The Refugees

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF VIET THANH NGUYEN

Nguyen was born in South Vietnam and is the son of immigrants who moved from North Vietnam in 1954. After the fall of Saigon in 1975, the family fled to the United States and was resettled at Fort Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania—one of four camps that accommodated refugees from Vietnam. Later, Nguyen's family moved to San Jose, California, where they opened up a Vietnamese grocery store. After graduating from Bellarmine College Preparatory, Nguyen attended the University of California Riverside and UCLA before finishing his studies at UC Berkeley in May 1992. He went on to receive his Ph.D. in English from Berkeley in 1995 before moving to Los Angeles as an assistant professor at the University of Southern California. He is currently the Chair of the English department at USC and a professor of English and American Studies and Ethnicity. His first novel, *The Sympathizer*, was published in 2015 and received the 2016 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. The following year he published his short story collection, *The Refugees*, and was awarded the MacArthur "Genius" Grant.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Many of the stories touch on or are the result of events that occurred during the Vietnam War. The Vietnam War was fought between North Vietnam, a communist government supported by the Soviet Union and China, and South Vietnam, which was supported by the United States, South Korea, the Philippines, Thailand, and other anti-communist allies. North Vietnam had defeated the French colonial administration of Vietnam in 1954 and wanted to unify the country under a single communist regime, leading to country-wide military conflict. Vietnam was quickly scarred by bombs from various military forces, and many of its cities were lined with lethal land mines. It was extremely deadly: as many as 2 million civilians died, as well as an additional 1.1 million North Vietnamese soldiers, and about 250,000 South Vietnamese soldiers. The war ended with the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975, to the North Vietnamese, which led to a U.S.-sponsored evacuation of an estimated 150,000 Vietnamese refugees who were loyal to the South Vietnamese. This mass exodus was followed by another wave in 1978 of "boat people" who were fleeing the economic restructuring imposed by the communist regime. Many of Nguyen's characters are imagined versions of these refugees.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* examines similar topics and ideas as *The Refugees*. *The Sympathizer* focuses on a communist spy who fled Vietnam after the fall of Saigon and was relocated to refugee camps in America before his eventual return to Vietnam. Other major works that explore refugee experiences include Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, which looks at the childhood of an Afghani boy who is then resettled in America following Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan. Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* also examines the experience of a Jewish Czech refugee before, during, and after World War II. Moshin Hamid's *Exit West* serves as another example—it focuses on two refugees of an unnamed city who are forced to migrate further and further west using a system of fictitious doors. The book is also in counterpoint with Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, which recounts episodes from the Vietnam War from the perspective of an American soldier.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Refugees*
- **When Written:** 1997-2017
- **Where Written:** Los Angeles, California
- **When Published:** 2017
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Short story collection
- **Setting:** Vietnam; California
- **Climax:** N/A
- **Antagonist:** Frontier outlaw culture
- **Point of View:** First person and third person

EXTRA CREDIT

A Personal Story. Nguyen writes that there is only one truly autobiographical short story in the book—"War Years"—though he admits that the entire collection is "emotionally autobiographical."

Lengthy Development. Nguyen wrote this collection over the course of 17 years, with many of the stories being published individually in literary magazines prior to the book's publication.

PLOT SUMMARY

"Black-Eyed Women"

The story focuses on an unnamed ghostwriter (a person who is hired to write literary works that are officially credited to

another person), who is writing the memoir of a man named Victor Devoto. Victor is the sole survivor of a plane crash that killed his wife and children. Writing Victor's story reminds the ghostwriter of her own trauma, and over several evenings as she writes, the ghostwriter's brother, who died twenty-five years earlier, visits her home as a ghost. On his third visit, the ghostwriter confesses how guilty she feels that he died and she lived. The story flashes back to their escape from Vietnam by boat, when the ghostwriter's brother had tried to disguise her as a boy so that she wouldn't be kidnapped by pirates. But one of the pirates had seen through their ruse, and when the ghostwriter's brother tried to stab the pirate to protect the ghostwriter, the pirate had struck her brother with his gun and killed him. The pirate and other men had then raped the ghostwriter.

In the present, the ghostwriter's brother eases her guilt by telling her that she had died on that day as well; she just didn't know it. The ghostwriter weeps, finally able to grieve for his death and for the time that they had lost. After the ghostwriter publishes Victor's memoir, she resolves to write her own work: a book of "ghost stories," tales of the lost lives of refugees.

"The Other Man"

Liem, a Vietnamese refugee, is placed into the San Francisco home of Parrish Coyne by a refugee service. Liem had left his family during the war in order to make money in Saigon and send it back to them. Following the fall of Saigon, Liem had escaped by clawing his way onto a refugee boat which had then come to the United States.

Parrish is an older British man who is very generous, but Liem is put off by the fact that he is in a relationship with a younger man named Marcus Chan. Liem is particularly upset by their relationship because of his own sexual history with men, which he had tried to forget. Over the first weeks and months, Liem gets a job, improves his English, and tries not to think about Marcus's body.

A few months into Liem's stay, Parrish takes a trip for a weekend to Washington. Marcus and Liem spend the weekend together, starting with a trip to Chinatown, sightseeing, and going to a movie. By the end of the weekend, Marcus implies that he knows Liem is gay, resulting in the two of them having sex. Liem says "I love you," but Marcus doesn't return his words, which disappoints Liem. In the final moments of the story, Liem looks out his bedroom window and sees two men on the street. He waves at them and they return his wave in a fleeting connection.

"War Years"

In 1983 in a Vietnamese community in San Jose, California, a boy, the boy's mother, and the boy's father live together and run a Vietnamese grocery store called the New Saigon Market. The boy's parents escaped Vietnam when he was very young, and he has grown up caught between Vietnamese and American cultures.

One day, a woman named Mrs. Hoa shows up at the market and asks the boy's mother and father for money to support a South Vietnamese guerilla army training in Thailand who will then try to take back Vietnam from the Communists. When the boy's mother refuses because money is tight for them and they are supporting their daughter in college, Mrs. Hoa warns that people might call them Communist sympathizers. Still, his mother does not budge. A few weeks later, the family is almost robbed by a white man with a gun, except that the boy's mother startles the man by screaming at him, allowing them to push him out the door of their home before he can shoot. The police aren't able to catch the man.

A few weeks later, Mrs. Hoa approaches the boy's mother again at the store. The boy's mother again refuses to donate money, but this time Mrs. Hoa shouts to the other customers that shopping in the store is just as bad as supporting the Communists. The boy's mother is worried about what these customers might say to other people in the community, and so she and the boy visit Mrs. Hoa at her home in order to tell her off. But when they get there, the boy's mother notices that Mrs. Hoa's husband and sons were in the military in Vietnam. Mrs. Hoa explains that she doesn't know whether her husband and one of her sons are still alive. Touched by this story, the boy's mother agrees to give her two hundred dollars to support the army. On the way home, she hands the boy a five dollar bill, points him toward the nearest 7-Eleven, and tells him, in English, "Go buy." He is stunned, and doesn't know what to choose.

"The Transplant"

The story introduces Arthur Arellano and his new friend, Louis Vu. Arthur had lent Louis space in his garage to keep the merchandise he sells: boxes and boxes of counterfeit products from expensive brands. Arthur sees this as a way of paying back Louis's father, Men Vu, from whom he had received a **liver** transplant the previous year.

Prior to his diagnosis, Arthur had lost his home and his wife Norma due to his gambling addiction, and he had subsequently moved into his younger brother Martín's house. He also works for Martín at a landscaping business that their father owned, which their father had given solely to Martín because he thought Arthur was irresponsible.

When Arthur told Norma of his diagnosis of liver failure, she supported him through his transplant and recovery. They had then been given the name of the liver donor by mistake, and Arthur had called every person named Vu in the phone book to try to find someone connected with Men Vu, until he found Louis.

After Arthur recovers from his transplant and kindles this friendship with Louis, Norma feels that Arthur is repeating old patterns and doesn't truly care about her. Arthur doesn't want

to rely on his brother again, and so he sleeps at Louis's house. When he returns home to pick up a few things, however, he receives a call from Minh Vu, who tells him that he is the son of Men Vu. Arthur quickly realizes that Louis has been lying to him, and he confronts Louis, outraged at being misled. Louis admits that he lied but is confused why Arthur is so upset. Arthur threatens to get rid of all of Louis's things from his garage, but Louis says that if Arthur does that, he will call the police on his family's landscaping business, as he knows that some of the workers there are undocumented immigrants. Arthur returns home, deflated, and tries to explain to Norma what happened. But all she can see, he realizes, is that he has nothing to offer her.

"I'd Love You to Want Me"

Mrs. Khanh's husband, Professor Khanh, is slowly losing his memory. He confuses dates, he forgets the route to his home, and at a wedding, he mistakenly calls Mrs. Khanh by the wrong name: Yen. Mrs. Khanh is particularly upset by this last incident, as she has no idea who Yen could be.

