parents. Que and Ton are called "shameless" and "degenerates," and it is predicted that they would have deep misfortune. Still, Hang can tell, listening to the story, that her mother truly loved Ton.

This is another way in which adhering to traditional values can come at the expense of personal happiness. Despite the fact that Que and Ton truly love each other, the fact that they do not conform to the expectations of the village serves as a potential threat to their happiness as they are criticized by the other villagers.

A little over a year after the wedding (still long before Hang's birth), peace is declared and the French withdraw from Vietnam. The soldiers start to return, and some soldiers tell Que that her brother Chinh had been very sick and didn't have enough clothing. Que is consumed by worry. Six months after liberation, Uncle Chinh arrives home.

Though Duong doesn't go in-depth on the politics of the war, it was Ho Chi Minh's leadership (under communist ideology) that garnered support and ultimately led to Vietnam's liberation from France. The support for the Communist Party of Vietnam carries through the book, even though Duong illustrates the problems with the communist government.

When Uncle Chinh arrives, Ton gives him and Que privacy and visits his mother, Nhieu's, house—they live in the same village. Nhieu is ill and lives with Ton's eldest sister, Tam. Because Tam is educated and closed-off, she hasn't been able to find a husband. Instead, she works in the rice paddies and raises silkworms.

Here Duong highlights the hard work that Aunt Tam puts in to take care of her mother, brother, and the family's farm. Ultimately this land will prove to be the family's downfall due to the land reform, and it is Aunt Tam's incredible hard work to regain her wealth that illustrates some of the backwardness of the Party's ideologies and reforms.

As soon as Ton leaves, Uncle Chinh tells Que that she must no longer speak or have any contact with Ton because he is an "exploiter." Uncle Chinh explains that Ton's entire family are landlords, who are bitter enemies of the peasant class. He says that the Party is about to begin land reform, and that Ton's family are the people whom they must condemn and punish. When Que protests that Ton's family has never exploited anyone, Uncle Chinh tells her not to betray her own class. Que starts to sob.

Uncle Chinh is the most vocal supporter of the Communist Party that is featured in the book. Both here and throughout the book, Duong highlights the radical and almost dystopian language of the Communist Party. But while the language implies a kind of hardline stance, this only adds to the irony later when so many of the officials (Uncle Chinh included) prove their words to be hollow.

Que is confused, thinking that Nhieu only has a few acres of rice paddy, which Tam cultivates and hires a few people to help her. Que thinks that villagers who owned a bit of land were the backbone of the countryside: farmers who were always incredibly devoted to what they do.

Que points out that Ton's family has never exploited anyone; they are simply being targeted for owning land. Rather than equalizing hardworking citizens, the reforms punish some of the most productive members of society.

Uncle Chinh immediately goes after Nhieu and Tam. The two women are forced to prostrate themselves with their arms behind their backs in the village courtyard. People around them shout "down with the landowning classes!" Other "exploiters," who own just a bit of land, are also forced into this humiliation. The villagers who denounce Nhieu and Tam simply do so out of fear.

The fact that the other peasants, many of whom know and love Nhieu and Tam, feel that they have no option but to denounce the women highlights another issue with the reforms. Duong emphasizes how these reforms cause fear in the very people they are supposed to be uplifting and protecting.

Two peasants who had been made "pillars of the land reform" lead the accusations against Nhieu and Tam. One, named Bich, was expelled from the army for drunkenness and is notorious for his laziness and his lecherousness. Now, suddenly, he had become a respected figure preaching "class-consciousness" and the struggle against the "exploitative property-owning classes." The second peasant is a widow named Nan, who stole food to the point where she gave her husband a heart attack over her behavior. After he died, she was incapable of working and ran out of money.

The two people who are given authority in the land reforms begin to hint at the hypocrisy of the Party. Bich is not a person who has been exploited—he is notorious for being lazy. But simply by taking up the Party ideology and echoing their hollow words, he is given power and property. Nan, too, was simply lazy and had also stolen from others, and yet she is elevated above others simply because she is willing to commit to the ideology.

Now, Bich and Nan, the two outcasts, sit on the "bench of honor," scolding villagers like Nhieu and Tam. During a second denunciation session, Nhieu and Tam are forced to squat in a deep pit. They feel humiliated and helpless. Afterward, Nhieu falls ill and dies. Before this, Uncle Chinh had told Ton that he and Que were no longer husband and wife, and that if he tried to see Que, Uncle Chinh would have him locked up. When Ton reports this to Tam, she tells him to flee so that he can avoid the same humiliation, and he does.

Rather than equalizing citizens and promoting harmony, instead the land reforms propagate more injustice and lead to Nhieu's death. Additionally, Duong highlights one of the differences between Que and Uncle Chinh and the degree to which women are more strictly held to the standards of traditional values than men are. Whereas Que views it as her duty to support her brother no matter what, Uncle Chinh is not held to those same values and instead prioritizes the Communist Party.

After Ton departs, Que secretly visits Tam to ask where Ton went. Tam tells Que that she does not know. Later, Uncle Chinh interrogates Que, saying that he was informed that she met with "that bitch Tam." He tells Que that he has been promoted to chief of the village Land Reform Section, and that if she continues to meet with Tam, the Party will denounce him. He tells her not to be selfish and to think of the interests of their class. Que sobs and wanders around the house, distraught.

Again, the hollowness of Uncle Chinh's words ring out here. He tells Que not to be selfish, but he has persecuted her husband and torn their family apart. This dynamic is emblematic of the chaos and the destructiveness of the land reform, as it turns family members against one another and punishes innocent citizens like Ton.

Que soon begins to deteriorate physically and mentally, and Uncle Chinh confronts her again to stop grieving Ton. He tells her that she is undermining his efforts in the Party, and that she has to support him because they only have each other. Instead, that night, Que bundles up clothes and leaves the village. No one can find her. Six months later, Uncle Chinh leaves the village to join the Land Reform Section—then one day, Que returns. She is emaciated, her face covered in lines.

Again, the irony of Uncle Chinh's words becomes apparent here. Uncle Chinh believes that Que must support him because they have to prioritize family over everything else, but he has not done the same for her. Duong also highlights how the suffering that Que has endured has aged her and detracted from her beauty.

Soon after Que returns to the village, the "Rectification of Errors" begins. The campaign is an effort to rectify the land reform, which had wrought immense chaos and suffering. People talk about the injustices they suffered, and Uncle Chinh becomes reviled through the village. No one knows where he has gone, and so a mob of villagers appear on Que's doorstep. However, Aunt Tam intervenes, telling them that Que had lost her husband at the hands of her brother and does not deserve punishment. The mob disperses, and Que opens the door and embraces Tam.

The ineffectiveness of the Party's policies become so apparent that even they admit their failings. Yet the destruction and pain that they wrought—like driving Ton away, or causing Nhieu's death—are irreversible. This moment of solidarity between the two women provides a potential alternative for the idea that family must come before everyone else.

In the present day, on the train to Moscow, Hang watches the countryside pass. An old man next to her (whom she calls her traveling companion) offers her a sandwich, but she declines. He puts on music, and Hang thinks about the first time she heard the artist whose music is playing. The story flashes back: Hang and a friend, who are both "exported workers" in Russia, visit her friend's uncle in Kiev. They start to cook food, and Hang's friend leaves for a short errand.

Hang's journey to Moscow takes on a new meaning following the revelations about her uncle and her mother's history. Even though Uncle Chinh so thoroughly damaged Hang's parents' lives, she is still choosing to visit him because he is ill. This demonstrates how Hang is making the same decision her mother made: to prioritize family over all else.

While Hang's friend is gone, she continues preparing their meal with her friend's uncle. Three hours pass, and they start to eat. He suggests that they share wine as well. Hang replies that she can't drink alcohol, but he tells her that the wine is "very light" and pushes it to her lips. Out of politeness, she drinks the glass. Suddenly, he starts grabbing at Hang to kiss her, but she pulls away, warning him that she's going to scream. She pushes his head back and gives him a hard stare.

This story expands on some of the traditional values outside of deference to family that is inherent in Vietnamese culture. Hang feels that she has to respect an older man, despite the fact that she can't drink. But this episode demonstrates the potential harm in those values: because this man simply wants to take advantage of her, being deferent to him only allows him a greater advantage.

Suddenly, Hang's friend returns, and she tells her uncle that he should be ashamed. She tells him to sleep next door, and he leaves. Hang is humiliated, sad, and homesick. Her friend puts on the Russian singer, singing about mountain ranges and dense forests. Hang thinks that this singer must have also known weariness and despair, and that she must have had to reinvent a sense of optimism for herself. She thinks that life is like a **flower** picked from a swamp. Back in the train, Hang thinks that the voice had so enchanted her because it beckoned her "to revolt."

Here, Duong introduces the symbol of the duckweed flower. Hang recognizes the beauty of the flower in her childhood, but now that she has grown up, also sees the poverty and hardships that have been masked by that beauty. It follows that she ties this metaphor to her desire to "revolt," because seeing the stagnation in her home country prompts her to avoid her mother's path and to turn away from her family.

CHAPTER 3

Hang returns to her memories. Due to the continued resentment of the villagers, Que moves to Hanoi. Ten years later, Hang is born in a brick hut in a "working-class slum." Every day, street vendors are outside selling their homemade snacks. Each morning when Hang is growing up, Que packs her own snacks to sell and wakes Hang before school. She makes her breakfast of pickled cabbage and fried silkworms, as well as some kind of candy that she has picked up for Hang. Que looks at Hang with tenderness and admiration.

Hang's introduction of her childhood home and her dynamic with her mother provides some evidence as to why she considers the past to be so idyllic. While she appreciates the food that her mother prepares for her, it becomes clear that what she appreciates most is knowing that her mother has real love for her. It is this knowledge, not any food or wealth they might have, that gives her a sense of comfort and love.

One morning, when Hang is about eight, she wakes up when Que has already gone. She walks through the street, passing her neighbor Madame Mieu's house. Madame Mieu has a blind dog named Fuzzy White that Hang loves, and a "crippled" son (whom Hang refers to as "the cripple") who sings in a falsetto voice, "Hail autumn and its procession of dead leaves, the rows of barren poplars stand silent on the hillside." Hang feels like crying at the **song**.

The cripple's song serves as yet another symbol of the beauty, but also the poverty, of Hang's home. Hang senses the beauty of her surroundings—and perhaps even gets a hint of the tragedy around her—but as she reveals later, it is only when she has grown up does she truly understand the meaning of the song. It represents a life unfulfilled and lost to the stagnation.