Her son, Vinh, and her other children all counsel Mrs. Khanh to give up her job at the library so that she can spend more time taking care of her husband, but Mrs. Khanh is adamant that she's not old enough to retire.

As time goes by, the professor becomes more and more of a stranger to her. He buys a red rose for "Yen," despite the fact that he was never romantic in this way with her, and he continues to call Mrs. Khanh by the name Yen and recount stories that she does not remember. One day, she discovers him half-naked in the bathroom scrubbing his pants and underwear clean, and he yells at her to get out. He had never yelled at her before, not even when they fled Vietnam with their children, or when they arrived in America and were desperately poor.

Eventually, the professor's condition becomes so bad that Mrs. Khanh decides to quit her job at the library. But when she gets back from her final day, she cannot find the professor. She circles the neighborhood until nighttime without success. When she returns to the house, she finds the professor in his library. When he grows frantic and wide-eyed, asking who she is, she tells him "It's Yen."

"The Americans"

James Carver, an African-American Vietnam War veteran, and his Japanese wife, Michiko, go to visit their daughter Claire, who teaches English in Vietnam. Carver and Claire do not get along very well, particularly because Carver cannot understand why she wants to live in Vietnam. Claire argues that she feels at home in Vietnam; that in America, she never felt like it was a place where she belonged as a biracial woman.

Carver, Michiko, and Claire go on tours, visit her apartment, and eventually visit a de-mining site where her boyfriend, Khoi Legaspi, works. Legaspi is developing robots that can help remove mines from fields with much less human involvement. Carver is skeptical of his work, arguing that the Department of Defense (which is funding the project) could use the robot for much more sinister purposes. Claire defends Legaspi's work, saying that he's trying to undo some of the things that Carver had done during the war. Carver had flown a B-52 and dropped tons and tons of bombs on the country, but he felt that he was doing it for the right reasons. Outraged at Claire's words, he storms off and takes a walk. A monsoon hits soon after, and Carver slips and falls in the mud.

Carver winds up in the hospital for three days with both pneumonia and a fever. Claire stays by his side the whole time. When he wakes up, he asks her to help him get to the bathroom. He leans on her as they walk. He is reminded of when Claire was a little girl, barely potty-trained, and had asked him to take her to the bathroom in the middle of the night. When he and Claire reach the hospital bathroom, he has started to cry.

"Someone Else Besides You"

At the beginning of the story, Thomas meets Mimi, his father's (Mr. P's) girlfriend. Thomas's mother had died the previous year of an aneurysm, but even when she was alive his father had often cheated on her with multiple girlfriends. Mr. P. had fought in the Vietnam War and was very tough on his children growing up.

Thomas works two jobs: as a customer service representative for a medical supply company by day and as a watchman at a high-rise by night. He has also gotten divorced from his wife, Sam, the previous year, because he was unable to commit to having a child with her. He had been living alone for six months when his mother died, and had asked his father if he wanted to move in with him. His father agreed.

After meeting Mimi for the first time, Mr. P. says he wants to help Thomas get Sam back, as he says that Thomas is only half a man without her. Mr. P. drives Thomas to her doorstep. They are both surprised to find Sam is very pregnant. She is surprised to see them, but lets them in. Thomas discovers that Sam is having her child alone, and argues with her that a child needs a father. She is frustrated because she believes that Thomas had his chance.

When they leave, Mr. P. decides to slash Sam's car tires, and Thomas doesn't stop him even though he's furious with his father afterward. Two days later, Sam shows up at his doorstep, outraged that he has done that, though she says that, in an odd way, it showed that he cared about getting her back. Thomas puts his hands on Sam's stomach and tells her that he wants to be the father of her child.

"Fatherland"

Phuong's father, Mr. Ly, had had three children prior to the Vietnam War with the first Mrs. Ly. When he had been forced into a labor camp during the war, the first Mrs. Ly had fled to

America with her three children. When he got out of the labor camp, Mr. Ly had remarried Phuong's mother, and he had had three more children, whom he named after his first set of children. Phuong is the oldest of this second set of children.

Phuong's older sister goes by Vivien, and Vivien decides to visit Vietnam for the first time. Mr. Ly had always had a preference for his first set of children, because they were very accomplished: Vivien had graduated from a series of prestigious schools and is now a pediatrician. When Vivien visits, Mr. Ly's preferential treatment only grows worse. Vivien takes the family to an expensive restaurant where Phuong usually works, and Mr. Ly invites Vivien on one of his tours of various Vietnam War sites. As Phuong starts to experience what Vietnam is like as a tourist, she realizes that, to most foreigners, all Vietnamese people seem indistinguishable and quaint. Phuong does not want to serve these tourists any longer.

Phuong and Vivien grow closer over the course of her trip. Vivien gives Phuong black **lingerie** and tells her about her life in America, before revealing that she doesn't really love their father because she doesn't know him. On Vivien's last day, Phuong asks if Vivien would sponsor her to come to America, because she wants to be like Vivien. Vivien reveals that she and her mother lied about her life—that Vivien is actually a receptionist and has quite a bit of debt. Vivien tells Phuong that she cannot sponsor her. Phuong is shocked and upset.

After Vivien leaves, the story concludes with Phuong burning the **photos** that the family had taken over the course of Vivien's trip. Phuong resolves to find a way to leave Vietnam any way she can.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

The Ghostwriter – The unnamed narrator of "Black-Eyed Women." The ghostwriter is plagued by the trauma she experienced as a thirteen-year-old while fleeing Vietnam on a refugee boat with the ghostwriter's mother, the ghostwriter's father, and the ghostwriter's brother. Her brother had tried to disguise her as a boy, so that when pirates raided their boat, she would not be kidnapped like the other girls. When one pirate noticed that she was a girl, her brother had tried to protect her and was killed as a result. The ghostwriter was then raped by several men as her parents watched, unable to help her. Since that episode she has a difficult time going outside; she writes other people's memoirs (like Victor Devoto's) in her basement at night and sleeps during the day. She tries to forget this episode as much as she can, but twenty-five years after the day of her brother's death, her dead brother appears as a ghost in her home. He helps her to heal by allowing her to grieve not only for his death, but also for the fact that she seemed to have died that day, too. She realizes that many people have stories like hers, and when she finishes Victor's memoir, she resolves to write her own book of ghost stories: stories of the refugees who survived, but still lost so much. Thus, her arc demonstrates the cost of war and of being a refugee on an individual level.

Liem – The main character of "The Other Man." Liem is an eighteen-year-old Vietnamese refugee whose story begins when he is placed with a host in San Francisco. He had left his family a few years prior to work in a tea bar in Saigon in order to send money back to them. After the fall of Saigon in 1975, he clawed his way onto a refugee boat, which transported him to a refugee camp in San Diego. Liem's host, Parrish Coyne, is an older British man who is in a relationship with a younger man from Hong Kong named Marcus Chan. Liem is shocked and uncomfortable to learn that they are a couple, particularly given his own sexual history with men. Over the course of the story Liem starts to become more and more intimate with Marcus, until by the end of the story they have sex, and Liem tells Marcus that he loves him. Marcus does not return the sentiment, however. Liem's story is an example of how war can wreak havoc on the lives of individuals, but also how refugees are also simply human beings with a desire and a need for intimacy. Marcus is the first person who really sees Liem as a human being and shares a strong emotional and physical connection with him. But when Marcus is unable to return Liem's feelings in the same way, Liem feels completely isolated and hopes that he might be able to find someone with whom he can share that love.

The Boy – The narrator of "War Years." The boy, the boy's mother, and the boy's father live in a Vietnamese community in San Jose, California. They had fled Vietnam when the boy was very small, and he has no memories of the war. Growing up in America, the boy finds himself caught between two cultures: the Vietnamese culture of his family, and the American culture of his classmates. As he grows up, he finds that he is more attracted to American culture. He likes school because he can speak English there, he wants the Vietnamese market his parents own to sell TV dinners and bologna, and he loves *Star Wars*, *Captain America*, and President Reagan. Meanwhile, his parents are trying to maintain some of the values of their own culture by not giving their son an allowance, by selling only Vietnamese products in their grocery store, and by taking him to church every Sunday. By the end of the story, however, the boy's mother realizes that she must compromise with him, knowing that he feels connected both to a Vietnamese and to an American cultural identity.

Arthur Arellano – The main character of "The Transplant." Arthur is a middle-aged man with a gambling addiction. As a result of this addiction, he had lost his home in a bet, and subsequently he separated from his wife Norma. When his **liver** started to fail, however, Norma returned to him to support him through his transplant and recovery. Arthur

befriends Louis Vu, whom he thinks is the son of his organ donor. In Arthur's case, Nguyen makes literal the idea that humans need intimacy to live, as the intimacy and support that Arthur receives from both Norma and Louis help him to literally survive. Yet even though Arthur tries to view his liver transplant as giving him a new lease on life, Arthur does not change his habits. He continues to be self-absorbed and continues his obsession with gambling. The irony of his story lies in the fact that many of the refugee characters in the book are forced into a new life but are able to overcome immense outside adversity, while Arthur is given an opportunity to make something better of himself and is unable to because of his personal irresponsibility.

Mrs. Khanh – The main character of "I'd Love You to Want Me." Mrs. Khanh's story centers around her husband, Professor Khanh. The professor, who likely has Alzheimer's disease, realizes that he is slowly losing his mind. But perhaps most startlingly to Mrs. Khanh, he calls her by the wrong name—Yen—increasingly frequently over the course of the story. This causes Mrs. Khanh to worry that he might be in love with someone else, or that he had a relationship with someone else in the past. Initially, Mrs. Khanh holds on to some of her independence, refusing to give up her job as a librarian despite her son's Vinh's pleas that she stay home and take care of her husband. She also corrects her husband when he calls her Yen, but eventually, Mrs. Khanh realizes that the only way in which she can help her husband retain his sanity is through a great deal of personal sacrifice. She essentially turns herself into a ghost, quitting her job at the library, going out less and less, and calling herself Yen when the professor doesn't recognize who she is.

James Carver – The main character of "The Americans." James is an African-American Vietnam War veteran who flew a B-52 (a plane that drops bombs). Carver and his wife, Michiko, go to visit their daughter Claire, who now lives in Vietnam and teaches English. Carver, who never liked Vietnam, is confused as to why Claire would want to live there. He sees this decision as another one of Claire's rebellions, as many of her biggest decisions have been in defiance of his opinions. For Carver, the trip helps him to realize that Claire is an adult who can make her own decisions, and that she truly feels closer to Vietnamese culture than she does to his own, or his wife's Japanese culture. Carver is frustrated, however, when Claire takes him to the de-mining site where her boyfriend, Khoi Legaspi, is developing a robot that helps with de-mining. When she argues that he's trying to undo some of the bad things that Carver did during the war, Carver is outraged. Carver's character offers a different perspective from many of the stories that come before. Having direct involvement in the Vietnam War, he serves as a demonstration of the scars that people who fought in the war left on the country and its people.

Thomas – the narrator of "Someone Else Besides You." Thomas and his ex-wife, Sam, had gotten divorced because Sam had wanted a child and Thomas was unsure of whether he could be a good father. His own father, Mr. P., had been very tough on his children growing up and Thomas worries about turning out like him. Yet after Thomas has lost Sam, he spends a majority of the story trying to combat his resulting isolation. When Thomas's mother died shortly after his divorce, he had asked his father if he wanted to move in with him, which his father had agreed to. Thomas also calls Sam many times a day in order to hear her voice. Mr. P. realizes what Thomas doesn't seem to see: that Sam made Thomas a whole man. Mr. P. devises a plot to try to win Sam back, but when they see that she is pregnant, Thomas is shocked. Seeing her, he realizes what he had lost and is haunted by the child and the future that he might have had with Sam. This spurs him to tell her that he wants to be the father of her child, revealing his desire to regain that intimacy with her.

Phuong – the main character of "Fatherland." Phuong's father, Mr. Ly, had one set of three children prior to the Vietnam War with the first Mrs. Ly, and then had had a second set of three children after the war with Phuong's mother, naming his second set after his first. Phuong's older sister, whose name is also Phuong but who goes by Vivien, haunts her throughout her life. Vivien and her family live in America, and to Phuong it appears that they are infinitely more blessed than she is. Mr. Ly constantly praises them, even though they have spent the vast majority of their lives away from him. Thus, when Vivien visits, Phuong is both jealous of her but also wants to be just like her. She yearns to move to America and to make something more of herself, especially because she is tired of being part of a society that prioritizes tourists over its own citizens. In the end, Phuong asks Vivien if she can come to America with her, but when Vivien says that she cannot sponsor Phuong, Phuong resolves to come to America anyway.

Claire – Carver and Michiko's daughter in "The Americans." As the daughter of an African-American man and a Japanese woman, growing up Claire never felt at home in America, as peers and strangers alike would ask about her ethnicity. Claire now lives in Vietnam and teaches English, and says she feels much more at home there, much to Carver's dismay. Carver views Claire's actions as simply a rebellion against him and his American culture, as she never agreed with his involvement in the war and he feels that her choice to move to Vietnam is similar to other rebellious decisions that she's made that he considers stupid. Claire provides a different kind of example of a young character that rebels against the culture of her family—in contrast to several of the Vietnamese characters who rebel against their Vietnamese culture in favor of American culture.

Vivien – Phuong's older sister in "Fatherland." Vivien's name is also Phuong, but she goes by Vivien—a symbol of her Americanness. Vivien arrives in Vietnam like a movie star, with big sunglasses, makeup, and crimson luggage. Throughout her

stay, Vivien lives up to Phuong's belief that she is more blessed, taking her entire family out to an expensive restaurant and giving them all gifts. It is also clear to Phuong that their father, Mr. Ly, loves Vivien more than he loves Phuong. Vivien and Phuong become close on her trip, but ultimately Vivien reveals that she has been lying about her job and her success. She is not a pediatrician, but is an unemployed receptionist with a lot of credit card debt. When she tells Phuong that she is unable to sponsor her to come to America, Phuong realizes that she does not need to aspire to be her sister, but instead aspires to be something even more.

The Ghostwriter's Brother – In "Black-Eyed Women," the ghostwriter's brother appears mostly as a literal ghost, after having been killed at age fifteen while trying to flee Vietnam on a boat. He and the ghostwriter had been very close as children, only two years apart. They would play together in the bomb shelter the ghostwriter's father had built. When the family tried to escape to America, pirates had invaded their boat. The ghostwriter's brother had tried to disguise the ghostwriter as a boy so that she would not be kidnapped by the pirates, but one of them discovered the ruse. The ghostwriter's brother tried to protect her, but was knocked dead by the butt of the pirate's rifle, and the ghostwriter was then raped as a result. She is haunted by the death of her brother, constantly questioning why it was that she lived and he died, but she is even more haunted by the possibilities that they lost—by the years that they would never have together.

The Boy's Mother – The mother of the boy who narrates "War Years." She had fled Vietnam with the boy's father and the boy after the Communists had seized her husband's auto parts store. She now owns a grocery store, the New Saigon Market, with her husband in San Jose, California. In the story, the boy's mother is at the center of two conflicts. The first is with her son, as she is trying to maintain the boy's sense of his Vietnamese culture and she herself is reluctant to assimilate. The second is with a neighbor, Mrs. Hoa, who asks for money to support a South Vietnamese guerilla army training in Thailand. The boy's mother at first refuses because she believes trying to win back the country is a lost cause. But gradually she relents when she hears that Mrs. Hoa's husband and son went missing after the war, and she sees how Mrs. Hoa is haunted by the possibility of getting them back. But after she gives Mrs. Hoa the money, she sees the harm in being stuck in the past, and she realizes that moving forward with her son means assimilating into American culture to some degree.

Professor Khanh/The Professor – Mrs. Khanh's husband in "I'd Love You to Want Me." The professor and Mrs. Khanh came to the United States via a refugee boat with their children. The professor, whose work was in oceanography, was only able to find a job teaching Vietnamese at the local community college. The story focuses on the professor's battle with a diagnosis he receives. Though it is never explicitly stated, it is heavily implied that he has Alzheimer's disease, as he is constantly mixing up dates and information, forgetting how to get home, and how to use various appliances in the house. When he calls Mrs. Khanh by the incorrect name, Yen, she initially gets upset. But eventually, Mrs. Khanh realizes that the only way in which she can help her husband retain his sanity is by sacrificing her own identity, as she starts to call herself Yen.

The Ghostwriter's Mother – The mother of the ghostwriter in "Black-Eyed Women." Following the ghostwriter's father's death, the ghostwriter's mother moved in with the ghostwriter. Like the ghostwriter, she has been heavily traumatized by her experience as a refugee. She loves gossip and ghost stories, but she refuses to speak about her own experience fleeing Vietnam, having lost her son (the ghostwriter's brother) and having watched the ghostwriter get raped on the deck of their refugee boat. In the end, like the ghostwriter, she must confront these losses and help her daughter to move forward by creating a nightly ritual in which the ghostwriter's mother tells her "ghost stories" about the refugees and the pieces of their lives that were lost as a result of the war.

Louis Vu – Arthur's friend in "The Transplant." Louis is Chinese, but he spent most of his life in Vietnam before moving to the United States. He sells counterfeit brand-name products. Louis tells Arthur that he is Men Vu's son, who is the donor of Arthur's **liver**. Louis and Arthur subsequently strike up a close friendship. Arthur becomes closer with Louis than he is with his own brother, and he relies on Louis's connection and support when he has a falling out with his wife, Norma. This is why, when Arthur discovers that Louis had been lying about being Men's son, he grows furious, realizing that the friendship that they had formed was built on a false premise. In the end, Louis turns on Arthur, blackmailing him into keeping his merchandise in Arthur's garage.