Just then, girl named Thu invites Hang to play with her. Hang thinks that the girl is mean and lies shamelessly, but she agrees to play. They run down to the Red River, try to catch dragonflies, and gather fruit. But when Thu hears her mother hollering for her, they run back home and pretend that they have been there all along. When her mother returns, angry that she couldn't find Thu, Thu says that Hang made her go down to the river. The woman yells at Hang, forbidding her to go near Thu and calling her a "little bitch without roots" before dragging her daughter back to their house.

While Hang thinks back on this time in her childhood as an idyllic one, there are parts of it that are still filled with pain. Not knowing who her father is, as this woman brings up, is a large source of distress for Hang. It plays into her need to feel love and affection, because she is missing a key piece of her life.

Hang is deeply upset by the woman's words. An old blind neighbor calls out to Hang, asking to talk to her, but she runs away in tears. That night, in bed, Que tries to comfort Hang. Hang begs Que to tell her who her father is, but Que refuses, crying. She asks Hang not to ask those questions and reassures her that at the very least, they will always have each other.

Even though Hang is upset about not knowing the history of her father, Que reinforces their mother-daughter relationship. This adds further context as to why Hang feels so much loyalty for her mother later in life—clearly, Que's support is a buoy for Hang as she navigates life without a father.

A year later, Uncle Chinh comes to the house. It is the first time that Hang has met him, and he looks so much like Que that Hang instantly takes a liking to him. Que starts to prepare rice for Uncle Chinh and instructs Hang to get a pound of pork, a pound of roast goose, and pickled shallots for dinner. As Hang leaves, Uncle Chinh comments on how much Hang looks like her father. When Que doesn't respond, Uncle Chinh comments further that Que doesn't have to worry about the stigma of a bad family background because she comes from the working class. Que asserts that Ton's family was reclassified as middle peasantry during the Rectification campaign, then changes the subject.

Duong introduces the dynamic between Que and Uncle Chinh that will follow throughout the rest of the novel. Despite the fact that Uncle Chinh is cruel toward Que, Que makes it her duty to support her family no matter what. Duong also includes the idea that food is an expression of love, as Que insists on providing a more lavish dinner because Uncle Chinh is there. And lastly, the hollowness and vindictiveness of Uncle Chinh's communist rhetoric becomes evident yet again, as he is unwilling to admit the mistakes he made in persecuting his sister's husband for the Party.

That evening, after dinner, Que invites some neighbors to meet Uncle Chinh. They are impressed that Uncle Chinh is responsible for ideological education and sit rapt as he talks about the "'International Struggle' between capitalism and communism." The neighbors don't leave until late in the evening, and after Que sends Hang to bed, she and Uncle Chinh speak more seriously.

Duong demonstrates how there are still many people throughout the country who subscribe to the communist ideology and associate it with education. Yet because Duong has already illustrated many of the problems instigated by the Communist Party, she uses an anecdote like this to illustrate that Uncle Chinh's language is flowery and simply meant to impress—it doesn't contain any real substance.

Que asks Uncle Chinh why he didn't make contact with her for the past nine years. He responds that he's been very busy with government business, organizing the unions and publicizing various campaigns. Que then asks why he never organized memorial ceremonies for their parents. He says that they live in an age of materialism age, and no one cares about worshipping their ancestors because after death, there is nothing.

Again, Duong depicts how Que and Uncle Chinh hold themselves to different standards: women are expected to remain loyal to their family members above all else. But when Que points out that Uncle Chinh does not do the same, he argues that his ideology is more important than paying his respects to his family.

Uncle Chinh then asks Que how she's been supporting herself. She says that after he ordered her to sell her street-vending business in the village, she moved to Hanoi to work in a textile mill. She couldn't save anything, however, and instead started selling small snacks at the market so that she could save money for Hang. Uncle Chinh argues that merchants are "exploiters" and "parasites" and that Que should "rejoin the workers." Que responds that all she wants is food and education for her daughter. Uncle Chinh argues that in the new society, children who come from working-class families will have advantages.

Duong again points out the irony in the communist ideology and its ineffectiveness in its goals. Where it is meant to empower the working class, instead Que argues that adhering to the ideology and "rejoining the workers" actually makes it more difficult for her to provide for a future for her daughter. While Uncle Chinh continues to make promises, Que's personal path proves that those promises are largely empty.

Uncle Chinh then says that the Party has given he and his wife (Thanh), who is a leader of the Communist Youth League, a new apartment in Hanoi. He explains that he needs the money Que got from selling their parents' house in order to furnish it. He says he is too busy to go to the village to collect the money, so Que is forced to go.

Uncle Chinh reveals his hypocrisy yet again in proving that communism doesn't actually allow him to support himself fully. Even though he and his wife are both officials in the Party and they have been given a new apartment, they don't make enough money in those positions to be able to furnish it. Only by using the money that they have from selling their parents' house are they able to make a comfortable life for themselves.

A week later, Que and Hang return to her old village. The bus drops them off eight miles from the ferry, and they walk through a traveling bazaar. Hang is entranced by the stands, and Que buys her a set of small figurines. They then go to the pagoda and sit down together at the base of a banyan tree, where Hang falls asleep in her mother's arms. When she wakes, Que smiles at her. Hang once again notes that Que's teeth glisten, but she thinks that the rest of Que's beauty and youth had faded from sorrow "for nothing."

Que shows her love for Hang through the gesture of buying her figurines, but Duong illustrates that Hang derives more comfort from her mother holding her and supporting her emotionally than from any monetary gift she could give. Duong also draws a connection between hardship and a loss of physical beauty in referencing Que's teeth yet again. This part of her beauty contrasts with the beauty that she has lost due to the struggles that she has had to face in her life. Hang realization that this has happened "for nothing" suggests that she sees in hindsight how society has unnecessarily broken Que.

Que and Hang eat a little food and then head to catch the ferry. While they wait on the bank, Hang wraps her arms around Que and asks where her father is. She knows she is upsetting her mother but thinks that she needs "another shoulder to lean on in this life." Que doesn't respond. The ferry arrives, and they cross the shore to the village. That night, Hang dreams that she is being beaten. She thinks about the humiliation that's haunted her since the neighbors mocked her. Seeing Hang suffer, Que decides to tell Hang what happened to Ton.

Hang's desire to simply be loved is evidenced by her statement that she needs "another shoulder to lean on." She wants to know who her father is to have some sort of connection or knowledge of another person who could truly love her. But in deciding to be honest with Hang about what happened to Ton, Que knows that she will potentially make Hang feel even more alone.

CHAPTER 4

The narration flashes back to Ton fleeing the village. He hides with the parents of a former student of his, and they are terrified that he will be found with them and that they will be punished for associating with the landowning class and acting out against the revolution. Ton doesn't stay long and takes the ferry to get as far away from the village as possible. The woman at the ferry tells him to pay 18 coins, though the trip usually costs five. Ton does so, and he takes a three-day journey up the river to the end of the line.

The tyranny of the Communist Party becomes evident in Ton's experiences. Not only is he forced to flee his home, but people who had previously been friends are now hesitant to have any contact with him at all. Additionally, Ton's experience at the ferry illustrates how the policies allow for opportunistic people to take advantage of others, because the woman knows that Ton is being forced to flee and will pay the inflated price.

Ton finds refuge for two weeks with a couple who had come to this more rural area during the anti-French resistance. He then travels further up the river into a Muong minority region. There, he starts a new life, teaching Vietnamese and science. He is quickly revered by the villagers, marries the daughter of the village vice president, and has two sons.

Again, Ton's path illustrates the cruelty inherent in the Party's policies. Far from equalizing citizens and promoting justice, it forces Ton to abandon his life and create an entirely new to preserve his anonymity.

After six years, a traveling salesman who knows Tam and Que arrives in Ton's village. The salesman tells Ton about the Rectification campaign and that Que had sold her home and left for Hanoi. The following week, Ton takes a raft down the river to Hanoi. When he arrives, he finds Que, still young and beautiful but very bitter and somber. Hang describes how their love rises again despite being apart for years and each of them having endured great loneliness and suffering. On that night, Hang is conceived.

The story of Hang's conception is related to Duong's themes of beauty and disillusionment. In the society, beauty (in this case, Ton and Que's love) is able to prevail despite harsh conditions. However, much like the symbol of the duckweed flower, it is stifled by the poverty and dirtiness of what is around it. As much as Que and Ton try to revive their love, ultimately their circumstances prevent them from rebuilding their life together.

On the train to Moscow, the train stops abruptly, and Hang lurches forward but is caught by her traveling companion. Outside, the sky darkens. Hang sees the trees in the distance and a singular old house with a chimney on the edge of a lake. The house stirs a memory in Hang: "a vision of a former life [...] a past to which each of us is linked, inextricably, by the ties of blood and race." Hang thinks about the night Que first took her to visit Que's old village.

The vision of the house sparks Hangs memories of her own past, as this dwelling serves as a symbol of the "ties of blood and race," or their familial ties. But Hang also seems to acknowledge the disillusionment she has with the past: even though the vision reminds her of her family, she also acknowledges how those ties can be suffocating ones, particularly because they are inescapable.


CHAPTER 5

Que and Hang bring gifts back to Que's old village, and they tell everyone about their life in the city. On the path to the village, Hang is excited to see a barley sugar vendor. Que tells her that this is the daughter of the woman who used to sell barley in the street when Que herself was little. Hang wonders if, in 10 years, she will live the life of her mother. This thought makes her shiver.

Hang's visit to Aunt Tam marks the moment in which she starts to truly come of age and become disillusioned with her childhood. Hang later calls her childhood a "paradise," because afterward she starts to see how it had concealed some of the tragic underpinnings of the society. Thinking about the barley sugar vendor's daughter, she hopes that she will not fall prey to the same kind of stagnation.

Que and Hang then go to Aunt Tam's, which has an extravagant courtyard leading up to a modern house. There are large gardens and several outbuildings. An old woman, Madame Dua, who is working in the courtyard says that Tam is expecting them. Aunt Tam answers the door and immediately studies Hang's face. Hang observes that her hands are knobby and rough. Tam says, "She's a drop of his blood. My niece," and starts to cry. She then invites Que and Hang into the house.

Hang's introduction to Aunt Tam is emblematic of the dynamic between them for the rest of the book. Aunt Tam does not see or love Hang for herself—rather, she only sees Hang as a connection to her lost brother and the heir to their family. Aunt Tam will subsequently spend the rest of her life supporting Hang in whatever way she can, but Hang frequently feels these gestures to be more about Aunt Tam's own desire to flaunt her wealth and support her family than about genuine love for Hang.

The inside of the house is just as extravagant as the outside, and Hang is hesitant even to sit down. Aunt Tam offers them a spread of food that rivals a Tet feast: chicken, pâté, spring rolls, salads, and vegetable dishes. She raises a toast to Hang, calling on their ancestors to defend and support Hang's destiny. Aunt Tam says that she is pleased that she and Ton will not have lived in vain, now that she has someone who can carry on the family line.