Norma – Arthur's wife in "The Transplant." Prior to the beginning of the story, Arthur had lost their house in a gamble and subsequently Norma had left him. But when she hears of Arthur's diagnosis of **liver** failure, she returns to him in order to give him the physical and emotional support she knows he will need to get through it. Her intimacy, then, is literally tied to Arthur's ability to live. But ultimately she sees Arthur fall back into his old patterns despite his desire to be a new man after the transplant. While she provides him with the intimacy he needs, she does not receive the same support, making her feel isolated and ultimately bringing her to the realization that she needs to leave him once more.

Marcus Chan – One of the two men who serve as Liem's hosts in "The Other Man," along with Parrish Coyne. Marcus is from Hong Kong, is in his early twenties, is finishing college, and is in a romantic relationship with Parrish. He had been sent overseas for school by his father, who was an executive at a rubber company, but his father had disowned him when an ex-lover of Marcus's had sent him very "candid" photos, revealing

that he was gay. Marcus takes an interest in Liem, and when Parrish leaves for a weekend, the two kindle a romance of their own. But while Marcus and Liem share an intimate connection, Marcus does not return Liem's expression of love, which makes Liem feel even more isolated than he had been.

Mr. P. – Thomas's father in "Someone Else Besides You." Mr. P. had served in the army in Vietnam before fleeing to the United States and had subsequently treated his children like his own personal army. He had not loved Thomas's mother, his wife, saying instead that he respected her. Yet he had also cheated on her with many women, and after she died he began dating another woman named Mimi. He has a complicated relationship with Thomas, but he ultimately wants what is best for his son and tries to help him win his ex-wife Sam back.

Sam – Thomas's ex-wife in "Someone Else Besides You." Sam is a high school geometry teacher and is both kind and patient. She had waited many years to have a child with Thomas, who was always unsure as to whether he would make a good father. When Sam turned thirty-four, she had gotten tired of waiting, and after the two had gotten a divorce, Sam decides to have a child on her own. When Thomas sees Sam pregnant, he regrets the opportunity he lost with her and works to try and win her back. By the end of the story, he tells her that he wants to be the father of her child.

Mr. Ly – Phuong's father in "Fatherland." Mr. Ly had one set of three children prior to the Vietnam War with the first Mrs. Ly, and then had had a second set of three children after the war with Phuong's mother, naming his second set after his first. It is clear throughout the story that Mr. Ly loves his first set of children a lot more than his second set of children—a fact that becomes particularly evident when his oldest daughter, Vivien, visits. Phuong sees his preference for Vivien as emblematic of Vietnam as a whole, which she feels prioritizes tourists over its own citizens.

Martín Arellano – Arthur's younger brother in "The Transplant." Arthur and Martín have a difficult relationship, because their father had left the family landscaping business, Arellano & Sons, only to Martín when he realized that Arthur is irresponsible with money. Arthur works under Martín at the business, and his younger brother serves as a constant reminder of the life that he might have had were it not for his gambling addiction.

Mrs. Hoa – A neighbor of the boy, the boy's mother, and the boy's father in "War Years." She asks people in the neighborhood, including the boy's family, for money to support a South Vietnamese guerilla army training in Thailand who hope to fight against the North Vietnamese. Mrs. Hoa does this because her husband and son went missing during the Vietnam War, and she is haunted by the possibility of getting them back.

The boy's father – The father of the boy who narrates "War Years." He had fled Vietnam with the boy's mother and the boy after the Communists had seized his auto parts store. He now owns a grocery store, the New Saigon Market, with his wife in San Jose, California. Like his wife, the boy's father sees the value in maintaining the boy's Vietnamese culture, though he does not work to maintain it as strictly as the boy's mother does.

Parrish Coyne – One of the two men who serve as Liem's hosts in "The Other Man." Liem's other host is Marcus Chan, with whom Parrish is in a romantic relationship. Parish is middle-aged, British, and very wealthy. He aims to try to use his money to do good in the world, like in helping with environmental causes, or taking in Liem.

Victor Devoto – A client of the ghostwriter's in "Black-Eyed Women." Victor is the only survivor of a plane crash, in which he had lost his wife and children. The ghostwriter helps him to write his memoir and confront his loss. In doing so, the ghostwriter starts to heal from her own trauma and the death of the ghostwriter's brother.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Khoi Legaspi – Claire's boyfriend in "The Americans." Legaspi is working on a robot that can improve the de-mining effort in Vietnam, making it safer and more cost-effective. Carver critiques Legaspi's naïveté, arguing that the department of defense can use it for less humanitarian purposes.

The Ghostwriter's Father – The father of the ghostwriter in "Black-Eyed Women." He was drafted and fought in the war before fleeing with his wife (the ghostwriter's mother), his son (the ghostwriter's brother), and the ghostwriter. He died a few years prior to the beginning of the narrative.

Michiko – Carver's wife and Claire's mother in "The Americans." Michiko is Japanese, but she does not appear to feel the same frustration with Claire as her husband does when Claire says that she feels more at home in Vietnam than she does in America.

Vinh – Mrs. Khanh and Professor Khanh's son in "I'd Love You to Want Me." He suggests that his mother quit her job at the library in order to spend more time taking care of the professor.

Thomas's mother – The mother of Thomas, the narrator of "Someone Else Besides You," and the wife of Mr. P. Thomas's mother dies of an aneurysm before the story begins.

Men Vu – The organ donor who provides Arthur with a new **liver** in "The Transplant" after he was killed by a hit-and-run. Louis Vu pretends to be Men's son, but Men's actual son is Minh Vu.

The first Mrs. Ly/Vivien's mother – Mr. Ly's first wife and the mother of Vivien in "Fatherland."

Phuong's mother – Mr. Ly's second wife and the mother of Phuong in "Fatherland."

Mimi – Mr. P.'s girlfriend in "Someone Else Besides You."

Minh Vu – Men Vu's son in "The Transplant."

William James Carver's son in "The Americans." William has become a pilot, just as Carver once was, though William is unhappy and bored because he is flying a refueling plane rather than a fighter.

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.

WAR AND THE REFUGEE EXPERIENCE

Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Refugees* is a collection of eight short stories, each of which centers on, or sometimes simply touches on, the lives of Vietnamese refugees who have immigrated to America following the Vietnam War. While it is easy to conjure a stereotypical image of someone fleeing a war-torn nation, the variety of characters in the stories allows for multiple perspectives on what it means to be a refugee. Nguyen illuminates how the concept of fleeing a country in turmoil has a major effect on refugees as they try to form new lives. He also reveals the ripple effects the refugees' exodus has in their newly adopted countries and in the countries they leave behind. Nguyen's collection aims to show that anyone's life can be affected by war and the refugee experience, and his range of stories defies any single stereotype of what it means to be a refugee.

Several of Nguyen's stories examine the refugee experience from a first-person point of view, revealing the irreparable damage that war and turmoil can have on an individual's life. "Black-Eyed Women" explores the life of an unnamed ghostwriter who came to America on a refugee boat as a young girl. In fleeing Vietnam, she experienced both trauma and tragedy: she was raped by pirates, and the ghostwriter's brother was killed trying to protect her. Over the course of her story, she has to learn to bear this grief and the collective grief of losing her home to war—a mourning that makes it difficult for her to feel like she can make a proper life in America. In "The Other Man," a young man named Liem's arrival in San Diego from Vietnam separates him from his family and the only life he's ever known. His story is not explained in the same depth as the ghostwriter's, but when he recounts his journey to the two men who are hosting him, he expresses the grief and exhaustion of leaving his family and coming to America. He is not only expected to make a new life, but also to help his family as much as possible by sending money back to them. Liem's story demonstrates that some refugees have to bear the loss of their family and simultaneously take on the responsibility for improving the lives of those they left behind.

In addition to looking at individual characters' traumas, Nguyen also makes a point to show how even after a war has ended, it can impact lives on a massive, country-wide scale. The short story "War Years" bridges the gap between the individual and the collective refugee experience. Drawn from the perspective of an unnamed young boy, this story focuses on the new life that his parents and many other refugees have built in a Vietnamese community in San Jose, California. The boy does not remember the war, but the large group of refugees demonstrates how the enormous scope of this crisis served to change the culture of this town and presumably many others in America, as more than 150,000 Vietnamese people fled to America following the fall of Saigon in 1975. Another short story, "The Americans," centers on an African-American veteran named James Carver who served as a pilot in the Vietnam War. In the story, he visits his daughter Claire, who has moved to Vietnam to teach, despite his protests that he dislikes the country. This story examines the scars of the Vietnam War both on the people who fought in it, as Carver both gained a thrill from serving in the war but also downplays the violent legacy of his actions, and on the people who were forced to remain in the country. When Claire's boyfriend Legaspi brings her family to a site where demining efforts are ongoing, they observe several young Vietnamese people who have lost limbs from mine explosions.

In some of the stories, however, the refugees are background characters, as Nguyen expands on the effects that ripple out of a war-torn country to show that the lives of many people, even those who were not directly involved in or affected by a war, can be changed by it as well. In "The Transplant," Arthur receives a new **liver** from a Vietnamese man named Men Vu who had passed away and donated his organs. This small but extremely meaningful act serves to prove that refugees can have an impact on the lives of people they might never meet. For some characters, like Thomas in "Someone Else Besides You" and Mrs. Khanh in "I'd Love You to Want Me," their refugee status and heritage fade into the background of their lives. This illustrates how human beings are complex: while large events can certainly shift a person's life dramatically, they are also not solely defined by a single experience, or by their cultural identity.

In an essay, Nguyen writes of himself: "I am a refugee, an American, and a human being, which is important to proclaim, as there are many who think these identities cannot be reconciled." The different characters in *The Refugees* serve as examples of how these identities can be reconciled. For many people, particularly those in countries like the United States, refugees are often associated with images of war and turmoil and are viewed as masses of people rather than as individuals.

Yet Nguyen knows from personal experience that while war can be traumatic and life-changing, it cannot take away people's humanity and individualism. In writing this collection of short stories, Nguyen aims to show how the refugee experience is not defined by one situation or perspective. It is a collection of stories, encompassing both the stories of the refugees themselves and the stories of the people whose lives are touched by them.

CULTURAL IDENTITY AND FAMILY

Inherent in the concept of being a refugee is the idea that one has been ripped from one's own culture and transported into another. As many of Nguyen's characters grapple with their status as refugees, they are also forced to reevaluate their cultural identity in a new country. One's cultural identity, Nguyen shows, is mutable, and for three young characters at the center of three different short stories, culture becomes also inextricably linked to their families. As each character grows up and assimilates into a new culture, separating themselves from their heritage also becomes a way of distancing themselves from their families.

In "War Years," a young boy lives in a Vietnamese community in San Jose, California. As the months pass, he finds his own identity shifting away from his Vietnamese family and community and toward his new American cultural milieu. Throughout this story, there are near-constant details implying how the young boy is becoming Americanized: references to Reagan beating the Communists, the boy's love of Captain America and *Star Wars*, and reading about American Reconstruction in school. This Americanization starts to affect the boy's view of his own home and family. The young boy describes how he prefers school, where he can speak English, to the grocery store that the boy's mother and the boy's father own, where English is hardly ever spoken. The young boy also wonders why his parents' grocery store doesn't sell TV dinners or bologna—two quintessentially American products. When he mentions bologna to his mother, she says she could never sell something she can't pronounce, highlighting the cultural divide developing between them. While the boy's transformation is particularly upsetting to his mother, she eventually sees that to remain close with her son and aligned with his own sense of culture, she has to bend to some aspects of American culture. In the final moments of the story, she gives him five dollars—a remarkable thing to the young boy, as his parents have never given him an allowance. She then points toward the nearest 7-Eleven and says "Go buy" in English. This symbolic language adjustment emphasizes her willingness to compromise, and her desire not to be alienated from her son.

The main character of "The Americans," Claire, veers in the opposite direction as the young boy. Claire rebels against her American culture in favor of Vietnamese culture, which creates both a metaphorical and literal feeling of separation between her and her family. Claire is the daughter of a Japanese woman, Michiko, and James Carver, an African-American pilot who fought in the Vietnam War. After growing up in America, Claire returns to Vietnam and becomes a language teacher. Returning to Vietnam serves as a way of literally distancing herself from both her American culture as well as her family. Vietnam also represents a place where she fits in. Carver recounts how, in Claire's teenage years in the U.S., she would come home crying when other kids questioned her identity, asking, "What are you?" Choosing to live in Vietnam, then, is an acknowledgement that she doesn't feel that she fits in either with her father's African-American heritage or her mother's Japanese heritage. When Michiko and Carver travel to Vietnam to visit their daughter, Claire and her father bicker about when she will return to America. Claire tells him that she has no intention of returning to America, and that she has a "Vietnamese soul." Her father likens this decision to other stupid rebellious decisions she has made, thus emphasizing that Claire's cultural shift is also a symbolic shift away from her parents.

In "Fatherland," the main character, Phuong, lives in Vietnam but is attracted to the life that her half-sister has made in America, particularly because it provides an escape from a father who does not love Phuong. Phuong's older half-sister, whose name is also Phuong but who goes by Vivien in America, visits the family in Vietnam twenty-seven years after fleeing Vietnam as a young girl. Vivien is quintessentially American, arriving like a movie star with big sunglasses, glossy makeup, and large crimson luggage, all of which delights Phuong. Vivien introduces Phuong to the life she might have in America, eating in an expensive tourist restaurant where Phuong usually serves as a hostess, buying her lacy black **lingerie**, and describing the American boys Vivien has dated. Phuong is both jealous of Vivien and also longs to remain with her—she wants to separate herself from her father (Mr. Ly), who feels that she doesn't appreciate the life she has in Vietnam. Phuong also acknowledges that her father loves Vivien more than he loves her; for example, when he invites her half-sister to come on a tour he gives for tourists, while he has never asked Phuong to visit him at work. Thus, when Phuong asks Vivien if she can come back to America with her, it is both to leave behind a country that prioritizes tourists over its own citizens and to escape a father who prioritizes the American daughter he has never known over the Vietnamese daughter he has always had.

Many of the stories in *The Refugees* reveal how cultural identity and family are intimately tied to one another. However, as children grow and start to develop their own sense of identity outside of their families, it makes sense that this maturation would also include a kind of cultural rebellion. Many of the characters in *The Refugees*, some of whom already have their feet in multiple cultures, tend to grow away from the cultural identity their family provided, and instead gravitate towards a cultural identify they feel they can choose.

MEMORY AND GHOSTS

Since many of the characters in *The Refugees* deal with past traumas and former lives, an obsession with memories and a connection to ghosts play a large role in Nguyen's stories. In each episode, characters are haunted—sometimes literally, sometimes metaphorically. However, in Nguyen's stories, memory and ghosts are not simply representative of the past: they also represent the characters' future possibilities and lives that were taken from them.

"Black-Eyed Women," Nguyen's first story in the collection, centers on a woman who is haunted both by her brother's ghost and by the experiences that she had to endure in order to make it to America—but primarily by the ghost of who she might have been. The narrator of this short story, whose name is never revealed, is introduced simply as a "ghostwriter"—a person who is hired to write literary works that are officially credited to another person as the author. This sets up this character's primary conflict, which is that she often feels absent from her own life, just as her name is absent from the body of work that she produces. This sentiment of feeling like a ghost is exacerbated by the fact that the ghostwriter is literally haunted by the ghost of her older brother. The narrator's brother died on a refugee boat trying to protect her from pirates, who killed him and raped her in response. She is unable to confront both traumas, and as a result, she essentially turns into a ghost herself, refusing to go out in the daytime and growing paler every year. The ghost of her brother acknowledges this, saying to her that when he died, she died too and simply did not know it. In conversing with her brother, the ghostwriter gains some closure in finally grieving for his life and her own life. She realizes how the things she has lost have come to define her, and particularly emphasizes that the most painful losses are the years that she and her brother might have had, and the lives of the many other refugees who were killed on the same boat and were robbed of their future.

In "War Years," a similar loss defines the community and families at the center of the narrative, as they confront the memories of the people they have had to leave behind. Some families, like the narrator's family, try to move on, while others remain haunted by the uncertainty of their future. The narrator of "War Years" is a young boy living in San Jose, California, which has become a home to many Vietnamese refugees. They have a difficult time rebuilding their past lives, as they realize that their community is merely an echo of the country they once called home, and the prospect of regaining their lives in Vietnam is hopeless. This is why when Mrs. Hoa, another Vietnamese refugee, extorts money from other refugees to support a small Vietnamese guerilla army training in Thailand, the boy's mother refuses to spend money to try to fight the Communists, believing that it is instead necessary to focus on their future in America. Nguyen reveals later that Mrs. Hoa lost her husband and her two sons to the war. However, she does not know whether her husband and one of her sons have actually died—as far as she knows, they are simply missing. Her efforts to support the war, then, stem from a desire to relieve herself of being haunted by their memories, and by the possibility that they might one day return to her life.

In several other stories, characters are haunted by the other potential lives they might have led. In "Fatherland," Phuong views her older half-sister, Vivien, as a ghost of herself. Vivien was able to escape Vietnam and go to America, while Phuong was forced to remain. When her sister visits Vietnam many years later, Phuong realizes that Vivien leads a life that she herself might have led. In "I'd Love You to Want Me," Mrs. Khanh's husband, Professor Khanh, begins to lose his memory to Alzheimer's Disease, and he starts to call his wife by a different name—Yen. She gradually relents to this false name, realizing that in order to make her husband feel sane, she has to relinquish a future in which she retains her identity. "Someone Else Besides You" centers on Thomas and his ex-wife, Sam. Prior to the story's opening, Thomas had been unable to commit to having children with Sam, and so their marriage had fizzled. But after they have broken up and he sees that she is pregnant, he is haunted by the opportunity he lost and tells her that he wants to be the father of her child.