Just as Duong ties food and love together when Uncle Chinh visits Que, the same dynamic plays out when Que and Hang visit Aunt Tam. Food becomes not only a show of wealth but also an expression of love for these women toward their families. And again, Tam's assertion that Hang can now carry on the family line illustrates how Tam thinks about her only in terms of the family line.

Night settles, and Hang hears the sounds of the villages, smells the aromas of the food cooking in neighboring houses, and senses the purity of the peaceful countryside. She thinks that in the morning, however, it will just seem like ancient swampland again.

Duong continues to convey the relationship between beauty and poverty. Even though there are moments in which the beauty is able to shine, Hang acknowledges that a majority of the time, beauty is stifled by the poverty of the town.

Aunt Tam, Que, and Hang go outside for tea in the courtyard and talk about how Aunt Tam began rebuilding the house five years ago. Aunt Tam speaks about how during land reform, they cut the house in half for Bich and Nan. They gave her a hut next to the temple, leaving her only a few acres of "wasteland." Tam recounts that she thought about suicide but believed that it would be too cowardly. So she sold the only two dresses that she had left for two baskets of potatoes and started to work on other people's rice paddies in exchange for their help on her own.

The injustice of the Communist Party against Aunt Tam becomes even more evident here. Her home is given to people who are notorious for being lazy, while she, an incredibly hard-working person, is given a piece of "wasteland" to live off of. As Hang had pointed out earlier, farmers are incredibly dedicated to their work, and the fact that the house falls into complete disarray speaks to the disorganization of the land reform.

Aunt Tam continues her story: she worked as hired labor in the village and gradually learned how to make **duckweed** into flour and noodles. She invented a machine that would grind the duckweed, which she could buy for nothing and sell for a lot more. She says that she kept every penny she earned in her belt and slept with a knife under her neck. Eventually, with the money she earned from the noodle business, she cultivated her paddy to be the nicest in the village.

Ironically, Aunt Tam's hardship pushes her even further away from communist ideology. She demonstrates how through incredible hard work and ingenuity, she can still rise from extreme poverty and become more prosperous than anyone else in the village.

Aunt Tam then recounts how a little over a year after being kicked out of her home, the Rectification of Errors returned her house to her—though they could not bring back Nhieu or Ton. The house was missing bricks from the walls, and animals ran wild all over it. They had sold the tiles and the antiques in the house. Aunt Tam cleaned the house for three days straight and then set up her noodle business.

Duong again returns to the Rectification of Errors to highlight both the ineffectiveness of the land reform campaign and the injustice that it wrought. The Party acknowledges their mistakes, but they have done irreparable damage to families like Tam's.

Aunt Tam confesses that before the land reform, she never wanted to make a fortune—she only loved working. But from then on, she became obsessed with getting rich and worked constantly. She wants to renovate the house again and make it even more beautiful. She acknowledges that people say she is extravagant, but she says that the house is an offering to herself as a memorial of her suffering.

Duong again emphasizes how the Communist Party's policies actually pushed people like Aunt Tam further away from adopting them: now, Aunt Tam wants to earn as much wealth as possible. Though she does not exploit the workers in her home, the wealth inequality between her and the other villagers is stark.

Aunt Tam tells Hang and Que that Bich and Nan now live on the edge of the village and are decaying in their poverty. She then asks where Uncle Chinh is, and Que replies that he visited for the first time in nine years the previous month. Aunt Tam criticizes him for leading the land reform, but Que tries to defend him by saying that he was obeying orders.

Duong again uses the contrast between Bich, Nan, and Aunt Tam to emphasize the disarray of North Vietnam's policies at this time. Despite the fact that Bich and Nan were elevated by land reform, in the end they are still left in complete poverty.

Aunt Tam then asks if Que knows how Ton died. Que says that she heard he died of malaria. Aunt Tam tells her the truth: he asked his wife in the Muong village for permission to come to town and help Que with Hang, but she refused. In shame and despair, he committed suicide by drowning himself. Aunt Tam says that if Uncle Chinh hadn't persecuted Ton, this would never have happened. Both women start to cry. Hang watches, silent. She recognizes how the past poisoned Aunt Tam's life, leaving her only with a desire for vengeance.

Uncle Chinh's persecution of Ton also trickles into the heart of the conflict between Aunt Tam and Que through the rest of the book. Both women feel that they need to put their family members above all else. For Que, this means supporting Uncle Chinh in whatever way she can, even though he persecuted her husband. This is horrific to Aunt Tam, however, who argues that Uncle Chinh's actions led to the death of her brother.

Presently, on the train, Hang observes as passengers fall asleep around her. She watches out the window and recalls her first winter day in Russia. She had stayed awake for six hours just to watch the snow fall. Light had made the snow sparkle, delicate and light like a dream from childhood. She describes how this beauty felt deeply sorrowful. Hang then recalls experiencing the same sensation as a girl, when her mother had taken her on a trip to a beach. It was a serene place with green water and intricate caves. She says that she'll never know why the landscape's beauty was so painful to her.

Hang's reaction to the snow and the beach landscape hint at some of her later realizations. When she is young, she appreciates the beauty in the world, but it is only when she is older that she understands why it also makes her sad: the beauty of the landscape stands in direct contrast with the poverty and stagnation of the people within that landscape.

Hang recalls another time in which she had stared at the snow, after she had already lived in Russia for several years. One of her roommates asked who stole the sewing machine under her bed, which had been lent to her the previous day. Hang and her other roommates got defensive, saying they didn't even know about the sewing machine. They all began to search the apartment, until the sewing machine was found in a drawer—the girl had simply forgotten she had moved it. The girl is upset and ashamed at having been so paranoid. Hang observes that when people lose something precious to them, their values seem to evaporate.

This incident with the sewing machine indicates another kind of disillusionment for Hang, and also for her roommate. They both recognize that when people experience something that pushes them further into poverty, they tend to lose their sense of their ideals and instead resort to paranoia and desperate accusations.

Hang returns to her memory of visiting the village for the first time. She and Que stay a week before she receives the money for her parents' house. The next morning, Aunt Tam accompanies them to the ferry, giving them a large basket of provisions and carrying Hang on her back so that she doesn't get cut by the branches. Hang describes how her aunt sometimes scares her with her intensity. When Que is out of earshot, Aunt Tam confesses to Hang that she is keeping the house and the rice paddies for Hang when she dies. She assures Hang that she can buy anything Hang might need: food, clothing, and medication.

Here Aunt Tam starts to establish her use of food and wealth as gestures of love toward Hang, as she provides Hang with everything she might need. But it is clear that their relationship is based upon the idea that she needs something, or someone, to live for—and Hang is simply her closest direct relative. The fact that Hang doesn't feel truly loved or supported by Aunt Tam is evidenced in the fact that she actively tries to avoid her, because her love is so intense.

Before they say goodbye, Aunt Tam gives Hang a pair of antique **gold earrings** and a pair of rings. Hang confesses that she would be afraid to wear them at home because she might be attacked for them, but Aunt Tam insists that she wear them until she gets home. Hang thinks that they are inappropriate for a nine-year-old, and that there is something menacing about what Aunt Tam is doing, "like throwing flower petals on an abandoned grave." Que and Hang then board the ferry and head home.

Aunt Tam continues to express her love only through shows of wealth. While Hang appreciates the gestures, she also recognizes that they have little to do with her and more to do with Aunt Tam. Her description that it is like "throwing petals on an abandoned grave" illustrates Hang's acknowledgement that she is receiving this wealth only because of how she, as Ton's daughter, links Aunt Tam to her past.

CHAPTER 6

Hang and Que arrive home early that afternoon, and hear the familiar cripple's **song**. For lunch, Que makes Hang's favorite dish with the food that Aunt Tam gave them. Later in the day, Hang thinks about Ton, wishing that she could have known him. She wanders around the streets, ending up at the mouth of a sewer. She picks through the trash, trying to guess the origin of each item, until Uncle Chinh arrives and interrupts her, telling her not to play in the filth.

Here Duong demonstrates how Hang still has a sense of the childhood enchantment that she will lose upon coming of age. Rather than recognizing the street filled with trash for what it is and the poverty that it represents, she uses it as a game. Duong contrasts this childhood innocence with Uncle Chinh's acknowledgement of the filth.

Hang returns home with Uncle Chinh, Uncle Chinh asks Que for his share of the money, which she gives him. He then tells her that he's found her a post as an apprentice clerk in a food factory. Que asks how she could provide for Hang on an apprentice salary, and Chinh tells her that Hang would have more opportunities in the future if Que took the post. Hang asks Uncle Chinh to stop torturing her mother, but he responds that he is simply thinking of Hang's future, and then he leaves.

Duong begins to hint at the changing dynamic between Hang and her mother. Her mother begins to seek approval from Uncle Chinh now that he is back in her life, while Hang is trying to protect her mother from Uncle Chinh's cruelty. Additionally, Duong reinforces the irony in the fact that following an ideology meant to uplift the working class actually leads to them being poorer.

Que cries after Uncle Chinh departs. She says that she should have raised him and paid for his studies—that she neglected her duties as his older sister. A few weeks later, Hang overhears Que telling Neighbor Vi that her work reflects badly on him in the Party. She says that she has to be there for him as the sole male heir of their family. Vi assures her that it's hard to have higher virtues when you're struggling to make ends meet.

Duong continues to track Que's belief that she has not fulfilled her family duties, which contributes to her subsequent sacrifices for his happiness. Additionally, Vi's observation that it's difficult to maintain a moral high ground when a person is poor provides a degree of explanation for why so many people in the Communist Party in Vietnam—Uncle Chinh included—end up resorting to corruption, because they don't have enough to support themselves.

Tet falls soon after this visit. Neighbor Vi makes a huge pot of *che* (sweet pudding) for Que and Hang. As they carry the plates back to their house they notice Aunt Tam is waiting for them. Aunt Tam asks if they're begging now and sets out huge quantities of pâtés, green tea, spicy cakes, cookies, and juice. Que is shocked and embarrassed, saying that they can't accept it all. Aunt Tam says that the food is an offering to Ton's memory, and that it's for Hang to give to whomever she wants. Aunt Tam also gives Hang a generous amount of cash—far too much for a child.

Aunt Tam's gift of food and money is another extravagant gesture of affection. While Hang appreciates the food, she recognizes that this is not borne of love for her alone. Aunt Tam makes it rather explicit that she is only providing the food because of her love for her brother and Hang's connection to Ton. Additionally, this exchange hints at the fact that these gestures will create a degree of competition and resentment between Aunt Tam and Que.