At the end of her narrative, the ghostwriter resolves to author her own book—writing "ghost stories" like hers and many others'. In a way, she therefore becomes a stand-in for Nguyen. In crafting this series of narratives, Nguyen unveils many of the characters' ghost stories: they are haunted by the past and by what they have lost, but even more so by the possibility of what they might have become.

INTIMACY AND ISOLATION

While some of Nguyen's stories focus specifically on what it means to be a refugee, many of them focus on what it means to have human connection. Several of the characters deal with severe bouts of isolation, as they cut themselves off from the people around them, before rekindling or beginning relationships with friends, family, or life partners. Nguyen demonstrates how essential physical and emotional intimacy with others is to feeling alive. Yet as crucial as these human connections are, Nguyen demonstrates that they only truly combat loneliness when that emotional connection is reciprocated.

The main character of "The Other Man," Liem, becomes intimate with one of the men who is hosting him, named Marcus, after he flees Vietnam. This intimacy allows Liem to feel loved for the first time, but when Marcus later rejects him, Liem feels even more isolated than before. Liem arrives in San Diego as a refugee and is taken in by a gay couple—Marcus, who is a younger man, and an older man named Parrish. Liem is shocked to learn that they are a couple, as he is ashamed of his

own sexual history with men and has tried to isolate himself from romantic relationships as a result. However, living in Parrish and Marcus's house allows Liem to reawaken this desire for intimacy. Liem starts to think about Marcus's body, and when Parrish goes away for a weekend, he and Marcus spend time around the city together, going to restaurants and a movie. The next day, Marcus hints that he knows Liem is gay, which leads the two to have sex. This intimacy makes Liem feel like Marcus understands him in a way that no one else has, and Liem tells Marcus that he loves him. At a time when Liem is separated from his family, his culture, and the only life he has ever known, this physical intimacy gives him a sense of belonging. Yet Marcus doesn't return Liem's expression of love. After this devastation, Liem takes a shower, and afterwards he stares out the window of his bedroom. He sees two men walking down the street, and the men notice him—dressed only in a towel—as well. They wave to each other, and Nguyen describes how "for a moment there were only the three of them, sharing a fleeting connection." Even when the men have walked on, Liem wonders if there might be another man, watching him from his own window. This scene at the window echoes Liem's situation with Marcus and Parrish, and while it demonstrates the power of connection, it also shows that intimacy can lead to further isolation in the absence of a shared love.

"The Transplant," focuses on the intimacy that the main character, Arthur, feels with his wife, Norma, and also with a new friend named Louis Vu. In this story, Nguyen draws a literal connection between this intimacy and Arthur's ability to survive. Arthur's story begins when his **liver** fails. Prior to this diagnosis, Arthur had a serious gambling addiction, which isolated him from most of his friends and family. Arthur had recently lost his home in a gamble, and his wife had moved out. When Arthur receives his diagnosis, Norma returns to him, understanding that he needs her help both physically and emotionally to get through his illness, and is willing to provide him with this intimacy. However, once Arthur is able to recover, Norma separates herself from him once again. Arthur receives a liver from an organ donor named Men Vu, and kindles a friendship with Louis Vu, whom Arthur believes is Men's son. They meet each other weekly at a restaurant, and Arthur helps Louis with his business ventures by letting him use his garage for storage. When Arthur discovers that Louis is not actually Men's son, he feels betrayed. He drinks his first drink since his liver transplant, causing searing pain in his side to the point where he thinks he may have died. It is implied that he passes out. Thus, Nguyen draws a connection between Arthur's friendship with Louis and Arthur's physical health. Having this friend, after feeling isolated from so many other people in his life, allowed him to live.

In "Someone Else Besides You," the main character, Thomas, only feels that his life has meaning and wholeness when he rekindles intimacy with his ex-wife, Sam. Thomas and Sam split up because Thomas had been unable to commit to having a child with her. Thomas moves in with his father, Mr. P., but his father points out that Thomas has lost courage and looks unhealthy as a result of having left Sam. Mr. P. convinces him to go visit Sam several months after they have split up. When Thomas sees that she is pregnant, he feels even more alone, thinking that someone might have achieved the intimacy with Sam that he was unable to experience. Thomas feels some relief when Sam tells him that she is raising the child on her own, but Thomas realizes that even though he is still fearful of being a father, he wants to support her. He tells her, "I can be the father." The story ends with uncertainty between them, but Thomas's definitive desire for intimacy becomes his final act.

The Refugees shows how humans naturally strive for relationships with others, and that an aversion to isolation and loneliness is relatively universal. Yet it is worth noting the added weight of what it means to be isolated as a refugee: often alone in a new country, navigating an unfamiliar culture, and left without family or friends. Striving for intimacy becomes particularly important, then, for people who may feel completely cut off from the lives they have known. By making this desire for closeness central to many of his refugee stories, Nguyen furthers his goal of demonstrating how refugees are simply human and are worthy of meaningful connections.

SYMBOLS

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

LIVER

In "The Transplant," Arthur's liver transplant represents the opportunity for a better life. Before Arthur's liver starts to fail, Arthur loses his house, his wife Norma, and his part of his father's business because of his gambling addiction. When he receives his new liver from Men Vu, he strives to become a better person and husband. He tries to find a way to repay a member of Men's family, which he does by befriending Louis Vu, whom he believes is Men's son. However, over the course of the story, the liver transplant becomes a lost opportunity, as Arthur quickly falls back into old habits. He once again becomes self-centered and returns to his gambling addiction. This lost opportunity is particularly evident when Arthur takes his first drink after his transplant, and his liver begins to pain him once more, demonstrating how he has come full circle after his diagnosis to the person he had been before.

PHOTOS

In "Fatherland," photos become symbols of Mr. Ly's love for Vivien, as well as Phuong's tie to her sister. Before Vivien arrives in Vietnam, the only connection that Phuong has to her sister is through photos that Vivien's mother sends to the family. Phuong views Vivien as a better version of herself and is haunted by the fact that Vivien is living the life that she might have had in America. When Vivien comes to visit the family in Vietnam, they also take many pictures of her trip, which Mr. Ly asks Phuong to have laminated so they can preserve their memories of her. When it becomes clear to Phuong in the photos that Mr. Ly loves her sister much more than he loves her, she burns the photos. This gesture represents Phuong's refusal to allow her sister to haunt her after she leaves. She burns the photos so that she can make a new life, undefined by the life of her sister.

LINGERIE

In "Fatherland," lingerie comes to stand in for American culture and Phuong's desire for adventure. She receives the lingerie from Vivien, who encourages her to meet boys and to do what she wants—that she doesn't need to be as conservative as her parents are. This creates a sense of intimacy and trust between them, but it also spurs Phuong's ambition. She wears the lingerie when the family visits an amusement park, and when she asks Vivien if she would sponsor her to come to America, driving home the connection between the lingerie and Phuong's realization that she can rebel against both her culture and her family and yearn for something more.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Grove Press edition of *The Refugees* published in 2017.

Black-Eyed Women Quotes

❝ My American adolescence was filled with tales of woe like this, all of them proof of what my mother said, that we did not belong here. In a country where possessions counted for everything, we had no belongings except our stories.

Related Characters: The Ghostwriter (speaker), The Ghostwriter's Brother, The Ghostwriter's Mother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

After the ghostwriter's brother visits for the first time, the ghostwriter spends the next day in bed, remembering the years when she and her family had first arrived in America. Growing up, her mother had counselled her not to open the door for any strangers, because robbers would come in and commit all kinds of atrocities against families like theirs. Looking back, the ghostwriter sees the truth in what her mother said. Even though they had escaped the war that made them into refugees, they are still forced to face all kinds of discrimination and victimization in a new country that often sees them as subhuman. This quote can be read in conjunction with the next story, which affirms the ghostwriter's mother's fears. In the following story, the young boy and his family's home is robbed by a white man who clearly is trying to take advantage of a family that is already dealing with hardship.

Additionally, this quote weaves together the threads of memory, culture, and stories. Whereas the family may not have the possessions that make them more "American," the stories and their experiences as refugees become a kind of cultural inheritance that they carry with them from Vietnam to the United States.

❝ I wept for him and for me, for all the years we could have had together but didn't, for all the words never spoken between my mother, my father, and me. Most of all, I cried for those other girls who had vanished and never come back, including myself.

Related Characters: The Ghostwriter (speaker), The Ghostwriter's Brother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

When the ghostwriter's brother visits the ghostwriter for the second time, she begins to confront his death and her sexual assault after having repressed these memories for years. The ghostwriter's story illustrates the deep emotional havoc that the war and her experience as a refugee had wreaked on her life. While she does have a certain amount of survivor's guilt, she also realizes that the trauma she experienced had prevented her from living a full life and had essentially turned her into a ghost, as well.

Perhaps most importantly, the ghostwriter acknowledges

the most tragic part of what a ghost represents: the loss of future possibilities, as is true of the girls who were seized by the pirates on the refugee boat. In the case of her brother and herself, not only had he died, but the incident also ripped from her the future years that they might have had together, and the life that she might have had if she had not been raped.

> Stories are just things we fabricate, nothing more. We search for them in a world besides our own, then leave them here to be found, garments shed by ghosts.

Related Characters: The Ghostwriter (speaker), The Ghostwriter's Brother, The Ghostwriter's Mother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of this short story, the ghostwriter describes how she and her mother have a nightly ritual in which her mother will tell her a "ghost story"—often a refugee tale in which people have lost a sense of their past selves. The ghostwriter goes on to say that some of her stories come this way, but that sometimes she goes hunting for the ghosts herself. In this quote, she views the stories as fabrications because she can only glean the barest scraps from a story, or a ghost that she may encounter—that it is difficult to capture the full reality of a human being once they have been lost. This is one of the tragedies of war and of refugees, because so many pieces of their lives are destroyed in the process.

However, the ghostwriter (and Nguyen himself in this collection) both understand the value of trying to piece together these stories, to re-create or give some sense of the characters, in order to restore some humanity to the people who have become refugees.

The Other Man Quotes

> In the darkness, he heard the rustle of mosquito netting as the others masturbated also. The next morning, everyone looked at each other blankly, and nobody spoke of what had occurred the previous evening, as if it were an atrocity in the jungle better left buried.

Related Characters: Marcus Chan, Parrish Coyne, Liem

Related Themes:

Page Number: 28-29

Explanation and Analysis

When Liem arrives in California, he is surprised to discover that his host, Parrish, is in a gay relationship with a younger man named Marcus. Liem is taken aback particularly because his own history with men, which he elaborates here, is disgraceful to him. Using language like "an atrocity in the jungle" is particularly harsh, because during this time there were far worse wartime atrocities committed in the jungle, some of which Liem experienced, as well. Yet, for some people (including his parents), his sexual relationships with men would be treated with shock, outrage, and shame. Knowing this, Liem tries to repress his desires to the point where he is disgusted with both himself and with Parrish and Marcus.

Throughout the story, however, Marcus gradually helps Liem to open up and to realize that his sexual desire does not have to be shameful. Liem is also reminded of his humanity in reviving that need for intimacy, as it allows him to feel loved and to feel less alone in an entirely new country and culture.

> This summer, your uncles and cousins were reeducated with the other enlisted puppet soldiers. The Party forgave their crimes. Your uncles were so grateful, they donated their houses to the revolution […] The cadres tell us that we will erase the past and rebuild our glorious country!

Related Characters: Liem

Related Themes:

Page Number: 45-46

Explanation and Analysis

In the final pages of "The Other Man," Liem receives a letter from his father and the rest of his family in Vietnam, which reveals some of the hardships that they continue to face following the war and the fall of Saigon. The wording in the letter is particularly striking, as references to the Party forgiving his family's crimes, his uncles being grateful and "donating" their houses, and the need to erase the past implies through subtext what is really happening and that the family isn't as joyful as the words would lead someone to believe. The fact that his family cannot freely express their

true opinions on what is happening exposes how the current government has a pretty tyrannical surveillance of their mail and their opinions.

The letter creates conflicting feelings for Liem, as he has to leave his family and survive alone, but he also has to support them from afar while assimilating into a new country. Through this letter, Nguyen reveals the dual hardships faced by the people who must remain in a war-torn country, and the refugee who is able to escape it but still must deal with the ramifications of what is happening in his country.

❝ Suddenly the man raised his hand, as if to say hello. When his partner looked toward the window as well, Liem waved in return, and for a moment there were only the three of them, sharing a fleeting connection.

Related Characters: Liem

Related Themes:

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

In the final pages of "The Other Man," Liem and Marcus kindle a romantic relationship and have sex while Parrish is away for the weekend at a conference. Liem confesses that he loves Marcus, but Marcus does not return this sentiment. Later, Liem looks out his bedroom window and sees two men on the street who may be friends, but who could easily be lovers. In this passage, Nguyen describes their momentary connection, with Liem on one side of the window and the two anonymous men on the other. The dynamics here echo the relationship that Liem now has with Parrish and Marcus—he is "The Other Man," as per the title, outside of and looking into the relationship of two other men. This moment, as with the rest of the story, demonstrates Liem's deep need for intimacy and human connection. However, when the men turn away and Liem is left alone, it becomes clear that isolation is only remedied by a returned intimacy. Marcus sees Liem as more than a refugee, but he does not love him, which only leaves Liem feeling more isolated than before.

War Years Quotes

❝ "And what about bologna?"

"What?" My mother's brow furrowed. "If I can't pronounce it, my customers won't buy it."

Related Characters: The Boy's Mother, The Boy (speaker), The boy's father

Related Themes:

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

In "War Years," the narrator is a young boy whose parents escaped from Vietnam when he was only a small child, and who now live in San Jose, California and own a Vietnamese grocery store. One of the main conflicts in the story occurs between the young boy, who is growing up surrounded by American culture, and his parents, who are still deeply immersed in Vietnamese culture and who object to their son's changing values. In this quote that tension is made concrete. The boy asks why they can't sell bologna (and TV dinners) in the store, two quintessentially American products. His mother's response demonstrates how she does not feel the need to assimilate into this new culture, particularly when surrounded by other people who share that culture.

The boy also does not seem to realize that while he has grown up with American culture, his parents have a much harder time with English and with adapting to new social conventions and values. And so, while his mother's strict response implies that she doesn't need to assimilate, her words also imply that America does not make it easy for immigrants or refugees to feel a sense of belonging in their new country.

❝ More than all those people starved by famine, it was the thought of my mother not remembering what she looked like as a little girl that saddened me.

Related Characters: The Boy (speaker), The Boy's Mother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 64

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout the story, the boy reveals some of the hardships that his mother experienced when she was young, like a severe famine at the end of the Second World War that left many other children in her village dead of starvation. The boy tries to picture what his mother might have looked like as a little girl, but finds himself unable to do so. Part of the sadness that he expresses here comes not

from the fact that his mother was forced to endure hardships, but that because of the Vietnam War there are pieces of her life that she will never retrieve.

In a way, this little girl becomes a ghost—an echo of the mother's past that she cannot recover, and whose life was irrevocably changed by the Vietnam War. Just as the boy wonders earlier about a Communist child who might be living in his old home, the life that the boy's mother might have led has been completely erased and given to someone else who might be living the life that she had in Vietnam.

> It was a trivial secret, but one I would remember as vividly as my feeling that while some people are haunted by the dead, others are haunted by the living.

Related Characters: The Boy (speaker), Mrs. Hoa, The Boy's Mother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 71

Explanation and Analysis

When the boy and his mother visit Mrs. Hoa at her home, the boy's mother has a change of heart and decides to give Mrs. Hoa the money to support the guerilla army. As they leave, the boy notices that Mrs. Hoa dyes her hair black to hide her white hair.

The boy realizes that Mrs. Hoa is haunted, as she had explained that her husband and two sons had served in the military in Vietnam. She doesn't know whether her husband and younger son are dead—only that they never came back from the war. Thus, Mrs. Hoa is haunted by the possibility of her husband and son returning to her life, even more so than they would haunt her if she knew they were dead. This conforms to a pattern that Nguyen establishes throughout his stories, that often his characters are haunted by alternate possibilities as much as they are by memories: they are haunted by what their lives might have been in Vietnam and the people who might still be with them. In giving Mrs. Hoa the money, the mother acknowledges that her motivation is borne of the anguish of hoping that her family might one day return.

> "Go buy," she said in English, motioning me inside. Whenever she spoke in English, her voice took on a higher pitch, as if instead of coming from inside her, the language was outside, squeezing her by the throat.

Related Characters: The Boy's Mother, The Boy (speaker), Mrs. Hoa, The boy's father

Related Themes:

Page Number: 72

Explanation and Analysis

At the end "War Years," after the boy and his mother visit Mrs. Hoa and the boy's mother gives her money, the mother makes another symbolic gesture. When they drive home, the boy's mother gives him a five dollar bill and takes him to a 7-Eleven, before telling him, in English, to buy what he wants. This is a symbolic gesture for several reasons: first, the boy explains that he had once asked for an allowance—no doubt because many of his American classmates had one—and his father had told him that he had incurred $24,376 in expenses over his lifetime and would not be getting an allowance, and so being given spending money is a completely new concept to him.

Additionally, the mother's change in language represents a gesture of compromise, because she knows that her son is becoming Americanized and she acknowledges that she doesn't want him to pull away from their culture completely. And so, despite the fact that English is difficult for her (the boy characterizes it here as a language that is completely foreign and outside her), his mother is making an effort to accept his assimilation into a new culture.

The Transplant Quotes

> Arthur, hovering in the corner, sensed that he was merely a specter, already dead, acknowledged by Norma only as she brushed by him on her way out the door, saying over her shoulder, "Don't forget your pills."