Aunt Tam then instructs Que to clean her family altar and places a portrait of Ton on the altar as well. She then spreads out candles and firecrackers as offerings. Hang goes outside and thinks that with the money Aunt Tam had given her, she could buy anything she wanted, but this thought does not bring her joy. She feels that she can't go back into the house, because the feast and the candles are simply "an extravagant, postponed form of regret, a yearning for their lost paradise."

Hang confirms her recognition that Aunt Tam is simply giving her the money and food because of her connection to Ton and not actually providing her with the emotional support that she craves. The fact that Hang is starting to mature and become more disillusioned is also revealed in this passage, where she recognizes that each of these women has lost the "paradise" of their former lives. Later in the book, Hang, too, will recognize how she has lost the "paradise" of her own childhood.

Spring and summer pass quickly. Hang gives Aunt Tam a progress report on her studies each month, and Aunt Tam writes her long letters back. Hang thinks that she is submitting to "the glory of the Tan family." That autumn, Que repairs the wall in the kitchen. Hang suggests selling the **earrings** that Aunt Tam gave her to replace the roof, but Que refuses. Que says that she is embarrassed that she can't provide a decent roof. Hang notes that since Aunt Tam came into their lives, Que has become more distant and reserved toward Hang.

Duong illustrates the irony and the tragedy in Aunt Tam's gifts. They do not make Hang feel as though she is loved, and Hang recognizes that the money is in some ways a means of buying her back into the family. In addition, these gestures start to drive a wedge between Que and Hang, as Que worries that Aunt Tam's gifts signify a greater love for Hang. Thus, Duong illustrates how rather than making Hang feel more loved, Tam's gifts are instead causing friction between Hang and the person whom she values the most.

Winter passes, and Que says that she can buy a new roof after Tet comes. But one evening, Que returns home and says that Uncle Chinh is very sick. They rush to the hospital but are denied entry to visit Uncle Chinh. After a few days, they are able to get into the hospital, but Uncle Chinh is not there. The man who had been his roommate says that he was discharged the previous evening, and that he's fine.

Just as Aunt Tam is putting Hang's happiness above her own, Que begins to do the same with Uncle Chinh, even to the detriment of her and Hang's relationship. Even though she promises to fix the leaky roof, when Que discovers that Uncle Chinh and his family lack money, Que prioritizes them over all else.

Confused, Hang and Que go to Communal Residence K, where Uncle Chinh lives. When they arrive, Uncle Chinh, his wife Thanh, and his two sons Tuan and Tu are eating dinner. Uncle Chinh looks sallow, but Que is glad to see him. Uncle Chinh introduces Que, but Thanh (whom they call Aunt Chinh) barely acknowledges them. Aunt Chinh, who is a teacher at the Communist Youth League School, immediately notices Que's Western-style clothing (which indicates that Que is a small businesswoman). Que fawns over the two boys, who only speak when spoken to.

Duong illustrates here the double standard between Uncle Chinh and Que. Que wants to support her brother in whatever way possible, putting her brother over all else. Duong also foreshadows Que's obsession with Tuan and Tu as the male heirs to their family. Uncle Chinh and his wife, on the other hand, put their ideology over all else, and they're cruel to Que simply because of her position as a businesswoman.

Uncle Chinh is dismissive of Que's concern for his health, saying that he had just been overworked. With nothing more to say or do, Que and Hang leave. Que starts to cry, feeling dejected by Uncle Chinh and his family's treatment. Hang suggests that they never come back, but Que insists that she can't abandon her brother.

This exchange between Que and Hang demonstrates how an adherence to family values can actually cause misery within families, as Que's loyalty to Uncle Chinh over Hang begins to cause tension in their relationship.

Que and Hang return to their street and buy *pho* (noodle soup) from a vendor. Afterward, Que feels ill and starts to vomit. Hang calls Neighbor Vi, who massages Que. Meanwhile, Hang goes out into the street, where the cripple starts to **sing**. Hang notes that some days, he says he wants to get married or work, while other days he wants to drown himself. Hang returns to the house as Neighbor Vi leaves, and Vi tells her that her mother is feeling better. Hang finds her mother asleep. Seeing Que's bleary eyes, Hang worries that she might be looking into her own future.

Here Duong starts to hint at the deeper meaning behind the cripple's song. Even though it is beautiful, the fact that all he does every day is sing the same song illustrates an inescapably stagnant life. Even though Hang doesn't fully acknowledge this fact yet, she implicitly recognizes the potential for her own life to be stagnant as well when she returns to the house and worries that she might follow the same path of sadness and suffering as her mother.

The next morning, Que is still not feeling well, and Hang prepares rice for her. Que asks her to go back to Uncle Chinh's house with some food because Tuan and Tu look too skinny. Hang thinks that Que is acting just like Aunt Tam, but she agrees to go. Que then asks Hang to promise never to stop loving her, and Hang nods. Que then gives Hang money to buy two pounds of pork and cinnamon pâté and two pounds of pork filet. She tells her not to tell Uncle Chinh that she is sick.

Hang points out the many similarities between the two primary women in her life. They both sacrifice their own happiness for that of their family members—particularly the family members whom they consider to be their families' heirs. And both Que and Tam attempt to show their love through gestures of food and wealth.

Hang buys the food and returns to Uncle Chinh's home on her bike. Aunt Chinh is amazed at the food Hang has brought, but she locks the door and watches the window as she unpacks. When Uncle Chinh returns from work, he asks why Hang had come back. When Hang says that Que thought Tuan and Tu looked thin, he gets angry and says that they have the that not all skinny people are starving. Aunt Chinh thanks her and Hang returns home.

Once again, Duong subtly implies the hypocrisy and corruption of the Communist Party and its followers. Even though Uncle Chinh and his wife are both leaders in the Party, they do not make enough money to properly feed their families. And though they could be criticized for accepting these gifts from Hang, they still accept them and simply hide them—hinting at the idea that they will gladly take the advantages that Que gives them while still trying to maintain the appearance that they live like everyone else.

When Hang arrives, Que asks her many questions about how Uncle Chinh's family is doing. Que realizes that she forgot she wanted Hang to buy sticky-rice cakes for Tuan and Tu. Hang is frustrated that Que would do so much for Uncle Chinh's family yet doesn't want to tell them about her own illness. Soon after, Que starts to work more so that she can buy more food for Tuan and Tu.

It is here that Que truly starts to sacrifice her own happiness for that of Uncle Chinh and his family, particularly demonstrated by the fact that she does not want them to worry about her, whereas she frets constantly over making sure that they have enough food and money. Again, Duong illustrates how this adherence to traditional values starts to strain Hang and Que's relationship.

During a school vacation, Hang spends the day with her friends. When she returns in the evening, Hang finds Que dejected on her bed. Que reveals that she had left her vendor stall to buy a bowl of soup (which would be less money than someone bringing her food) and the stall had been robbed. Hang tries to comfort Que: she makes rice soup for her mother and goes out to buy an ear of corn for herself. Coming back, Hang is harassed by a 20-year-old man but manages to escape him and return home.

The robbery of Que's stall proves how she is risking her own happiness for that of Uncle Chinh. She is trying to save as much money as possible so that she can spend it on his family, but in doing so, she has lost money and goods. Additionally, the harassment that Hang experiences becomes a recurring theme, illustrating how the deference expected of young women toward men and their elders reinforces a dynamic in which older men are able to assault women without fear (as with Hang's friend's uncle in Chapter 2).

At home, Que laments that she hasn't yet honored the household gods for Tet. Hang tries to console her, telling her that their Tet will be fine and they can just have a few New Year's cakes. The next morning, Hang wakes up late and finds that Que has sold some spare iron bars. Que goes to the market while Hang prepares a simple dinner. But when Que comes back, she has bought everything needed for a wonderful Tet banquet. They finish Hang's dinner early and then go over to Uncle Chinh's house with the Tet feast.

Que's sacrifice of her and Hang's happiness is even more pronounced here. She assured Hang that she would repair their roof by Tet, but instead she uses what little money she can scrounge in order to support Uncle Chinh. Her sacrifice is made even more literal when she and Hang themselves have a very small and rushed Tet dinner so that they can deliver the food for Uncle Chinh.

Uncle Chinh and Aunt Chinh are both shocked by the food that Que brings; Tuan and Tu are overjoyed, having never seen so much food before. Aunt Chinh serves dinner to the boys, and Que and Hang simply watch. Hang wants to leave, but Que simply gazes adoringly at the boys, the Do family heirs, as they eat appreciatively.

Just as Duong emphasizes how Hang represents the heir to the Tran family for Aunt Tam, she also emphasizes how Uncle Chinh's sons are the heirs to the Do family in Que's eyes. Thus, their gestures of sacrifice are motivated by the traditional values of putting their families (particularly their heirs) above all else.

Just then, a young man enters their home, requesting to speak to Uncle Chinh. He says that a workers' delegation is visiting for Tet, and in their honor they are celebrating the poet Do Chieu. Uncle Chinh disagrees, believing that Do Chieu's poetry is not revolutionary and too critical of the Party. Uncle Chinh states that they have to be protectors of the revolution. However, when Uncle Chinh learns that the ceremony invitations are to go out in two days, and that he was written about by a famous communist historian, Uncle Chinh gives his permission to honor the poet. The man thanks him and quickly leaves.

This exchange between Uncle Chinh and the young Communist Party official is emblematic of Uncle Chinh's beliefs as a whole. While he spouts ideological purity, in reality he is willing to compromise his values for the sake of expediency, as long as he can find a tangible excuse to justify his beliefs. While this is not as extreme as his later incidents of corruption, it indicates the same emptiness in his harsh language and staunch viewpoints.

After the man leaves, Hang turns to Que and says that she's going home. They both leave together, and Aunt Chinh walks them to the residence entry. But each time she sees one of her colleagues, she speeds ahead of them or lags behind them, pretending not to be associated with them. Hang thinks that she has no desire to return to see the family again, and from then on, Que visits them alone. Que later asks Neighbor Vi why Aunt Chinh pretends not to know her when they walk. Neighbor Vi explains that no one is allowed to be different or seen as better. She suggests that Que wear the same clothes as Aunt Chinh to fit in. Que starts to do so and becomes much happier after her visits.

Duong again emphasizes the double standard between Que and Uncle Chinh's family. While she puts family above all else, Uncle Chinh and his family are clear that their communist ideology supersedes any loyalty to Que. This double standard is likely due to the fact that Que and his sons are the heirs to the family line, and so Que feels she must do everything she can to support him—whereas Uncle Chinh does not have the same obligation to a female family member.

A year passes, and Tet arrives once more. This year, Que once again exhausts her savings for Uncle Chinh's Tet dinner. A few days before the new year, Aunt Tam visits with a feast of meats, fruits, and cakes—as well as a rooster and six hens. When Aunt Tam leaves, Que immediately starts to decorate the ancestors' altar. Hang knows that Que had been counting on Aunt Tam for the food, so that she could put her own savings toward Uncle Chinh's family. Hang is furious. She wonders why Que loves people who "enslaved her."

Here, the rift between Hang and Que becomes even more pronounced. While Hang appreciates the food and money from Aunt Tam, they are not replacements for genuine love. At the same time, Que has found new recipients for her own affection and is enabled by Aunt Tam's gifts to spend even more money on Uncle Chinh's family—thus separating her further from Hang as well. In this way, the money that both women spend leaves Hang feeling isolated and completely unsupported, which is what fuels her frustration.

CHAPTER 7

On the train to Moscow, Hang wakes up to realize that she had fallen asleep on her traveling companion's shoulder. Embarrassed, she takes out Madame Vera's shawl and burrows in it to warm herself. She looks out the window but can see only fog. She recalls an English painter she once met who told her that he spent his life trying to get farther and farther away from his homeland. But the farther he traveled, the more that fog seemed to invade his paintings.

Even though Hang's interactions with her traveling companion are brief, they develop a deep bond over the course of their journey. Hang's connection with the older man stands in counterpoint to many of the characters' statements that family are the only people a person can rely on. Instead, Hang starts to realize the value in having other people who can support her.

Hang thinks that the fog in the Englishman's paintings reminds her of a pond filled with **duckweed** in a struggling village, a place where women are essentially enslaved to their husbands and where trains and cars are exotic. Hang thinks back to a time when she was a child, when Que had taken her to a pond with purple duckweed flowers where a woman was washing laundry. Hang had been captivated by the flowers, and Que explained to the woman that Hang loved them. The woman shrugged, wondering what was special about the flowers.

Duong establishes the duckweed flower as a central metaphor for Hang's coming of age. Duong establishes Hang's fascination with the flowers as a child in contrast to how Hang views the flowers in the present. Whereas before she saw only the flowers, she now recognizes the surrounding poverty as well. It is also notable that Hang's fascination contrasts with the woman's indifference, reinforcing how a young girl might still be optimistic and notice the positive aspects of life, while an older woman is disillusioned and embittered by years of suffering.

Hang remembers how years later, she always stopped to look at the **duckweed**. But she also started to notice the stagnant ponds, full of rotting algae, that were surrounded by dilapidated shacks. She thinks that at the center of these ponds were the purple flowers, a source of beauty amid filth that represented a loss of life. The purple flowers had been an obsession for her. She relays that in her memory, the flowers are both comforting and poisonous.

Here Hang recounts the change in her own views after coming of age. She, too, can look past the beauty of the flowers in order to see the poverty and decay inherent in the landscapes and the towns. With this change, Duong illustrates how a person's view of their memories can shift as they grow up: they go from seeing the idealized version of their childhood to recognizing the more miserable aspects of it.

CHAPTER 8

The train pulls into a station. Hang's traveling companion offers her a Bulgarian peach, which Hang gratefully takes. She watches on the platform as a couple parts with a farewell kiss. She thinks that separation is perhaps the most painful type of sadness a person can experience.

Hang's reflection on separation sheds light on her own feelings, as being in Russia has separated her from her mother. Pursuing her own path in a different country comes at the cost of Hang's happiness and her ability to maintain a connection with her mother, again illustrating the conflict between prioritizing oneself versus one's family.

The narration flashes back to the day Hang leaves her country, knowing that her own separation is breaking Aunt Tam's heart. She goes through customs at the Noi Bai airport. The people around her all look stunned and panicked. Que is in the hospital, and Aunt Tam is angry with Hang, so neither is there to see her off.

The fact that everyone around Hang has these expressions of fear and panic plays into her evolving idea of beauty. Hang realizes that true beauty is derived from this constant feeling of insecurity that is so characteristic of people in Vietnam.

Hang thinks back to three years prior to the day she moved to Russia, while she was preparing for college entrance exams. During the whole week, Aunt Tam stays at her and Que's house, spoiling Hang and making all of her meals while Que runs her street vendor business. A few months later, Hang learns that she passed her exams and has been accepted to university at the Institute for the Social Sciences.

The competition between Aunt Tam and Que becomes more pronounced here. Each woman works to try to support their family, but even with Aunt Tam's gestures, Hang is still unsure that either woman genuinely loves her.

As soon as Aunt Tam finds out about Hang's acceptance, she comes to their house with hampers of fruit, cakes, ducks, and chickens. She also gives Hang a wad of money so that she can travel. She tells Hang that the week before Hang leaves for university, she is inviting the family and neighborhood to celebrate her success. Hang is uncomfortable at the idea, but Aunt Tam assures her that because she is the first person in their family to get to the university, they have to properly celebrate.

The planned banquet is yet another way in which Aunt Tam tries to express her affection through her wealth. But the fact that Hang is uncomfortable at the idea of a massive feast in her honor shows that Aunt Tam's affections are misplaced. Rather than supporting her niece emotionally, Aunt Tam makes it clear that her gestures are once again motivated by the honor that Hang brings to their family line.

After the exams results, Hang devotes herself to spending time with her friends. One of them is the daughter of a high-ranking official, and they take a trip together to a few coastal towns, but Hang barely makes a dent in the money that Aunt Tam gave her. Then, 10 days before she is supposed to leave for university, a motorcycle driver arrives at their door to take Hang to Aunt Tam's house for the week.

While Hang has a difficult time accepting Aunt Tam's gestures as expressions of genuine love, it is clear that they enable Hang to have opportunities that she might not have had otherwise—both this trip and attending the university at all. Thus, there is some irony in the fact that Aunt Tam's sacrifices for her family in turn enable Hang to turn away from that family.

On the way to Aunt Tam's, Hang stops at the marketplace to say goodbye to Que. When Hang tells her mother that she's leaving, Que simply says goodbye. Hang notes that because Aunt Tam had been doting on her, and because Que had been focusing on Tuan and Tu, their relationship had been distant. Hang asks Que if she has any advice for her. Que says that Hang has Aunt Tam for advice. Que then laments that she's not rich enough to throw Hang a big feast. Hang protests, saying that they've always lived modestly but happily as mother and daughter. Hang thinks about how she simply wants her Que's love, while her mother wants recognition from the Do family.

Here the conflict between Aunt Tam and Que becomes more explicit as each woman focuses on the heirs to their family, and Que is disdainful of Aunt Tam because she can provide more for Hang than Que ever could. However, Hang emphasizes that it is not the money or food that is important to her, but a sense of being happy with the person she loves most in the world. But because Aunt Tam has been so lavish, this dynamic unfortunately creates conflict between Hang and her mother.

Hang says goodbye and meets back up with the motorcycle driver to go to Aunt Tam's house, where cooks are preparing the massive feast. Hang watches Aunt Tam as she directs the preparations; she thinks that she is very close to her aunt but also thinks of Tam as a stranger. Hang wakes up early the next morning and notices that her aunt has not gone to bed at all. Aunt Tam tells Hang that one sleepless night is nothing, and she instructs her to come get breakfast.

The banquet that Aunt Tam is throwing is the latest in her series of monetary gestures for Hang. But Hang makes clear here that just because Aunt Tam dotes on her does not necessarily mean that they have a close relationship. Additionally, Duong makes another point to show how much Aunt Tam has sacrificed of her own well-being and happiness for her family.

Hang notices Madame Dua sleeping in a corner of the kitchen, so Aunt Tam tells Madame Dua's story: she had come from a wealthy family and her husband was a carpenter. He then started working for his in-laws, and they had a son after a year. But Dua proved to be a very clumsy woman and would often break things. It became so bad that when Dua's son turned seven, her husband ran off with her child. Then her parents died, and she had to sell the house to feed herself. Now she is a servant. Aunt Tam tells Hang that Dua's parents are cousins of Tam's mother, and so she decided to take her in because she was family.

Aunt Tam's story about Madame Dua displays additional problems with traditional values. Because women are expected to be deferent to men and have far fewer rights, Madame Dua is left with nothing simply for being clumsy. Even while recognizing the horror of what has happened to Madame Dua, Aunt Tam implicitly upholds these values as well: she still views taking care of family as being more important than anything else.

Aunt Tam prepares a huge meal for Hang's breakfast, but Tam eats almost nothing of it as usual. Soon after, three cooks arrive. Aunt Tam offers the women lunch and then tells the cooks about her plan for the banquet. She says that it will cover both lunch and dinner, and there will be five dishes and five soups for the guest. One of the women comments on how Aunt wants three times as much food as any banquet the village has seen.

Here Duong illustrates the scale of Aunt Tam's banquet for Hang and the extent of its lavishness. Again, Aunt Tam is not doing this only for the sake of making Hang happy, but rather as a means of displaying their family's wealth and prosperity.

As they discuss the guest list, one woman mentions that a man named Mr. Duong has been invited. A woman with a scar frustratedly tells Aunt Tam that Mr. Duong is trying to take her sister's plot in the Trai hamlet, now that her husband has died. She says her sister has filed a complaint with the township, but that that will likely do little good. The woman refuses to serve him, and Aunt Tam agrees that she will not have to.

Mr. Duong's treatment of his sister is reminiscent of how Uncle Chinh treated Ton. His desire to gain land at the expense of this woman's sister illustrates his own greed and corruption, even if he claims to uphold ideologies of equality and harmony.

CHAPTER 9

At noon on the day of the banquet, the whole village arrives, and Hang "play[s] the part of the successful niece." Hang even sneaks away to take a nap during the day and then returns in the evening. When Hang rejoins the party, Aunt Tam introduces her to Mr. Duong, who is the vice president of the village. Mr. Duong invites Aunt Tam and Hang to their table, saying that he has something to ask Aunt Tam.

Hang's understanding that she is simply "playing the part" of Tam's "successful niece" indicates that she does not actually feel that this party is for her, but rather for the idea of what she represents: the product of a successful family. Thus, Hang feels that the gesture of the banquet in its entirety is a hollow one.

Mr. Duong and Aunt Tam begin to discuss politics. He tells her that these days, people readily stab him in the back, and that it is rare to find honest people. Aunt Tam disagrees with him, saying that the people in the village are very kind. She cites a man named Danh who had recently been arrested only for insulting Duong and the Party secretary, saying that he didn't even put up a fight despite the fact that the vice president did not have a warrant for his arrest. Duong says that people who criticize the Party must be silenced, and that authority must be exercised without weakness.

Aunt Tam begins to call out the ineffectiveness of the government through Mr. Duong. By pointing out that Danh didn't protest his arrest—even though it was an unlawful one—Aunt Tam illustrates both the authoritarian nature of the government as well as Mr. Duong's personal hypocrisy. While he believes it is rare to find honest and good people, he endorses injustice and absolutism.

Aunt Tam tells entertaining stories about ministers during the reign of emperor Tu Duc. Everyone is impressed with her memory and laughs at her stories of government officials' ineffectiveness. While the guests are entertained, Mr. Duong is livid over the way that Tam is speaking and says that he has to leave. When Aunt Tam prompts him about what he wanted to ask her, he asks if Aunt Tam would teach his daughter how to make noodles. She agrees to do so, but she notes that making noodles is hard work and points out that she knows his daughter lives off of his salary. Duong flushes with embarrassment but assures Aunt Tam that his daughter will live off of her own work. He leaves abruptly.

Again, Aunt Tam calls out Mr. Duong's hypocrisy. While the Communist Party's intention is to lift up the working class, Aunt Tam points out that even Mr. Duong's own daughter has never truly worked for a living and up until this point has only been living off of his salary. This also reveals why Mr. Duong and other members of the Party may be proponents of authoritarianism: because suppressing criticism allows them to hide their hypocrisy.

The guests enjoy watching Duong leave, and they joke about his shame. The guests begin to leave, and Aunt Tam packs the cooks' baskets with extra food for them to take home. She then gives food to the staff who had helped her, chatting with them about their families and their news. When the last person leaves, she asks if Hang is tired. Hang tells her that it is Aunt Tam who should be tired. Aunt Tam takes her hand, and Hang notes how bony, gnarled, and rough it is.

Duong continues to highlight Aunt Tam's physicality, illustrating how Aunt Tam works herself ragged in order to support Hang. It is also notable that Aunt Tam is generous with the people who work for her and that she cares about them, contradicting the idea that she is exploiting the people who work for her.


In the present, back on the train, there are only three stations left before Moscow. Two drunk men enter Hang's train car and start to harass her, asking if she has any jeans to sell. When she says that she doesn't, they argue and taunt her, wondering why she doesn't want to sell anything to them. She starts to cry, and Hang's traveling companion gets up and threatens the men to leave. When they do, Hang starts to sob—the first time she's ever let herself cry in front of a stranger.

The incident with the two drunk men and Hang's traveling companion directly contrasts with the interaction with Uncle Chinh that Hang describes just after this. Whereas Uncle Chinh often expects so much of Hang as a member of his family (and gives nothing in return), this man protects Hang even though she is a complete stranger to him. Her comfort is evident in her ability to cry in front of him, showing that she is able to be vulnerable and feel a sense of protection with him that she does not experience with a member of her own family.

This is not the first time that Uncle Chinh has demanded Hang come to Moscow; he had done so a year ago as well. Hang flashes back to a year earlier, when she takes the same train to Moscow to visit Uncle Chinh. She is looking forward to it, hoping for news of Que and Vietnam, as Chinh had only arrived in Russia three months prior. But when Hang arrives at her uncle's hotel, he immediately asks for the suitcase she has brought him, which is filled with luxury goods for him to sell on the black market.

Duong continues to illustrate Uncle Chinh's hypocrisy. After constantly criticizing Que for being a businesswoman that sells goods on the market, he does the same thing on the black market in Russia so that he can make money. For all of his lofty ideals, Duong also shows him to be the greediest character.

Uncle Chinh immediately starts to unpack the suitcase and asks for Hang's help in selling the goods, saying that he doesn't want to have to depend on people outside the family. Hang, frustrated, says that Chinh should have done her the courtesy of telling her about Que or made her a cup of tea, since she's come thousands of miles. She leaves the room and buys a bit of food for herself from the cafeteria. When she returns, she hears Uncle Chinh in a meeting with his comrades. Hang waits outside for the meeting to finish, feeling shame and humiliation. She misses her mother.

Hang recognizes the expectation that Uncle Chinh has for her to help him because he is a member of her family—just as Que would have done. Yet Hang points out that Uncle Chinh has failed to do his familial duties, like being kind to her or offering her something after her long journey. Instead, he is only concerned with his business dealings. This is one of the reasons why Hang is so frustrated with Uncle Chinh as she travels to Moscow in the present, and it foreshadows the possibility that Hang will ultimately turn away from this expectation that she will put family above all else.

CHAPTER 10

After the banquet at Aunt Tam's, Hang returns to the house in Hanoi and tells Que that she missed her, mending some of their animosity. Hang starts university in three days, and Aunt Tam had given her money to buy clothes, books, and supplies. Still, Que insists upon buying her a gaudy shirt with dots, bows, and clasps. When Hang wears it on the first day, students stare at her and make fun of her, but she wears it to please her mother.

As Que and Aunt Tam each try to show their love for Hang, Hang starts to recognize the things she does to fulfill her own familial duty. Even as she and her mother are drifting further and further apart, she begins to understand that she must make sacrifices for her mother as well—even small ones like wearing an ugly shirt and enduring her classmates' taunts to make her mother happy.

Autumn comes and Hang and Que are happy together once more. When Hang hears the cripple's **song**, she pities him and thinks that he is reaching out for comfort. One weekend, Que invites Hang to come along to Uncle Chinh's house, even though Hang had not been there in years. Their communal residence is in disarray, faded and dejected. Hang greets Uncle Chinh and Aunt Chinh, whom she had learned from friends' parents is completely ignorant despite being the dean of the Philosophy Department at the Communist League School.

Hang's new reflection on the cripple's song indicates that she has already grown to be able to understand the song differently. Duong hints here that Hang is starting to recognize the poverty and stagnation from which the song is derived, though that will only become clear later. Additionally, Duong calls out the hypocrisy and opportunism of people subscribing to communism yet again—Aunt Chinh is not knowledgeable in philosophy, and yet because she espouses the Party ideology, she has been promoted above others who are worthier of the position.

Que and Aunt Chinh prepare the meal together from groceries that Que has brought. Hang observes that her mother now has her place in the Do family; Que's mission life is to support is to earn enough money to support Uncle Chinh and his family. Everyone sits down to dinner, and they raise a toast to their family.

Duong shows not only Que's efforts, but also that Hang recognizes just how much her mother has sacrificed of her own happiness (and how much money she has spent) in order to be accepted by the family she is supporting.

The following year, Uncle Chinh is diagnosed with diabetes, and Que and Hang visit him in the hospital. Because his salary is so meager, Que assures him that she will find medication for him. When Que and Hang return to their home (which still has a leaky roof), Que says that she is the only family that Uncle Chinh has. Hang hesitantly tells Que not to worry about her and to do what she has to in order to help Uncle Chinh.

Que continues to take her familial duty and sacrifices to the extreme. Even though they still have problems with their roof, Que emphasizes that because she is the only family Uncle Chinh has, she has to put him over herself in whatever ways she can.

Soon after, Que and Hang's meals start to shrink. Uncle Chinh's illness grows worse, and Que has to spend more and more money on his medicine. Que and Hang quickly lose weight, eating only a bit of pickled cabbage fried in a spoonful of fat. One evening, when Hang can't stand it anymore, she begs Que to sell a **ring** that Aunt Tam gave her, saying that she's hungry. Que screams at her to "shut up." Hang runs out of the house, terrified, and only comes back after Que is asleep. She then wakes at two a.m. and finds her mother holding her head in the kitchen, crying. Hang wants to comfort her, but something holds her back. Hang returns to sleep.

This serves as the breaking point in Hang and Que's relationship. Que literally starves both herself and her daughter in order to try and support her brother. When Hang points this out and tries to remedy it with Aunt Tam's show of love, Que is insulted and refuses to allow Hang to sell her ring. Thus, Duong illustrates how sacrificing oneself for one's family can actually sow misery and discontent.


The next morning, Aunt Tam pays a visit. She is shocked to see that Hang has become skeletal. Aunt Tam addresses Que, asking her why Hang is starving. Hang says that she asked to sell a **ring** but that Que refused. Aunt Tam asserts that Hang should be able to do what she wants with it, and she asks Que to bring out the rings and the earrings. Que retrieves the earrings but says that she sent the rings to friends to start up a business, promising that she would share the profits. Aunt Tam and Hang both know that she is lying.

This incident between Aunt Tam and Que proves to Hang just how much her mother has prioritized Uncle Chinh over her, as it is implied that Que actually sold the rings that belonged to Hang in order to pay for Uncle Chinh's medication. Thus, not only is she sacrificing everything for Uncle Chinh, but she expects Hang to do the same thing.

Aunt Tam demands the **earrings**, and Que gives them to her. Aunt Tam says that she sympathizes with Que but that Uncle Chinh is her family's "mortal enemy," and that she refuses to allow Que to use her own money to feed Uncle Chinh. Aunt Tam says that Que has no right to honor Ton's memory, and she takes his picture from their altar. Aunt Tam then takes the earrings, gives Hang a basket of food, and leaves. Que weeps and then leaves for the market without eating, refusing to speak to Hang.

Even though Aunt Tam and Que are at odds with each other, Duong reinforces the fact that they both have the same goals at heart. While Que wants to support her brother, Aunt Tam wants to honor her brother's memory by supporting Hang. Their desires come to a head in the fact that Que is actively taking advantage of Aunt Tam's gestures in order to support the person who led to Aunt Tam's misery and Ton's death.

Hang describes how from that day on, things between her and Que degenerate slowly. Que is cold and sarcastic, refusing to eat any of the food that Aunt Tam brought. One day, when Hang tries to assure Que that she loves and respects her more than anyone else, Que tells Hang to honor someone else on her altar. Hang explodes, saying that Que has provided for Hang her whole life, but that Que is also in the wrong because she lied—something that Que beat Hang for doing when she was younger. In a rage, Que tells Hang to get out of the house.

Duong illustrates how much Que's sacrifices for Uncle Chinh have taken a toll on what was once a loving relationship between Hang and her mother. In addition, Hang also exhibits some of her disillusionment about her mother's choices. Whereas before she accepted them at face value, now she sees her mother's hypocrisy and how Que's support of her brother has trapped her in poverty and robbed her of any prospects for the future.


Hang goes to her old high school and gets a room in the dormitory with five roommates. That night, she sobs, feeling completely alone. When Aunt Tam discovers where Hang is, she brings her money and food every two weeks. Hang knows that she is better off than others, but she still loves and misses her mother. She hears news that Que's business is improving, and that Uncle Chinh had gone back to work. Hang dreams of her leaky roof, of the cripple's **song**, and of a stick of barley sugar.

Even though Que has in many ways turned her back on Hang, Hang still makes a distinction between the love that she feels from Aunt Tam and the love that she feels from her mother. While she appreciates the clothes and the food that Aunt Tam is giving to support her, Hang reinforces the fact that what she truly wishes she had is a feeling of emotional support and genuine love. This is evidenced in her yearning for the leaky roof or the barley sugar: she would rather live a life of simplicity and even poverty if she could have her mother's affection back.

Hang continues to study, and she earns a spot as one of the best students in the class. Aunt Tam buys her dresses and **jewelry** as a reward, though Hang rarely goes out and spends all her free time studying. The money piles up and Hang hopes to repair Que's roof once Que's anger subsides. Once, Hang goes out with friends, and it is a girl named Ninh's turn to buy snacks for the group. When she doesn't have the money, she asks Hang. Hang agrees to buy them but says that Ninh has to go get them. Ninh refuses, saying that just because Hang is rich, she's not above friendship. Hang realizes that she's let her privileges go to her head.

Even though Hang does not view wealth as a replacement for love, she hopes to use the money that she has accumulated from Aunt Tam to support her mother and provide a gesture of genuine affection. Thus, in some ways, Hang is still doing the same thing that her mother did: sacrificing her own well-being and pleasure in order to support her family at all costs.

As Hang goes to get the snacks, Neighbor Vi appears and tells Hang that Que is really suffering over what has happened between them. Hang says that Que was the one who kicked her out, but Neighbor Vi says that Que didn't want to kick her out—she had to. Neighbor Vi then reveals why she is really there: Que was hit by a car that morning and her leg had to be amputated. Hang collapses, stunned. Neighbor Vi helps her up, and the two of them rush to the hospital. When Hang sees Que, with her leg stopping at the knee, she starts to sob.

The tragedy of Que's accident changes Hang's course entirely. Even though her mother essentially disowned her, at this juncture Hang shows her own capability for sacrifice and chooses to give up her studies in order to support Que in whatever way she can.

CHAPTER 11

In the present, Hang wakes on the train to Moscow, which has finally arrived. Hang's traveling companion offers to carry her bags out of the station for her. Hang is glad to have this kind of protection, and she looks at him gratefully. As they walk, she comments that to an outsider they might appear to be father and daughter. Outside the station, they say goodbye. Hang's companion kisses Hang's hand and tells her not to let anyone bully her. Hang walks away without looking back.

Hang's connection to her traveling companion illustrates her burgeoning realization that friends or even strangers can provide valuable support just like family can. This is implied in Hang's observation that her traveling companion is treating her as a father would his daughter—a relationship that Hang has never had otherwise.

Hang takes the subway to get to Uncle Chinh's address. He is there for a training session at the Communist Party Cadres School at Aon, the most privileged university in the Soviet Union. When Hang arrives, however, Uncle Chinh is not there. Instead, he has left her a note to find him at another address, at an apartment of a man named Mr. Khoa. When Hang arrives at the address, she thinks briefly about turning back, thinking that Uncle Chinh had likely invented the story about being sick to get her there. She realizes that if he were really sick, Que would have sent her a telegram.

Uncle Chinh blatantly takes advantage of the sacrifices that Que, and now Hang, have made for him. When Uncle Chinh's fabrication of illness proves true, his decision to call Hang to Moscow in order to help him sell goods—even though Hang herself is ill—proves his greed and his selfishness once again.

Hang reveals that since Que's accident, Que has retired from the market and opened a small snack stand in front of their house. For the most part, her customers are their neighbors. She lives off this meager salary as well as the money that Hang sends her as an "exported worker" in Russia. After Que's accident, Hang gave up her place at university so she could support her mother.

Hang's decision to give up her studies at the university in order to support her mother demonstrates that she, too, is willing to sacrifice her own happiness for the sake of her family.

Hang travels through Moscow, thinking that it is a peaceful city, but recognizing that it has the "peace of a swamp" and that there is something sinister in this tranquility. Hang arrives at Mr. Khoa's building, where a man helps her get through the guard and to Mr. Khoa's apartment. Uncle Chinh answers the door and lets her in. Hang observes the room, which is disheveled and bears evidence of sexual exploits. Uncle Chinh makes Hang a cup of tea, and then starts to make lunch like an expert chef. Hang is impressed at his skills.

Hang's description of Moscow as having "the peace of a swamp" calls back to some of her language surrounding the swamps and ponds in which the duckweed flower is located. Like Hanoi and other Vietnamese villages, Hang implies that Moscow is yet another place rife with poverty and stagnation.

As Uncle Chinh makes lunch, a group of men comes through the door declaring that they're starving. Uncle Chinh serves them food, and when they notice Hang is there, they immediately become less boisterous. One of the young men is familiar to Hang; he reminds her of a character named "the Bohemian" from a famous film. They all sit down at the table, including Hang, and eat together. They toast to their health and to "the salvation of the fatherland" before digging in. Hang starts to drink some of the beer and feels the room spin. The men notice that she is looking unwell, and the Bohemian helps her into the bed.

The Bohemian serves a similar purpose as Hang's traveling companion: his character represents someone who is not in Hang's immediate family but on whom she comes to rely, nonetheless. The Bohemian clearly cares about Hang's well-being when she is looking queasy. This is in contrast to Uncle Chinh, who lied to Hang in order to get her to come to Moscow despite the fact that she was very ill.

Hang sleeps for some time, and when she wakes she hears the men talking about settling some of their debts to each other. Then they speak about Uncle Chinh, who has gone to do their laundry. They discuss how Uncle Chinh spends most of his time sleeping but has lots of energy when it comes to selling goods on the black market. They note that this has led him to have protection with his bosses and landed him in the Party leadership.

Duong makes clear here that not only is Uncle Chinh hypocritical and going against Party ideals, but that this hypocrisy is emblematic of the Party as a whole. His comrades encourage and even reward him for trading on the black market, despite the fact that they outwardly condemn these practices as exploitative.

Uncle Chinh returns. He notes that they haven't put on their dance music as they usually do, glad to have a break from their generation's degenerate music. The Bohemian then tells a story about a man his parents knew who was the deputy director of a factory. He was very strict and frequently gave morality lectures, but one day when the Bohemian was young, he saw the man molesting a nine-year-old mentally ill girl.

Here the Bohemian calls out Uncle Chinh's hypocrisy, though in an indirect way. In comparing Uncle Chinh to this deputy director, the Bohemian argues that Uncle Chinh espouses high morals (like that of ideological purity) in one aspect of life while having no morality in other aspects of his life.

The Bohemian continues, saying that the man had never set foot on a dance floor and often gave lectures about how the younger generation indulged in "shameful indulgences." The Bohemian says that so many people in his generation had been degraded and humiliated by strict people like Uncle Chinh, because if they deviated an inch from their expectations, they would be accused of "betraying the party." The Bohemian then concludes that Uncle Chinh says that their dances are decadent, yet Uncle Chinh does a much more decadent dance by pandering to powerful men. Uncle Chinh is shocked. Soon after, the men leave.

The Bohemian continues to demonstrate the issues with the Communist Party of Vietnam. Not only does it have many members who espouse strict morals while not adhering to them—and leaders who are corrupt with power—but the Party also works to alienate the younger generation. The fact that the Party leadership will only permit strict adherence to Party conventions ultimately drives people away from that ideology, because it actually inspires fear rather than harmony and compliance.

When Hang wakes up the next morning, the apartment is empty except for the Bohemian. Hang tells him that she recognizes him but doesn't know from where. He informs her that he was a student at the Institute for the Social Sciences, and that he had made fun of her for her gaudy shirt on the first day. He tells her that he had been a history student preparing to come to Russia, and Hang tells him she had to abandon her studies to get a job as a textile worker.

In some ways, the Bohemian represents the life that Hang might have been able have. Whereas she was forced to give up her education to support her mother, the Bohemian is a self-supporting young man who is pursuing his own path. His example could potentially allow Hang to envision an alternative path that isn't solely focused on caring for her family.

Hang tells the Bohemian that she's here to visit her Uncle Chinh, who told her that he was very ill. The Bohemian tells her that the real reason Chinh made her come is because he has imported goods that he's trying to sell, and in order to send them on a boat to be sold, he needs money and someone who speaks Russian very well—like Hang. The Bohemian gives Hang money to give to Uncle Chinh when he asks for it, and he tells Hang not to help Uncle Chinh otherwise.

The Bohemian continues to demonstrate the idea that sometimes friends can provide greater support than one's family. Unlike Aunt Tam, Hang sees that the money the Bohemian is giving her is not due to some arbitrary family ties, but because he genuinely wants to help her and doesn't want Uncle Chinh to take advantage of her.


After this, Uncle Chinh returns, and the Bohemian leaves. Hang asks Uncle Chinh why he asked her to come. He says that he's about to go back to Vietnam, and that he needs someone who speaks Russian to sell his goods. He says that Que said if he had trouble, he could count on Hang. Hang gives him the money from the Bohemian instead. As Uncle Chinh counts the money, Hang remembers taking a liking to Uncle Chinh the first time she met him because he resembled Que. But, she thinks, that was in the past.

Uncle Chinh both confirms his greed and illustrates his willingness to take advantage of both Que and Hang simply because they are family, and because he knows Que feels that she needs to sacrifice her own happiness for the good of her family's heirs. Even though Hang has largely followed that same path in order to make Que happy, her opinion on the matter starts to turn as she starts to give up these familial duties.

Hang remembers how a week after Que's accident, she went to tell Uncle Chinh the news. When she arrived at his home, she noticed it was more lavish. They had a brand new refrigerator and a Japanese TV hidden discreetly in the room. When Hang told Uncle Chinh and Aunt Chinh the news, they were surprised. They started to talk about sending money to Que, but they bickered about what they could sell or who they could borrow from. This went on for so long that Hang simply walked out of the house. When she got back to the hospital, she told her mother that Uncle Chinh was away.

Duong shows another prior breaking point for Hang in her understanding of her uncle. Not only is he hypocritical in terms of Party ideology—again, buying goods that elevate him above his peers—but he is also selfish, greedy, and uninterested in providing for his family. Despite the fact that Que has given Chinh as much money as she possibly could for his medication, he has taken advantage of her generosity in buying things like a new fridge or a TV and is unwilling to give up any of those luxuries even to help his disabled sister.

Hang wakes up in Mr. Khoa's apartment after another bout of sleep, still feeling quite ill. Uncle Chinh offers her noodles, but she says she only wants to sleep. The next morning, the Bohemian offers to drive Hang to the station instead of Uncle Chinh, and she accepts immediately. The Bohemian also buys her a train ticket and some food for the trip. When they part, she thanks him profusely, and they say goodbye.

Again, Duong reinforces the fact that Hang is moving away from relying upon her uncle and is instead feeling more comfortable relying on people outside her family. This is because the Bohemian's affection feels more genuine, and Hang doesn't feel the imbalanced sense of familial duty that she does in her relationships with her relatives.

On the train, Hang remembers her first winter in Russia: she had worked herself to exhaustion, was constantly numb with cold, and ate just enough to keep going—everything else was sent back to her mother. Hang shakes out of her reverie as the woman next to her on the train starts to eat. She asks if Hang wants to join, and Hang agrees, unpacking her food. They eat together in silence, and when they arrive, they wish each other luck and part ways.

Hang describes some of her own hardships in the sacrifices that she made in caring for her mother. No longer was she living the life of a comfortable university student, as she was forced once more into impoverished conditions and worked simply to send what she could back to her mother—just as her mother and Aunt Tam had done for their family members.

Hang exits the train and heads to a bus station that will take her to her dormitory. As she cuts across a park, she notices a group of young Japanese people. She notes that they exude confidence and have look healthy and well-nourished. Hang wonders what they have that Vietnamese people don't have. Then, she realizes that the faces around her are always fearful. They fear not being able to pay for food, or of learning that a parent has passed away, or to be humiliated.

Hang's comparison of Vietnamese people to Japanese people returns to the idea of beauty and poverty. Whereas in her childhood she found poverty in the landscapes of her home and the cripple's song, Hang now realizes that true beauty is derived from the ability to be free of fear, poverty, and stagnation as these young Japanese people are.

When Hang finally returns to the residence, Madame Vera apologetically gives her another telegram. This one asks her to come home, informing her that Aunt Tam is dying. Hang wishes that she could collapse and never wake up. Instead, she is forced to return to Moscow. There, the Bohemian helps her with her exit visa application to return home and gets her a plane ticket. Hang thinks about how this is the first time in her life she had accepted help from someone outside her family, and that with him, her problems disappear" He sees her off at the airport, and Hang is glad to close this chapter of her life as an "exported worker."

Just as Hang has finished fulfilling one piece of her familial duty, she is forced to travel yet again in order to fulfill her duty to her aunt. Duong continues to juxtapose this debilitating sense of obligation to her family with the easy nature of her friendship with the Bohemian. Whereas her family is a weight on her shoulders, the Bohemian actively lifts her up and lightens her burdens, pushing Hang further in the direction of realizing that she would be happier turning away from her family.

Two days later, Hang arrives in Hanoi. She returns home briefly and sees Que and a few neighbors. Hang once again hears the cripple's **song**. She thinks it's taken time to finally understand the song, that it represents a life that's been extinguished. Hang shares tea and candies she's brought from Russia with the neighbors, and gradually everyone departs. Hang and Que catch each other up on their lives. Que apologizes that Hang as suffered so much for her, and they hold each other, happy together once more.

Hang's reflection on the cripple's song echoes her newfound understanding of the duckweed flowers. It indicates her revelation after coming of age that even though the song is beautiful, the stagnation that the cripple experienced made it an unrealized beauty, because so few of the people in Vietnam have hope of escaping their poverty.

As Que and Hang settle down to sleep, she asks if Hang ever sees Uncle Chinh in Russia. Hang wants to scream in frustration, but she doesn't answer. Que quickly falls asleep and starts to snore. Hang can't sleep, and at four in the morning, she leaves a note saying that she is going to Aunt Tam's and isn't sure when she'll be back. She knows she should stay longer, but when she leaves, she doesn't feel guilty.

Hang's frustration is borne of the fact that Uncle Chinh asked so much of her, and that she had willingly sacrificed so much of her time and energy while being ill in order to visit him. Even though she loves her mother, this is a turning point for Hang, in which she resolves not to forgo her own happiness in order to support the family anymore.

Hang returns to the river, where she will take a ferry to Aunt Tam's. She thinks back to the evening she and Que had come to the village for the first time together. She had been happy; she had yet to meet Aunt Tam. She thinks that she had her mother then in "the magical, unique paradise of childhood."

Hang's description of her childhood as a "magical, unique paradise" hints at the significance of the book's title. Her childhood was a kind of paradise—but this is largely due to the fact that she hadn't fully opened her eyes to the poverty, fear, and stagnation that plagued so many others in her life and which now plague her in many ways as well.

Hang arrives at Aunt Tam's house and is relieved to learn that she is still alive. Aunt Tam remarks on the fact that Hang has become a skeletal, but Hang sees that Aunt Tam is also very frail and sunken in appearance. Tam expresses how angry she is at Que for making Hang sacrifice so much, and Hang tries to calm Aunt Tam, who begins to cough feebly. Aunt Tam pulls out two keys from under her pillow and gives them to Hang: one is to a chest that has money for her funeral, and the other is to a trunk that Aunt Tam has hidden which contains **jewelry** and a map to Hang's inheritance. Then, Aunt Tam falls asleep.

It is ironic that Aunt Tam is frustrated at how much Hang has sacrificed for Que, given the fact that Aunt Tam herself has sacrificed so much for Hang. And in many ways, Hang is sacrificing a great deal for Aunt Tam in return by taking care of her and her home. But hearing this gives Hang a kind of implicit permission to choose a path that will make her happier rather than adhering to traditional values and putting family over all else.

That night, many neighbors come to the house to greet Hang upon her return, including the motorcycle driver, whom Hang learns sent her the telegram. They chat together, and Hang remarks that Mr. Duong isn't there. The man explain that Mr. Duong rallied the local authorities to seize the land of the Madame Hai, who lost everything. One evening, right after Tet, Madame Hai snuck onto Mr. Duong's property and attacked him with a hammer, killing him. Then, she doused his home with gasoline, set fire to it, and hanged herself. Hang shudders at the story.

The image of Madame Hai having hanged herself in a burning house is a haunting one for Hang. In contrast to the images of beauty that she relays over the course of the novel, this image connotes the unnecessary pain that Hang's society brings to people. In losing her home, Madame Hai felt that her life was deprived of all meaning and that two people had to die.

The motorcycle driver then asks Hang to sell the house to him if she doesn't want it. Hang says that she can't think about that at the moment, and then she goes to bed, falling asleep in her clothes. In the morning, she visits Aunt Tam and combs out her thin hair. Aunt Tam asks Hang to keep up the house—the "altar to [their] ancestors"—when she is dead. Hang thinks that the price of this legacy to her is "a life deprived of youth and love."

Here, Duong puts a final point on how much Aunt Tam has sacrificed over her life for the sake of her family—as Hang notes, she gave up the time of her youth and any chance at love in order to serve and support their memories. Duong also sets up Hang's final internal conflict in Aunt Tam's asking her to do the same—to give up her own life and happiness in order to care for the "altar to their ancestors."

Aunt Tam starts to drift off, staring into the distance, her breathing growing rougher. She tells Hang that she loves her, and Hang starts to cry. Aunt Tam asks her the color of the sky. When Hang says that it's blue, Aunt Tam says that she has seen hell, and then she closes her eyes. Later that afternoon, Tam stops breathing.

Although Aunt Tam could mean that she is seeing hell in the present as she is dying, another interpretation could imply that Aunt Tam has already seen hell in her life due to experiencing so much pain and suffering.

Hang organizes the funeral for Aunt Tam. She dresses her and prepares her to be buried. On the day of Tam's funeral, Hang wears a white mourning dress, carries a cane, and walks backward toward her grave—an act that should have been performed by Aunt Tam's eldest son. She and the mourners dress Aunt Tam's tomb in flowers. After everyone leaves the cemetery, Hang thinks that that Aunt Tam was the only connection she had to Ton's love.

The fact that Hang performs an act that should have been performed by Aunt Tam's eldest son illustrates the extent to which Hang was a surrogate for all of Aunt Tam's family, and Aunt Tam was a surrogate for Hang's father. Yet although Hang and Aunt Tam represented family for each other, they could not act as true replacements for the loved ones that they lacked.

According to tradition, Hang must arrange a memorial ceremony on the third day, the 49th day, and the hundredth day after Aunt Tam's death. She sends a note back to Que, informing her that she'll be staying at the house for that time. Her mother responds, telling her to stay three years if she wants to. Hang doesn't respond.

This is the final nail in the coffin for Hang's relationship with her mother. The irony is that Hang is simply doing her duty to her family member, which is what Que had always done as well. Yet because of the history of Aunt Tam and Que's competition for Hang's love, ultimately Aunt Tam's death (and the inheritance that she leaves Hang) drive an insurmountable wedge between her and her mother. This again affirms the idea that wealth is not a replacement for love.


After the second ceremony, Hang opens the trunk Aunt Tam had left her. She finds two wedding dresses, more dresses, makeup, and **jewelry**—including the earrings that Aunt Tam had reclaimed from Que. Hang also finds directions to more money. Hang realizes that this trunk represented another kind of coffin, which held Aunt Tam's aspirations and youth.

Hang's comparison of this trunk to a coffin illustrates how much Aunt Tam sacrificed in order to amass her wealth. Although she achieved great riches for the sake of avenging her family, the cost of doing so was her life, her dreams, and her happiness.

CHAPTER 12

That same evening, Hang visits the cemetery once more. In the cemetery, she looks out over the fields of rice paddy, remembering how she had longed for this landscape when she lived in Russia. But she thinks that the beauty she imagined was something she misremembered.

Hang's final reflection on the landscape and beauty of her childhood demonstrates how much she has grown. Whereas in Russia, she found herself missing Vietnam, coming back allows her to recognize the fact that she had been idealizing her memories. Returning to this reality allows her to look past superficial beauty to recognize the hardships that she and others endured.

When Hang returns, the motorcycle driver is waiting for her at the house. He asks her if she would sell some of Aunt Tam's gold, and Hang agrees to do so. As she watches the man leave from her veranda, she observes the pond in the distance once more. Hang observes her village as a place where people's dreams and happiness have been drowned. She has a vision of a woman in the middle of a burning home, hanging from the end of a rope.

Hang's visions return to the idea of disillusionment. Before, she saw the flowers, but now, she recognizes the more important aspects of her society. While it can be a beautiful place, people here also experience immense stagnation, pain and suffering. Being haunted by the vision of Madame Hai, who was left with nothing but her sadness, prompts Hang to find an alternate path for her life.

In her mind, Hang asks Aunt Tam's forgiveness, thinking that she is going to sell the house. She thinks that can't waste her life following in her family's footsteps, trying to preserve a legacy of the past. She sits, dreaming of a university auditorium and of a faraway airport where a plane can come and go.

Hang's final decision to turn away from her family and her homeland has two sources. First, as she described just prior, she has experienced disillusionment about her childhood home; now, she wants to find a place that doesn't cause its inhabitants pain and sorrow. Second, her decision comes with a feeling of freedom in turning away from her family. After observing how much of their own happiness Que and Aunt Tam sacrificed for their families, Hang finds liberation in pursuing a different path—one that can provide her with education and the hope for a happier future.


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