Related Characters: Norma (speaker), Martín Arellano, Arthur Arellano

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 83

Explanation and Analysis

Arthur receives his liver transplant, and with Norma's help, he is able to recover. But gradually Norma realizes that Arthur is falling back into old patterns, caring only about himself. One night after Arthur forgets to pick up her dry

cleaning, she snaps. She makes him sleep on the couch and in the morning, ignores him. Norma's treatment illuminates how she is the reason that Arthur feels like a human being. It is her support and their emotional connection and intimacy that prevents him from feeling like a ghost. Without that support, Arthur acts as though he might as well be dead—and, in fact, he may have been, as she was the person to see him through his illness (unlike his brother Martín, from whom he receives very little support). Even with a new liver, which was supposed to give him a new lease on life and a new appreciation for what he has, he is still unable to return the intimacy and support that she shows him, leaving both of them feeling isolated.

"You're my friend," Louis replied.

Arthur interpreted the statement to mean that he was Louis's only friend, for Louis never mentioned anyone else. "You're my friend, too," Arthur said, putting as much feeling as he could into his words. For a moment, the two of them maintained eye contact and smiled at each other.

Related Characters: Arthur Arellano, Louis Vu (speaker), Martín Arellano, Norma

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 89

Explanation and Analysis

After Arthur and Norma have a falling out and Arthur is forced to move out of his home, he turns to Louis, who lets him stay over. This is an important development between the two characters because they turn from acquaintances who have lunch every so often to true friends. Arthur turns to Louis for help rather than his own brother, Martín, because Louis has shown more support for Arthur than Martín has.

Arthur and Louis's relationship originally began out of gratitude for the liver he received from Men Vu, whom Arthur thinks is Louis's father. Yet this quote reveals that the value that these men get from their relationship has grown from that initial gesture into true friendship, intimacy, and emotional connection. This is crucial to Arthur, particularly because at this point in the story he feels completely isolated from the only other person who has shown him support—Norma. Yet this moment also makes Louis's betrayal at the end particularly hard. Even though their relationship goes beyond Louis's connection to Men Vu, the liver donation is the bedrock of their friendship. Without that connection, Arthur feels betrayed and his isolation becomes even more severe.

I'd Love You To Want Me Quotes

That was true love, she thought, not giving roses but going to work every day and never once complaining about teaching Vietnamese to so-called heritage learners, immigrant and refugee students who already knew the language but merely wanted an easy grade.

Related Characters: Professor Khanh/The Professor, Vinh, Mrs. Khanh

Related Themes:

Page Number: 113

Explanation and Analysis

As the professor's condition worsens, Mrs. Khanh finds him in the bathroom half-naked, furiously scrubbing his pants and underwear clean. When he sees her, he yells at her to get out, despite the fact that he had never yelled at her in this way before, not even through the hardships that they had faced as refugees from the Vietnam War. Previously she had viewed her relationship in comparison with that of her son Vinh. She had had an arranged marriage, while Vinh had married for love and his marriage had only lasted for three years.

To Mrs. Khanh, romance is not the only thing that constitutes a good relationship; it is also these memories that they shared, and the adversity that they faced together. This is why the professor's condition is so tragic to her: if he cannot remember the foundations that built their love, then what she views as their love does not exist. Without these memories, they have no intimacy and both of them merely feel isolated from one another.

"Who are you?" he cried, raising his hand as if to ward off a blow. […]

"It's just me," she said. "It's Yen."

Related Characters: Professor Khanh/The Professor, Mrs. Khanh (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 124

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout the story, the professor accidentally calls Mrs. Khanh by the wrong name—Yen. This frustrates Mrs. Khanh and almost reduces her to tears, as she starts to believe that he is in love with, and may have had a relationship with, another woman. In the final pages, the professor does not recognize Mrs. Khanh, frantically asking who she is when she visits him in his library, and Mrs. Khanh tells him that she is Yen. In relenting to this false name, Mrs. Khanh commits a final act of sacrifice. She turns herself into a literal ghost—a woman that she knows nothing about except for her name—for the sake of her husband's sanity. She also relinquishes the possibility of a future with her husband wherein she retains her identity. Having already given up her job at the library, Mrs. Khanh's actions here also become a means of retaining some measure of intimacy with her husband. Without this lie, she would be completely isolated from him, as he would not know who she is.

The Americans Quotes

"You're not a native," Carver said. "You're an American."

"That's a problem I'm trying to correct."

Related Characters: Claire, James Carver (speaker), Michiko

Related Themes:

Page Number: 130

Explanation and Analysis

When Carver and Michiko visit Claire's apartment in Quang Tri, her living conditions are not quite up to their standards. When she says that her apartment is better than what a lot of people have, Carver responds in this way. Claire's adamant statement that she wants to be a native Vietnamese person, despite the fact that her father is African-American and her mother is Japanese, is upsetting to her father on multiple levels. Like many of the Vietnamese characters in other stories, their cultural identity is inextricably tied to their family, and a rebellion against one feels like a rebellion against the other. And so, when Claire chooses to move to Vietnam, she is both literally and metaphorically distancing herself from her parents. She feels that she does not have a place where she truly belongs because she is in between two cultures, and so Claire carves out a space for herself that she can truly call home.

The taller one's prosthetic arm was joined with the human part at the elbow, while the other's prosthetic leg extended to mid-thigh. Carver nicknamed the tall one Tom and the shorter one Jerry, the same names he and his U-Tapao roommate, a Swede from Minnesota, had bestowed on their houseboys.

Related Characters: Michiko, Claire, Khoi Legaspi, James Carver

Related Themes:

Page Number: 138

Explanation and Analysis

During their stay in Vietnam, Claire takes Carver and Michiko to a de-mining site, where her boyfriend Khoi Legaspi is developing robots that can help clear mines left from the Vietnam War. Legaspi introduces two boys whose names Carver immediately forgets. The boys help him with his work, as both of them lost their limbs playing around mines when they were young. Carver seems not to appreciate or acknowledge his own connection to these two boys. Serving in the Vietnam War and flying a plane that dumped explosives on the country, Carver may not have had direct impact on these two specific young men, but he was certainly a part of the reason that the war became a lot deadlier. Carver's prejudice emerges here, as well, since he views these two boys as interchangeable with two other Vietnamese boys he had known many years earlier and gives them somewhat demeaning nicknames. In creating Carver's character, Nguyen critiques some attitudes of American soldiers. He implies that, despite whatever intentions or attitudes they may have had about the war, it had a massive negative effect on a country full of people, and denying those people their humanity and individuality does them an injustice.

Someone Else Besides You Quotes

"Who says I want her back?"

"Don't be an idiot. You were only half a man before you met her, and you're back to being half a man now."

Related Characters: Thomas, Mr. P. (speaker), Mimi, Sam

Related Themes:

Page Number: 161

Explanation and Analysis

After Thomas picks Mr. P. up from his girlfriend Mimi's house, his father asks when he plans on getting his ex-wife Sam back. Although Thomas implies here that he may not want Sam back, both Mr. P. and the reader by this point know this isn't true. Thomas calls Sam when he knows she is at work just to hear her answering machine, and then he calls her in the evening but doesn't say anything so that he can simply hear her say "Hello?" He even asks his father to move in with him so that he will feel less isolated. His father's assessment that Thomas is only half a man without Sam is harsh, but also demonstrates just how vital she was in his life. Thomas's father is not the only one with this judgment: upon meeting Mimi, she also tells him that it's not good for him to be alone, demonstrating that it is obvious even to people that Thomas meets for the first time how hollow he seems without Sam. Unable to see his son in this condition, Mr. P. decides he must help Thomas win her back.

❝ When I spoke, it was so softly that only the stranger curled up behind the belly ring could hear. Then I said it once more, louder: "I can be the father." Feeling Sam's hand grip my shoulder, I said it a third time, just to make sure they both heard me right.

Related Characters: Thomas (speaker), Mr. P., Sam

Related Themes:

Page Number: 179

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of the story, Sam shows up at Thomas's doorstep because his father had slashed her tires. She is furious, but it also shows her that he cares about winning her back in an odd way. Thomas takes her stomach in his hands and confesses that he wants to be the father of her child. This is a surprising reversal for both Sam and Thomas: they had gotten a divorce because Thomas was unsure of his ability to be a good father. Unable to commit to this kind of intimacy, he and Sam had both ended up isolated and alone. But seeing Sam pregnant, Thomas realizes that he is haunted by the opportunity he lost—the possibility of a life with Sam and the possibility of being a better father to his child than Mr. P. was to him. And so, armed with this new desire, Thomas commits to the intimacy that he had previously been unable to embrace.

Fatherland Quotes

❝ He often compared Phuong with her absent sister, which had cultivated in Phuong a sense of yearning for Vivien but also some undeniable jealousy.

Related Characters: Mr. Ly, Vivien, Phuong

Related Themes:

Page Number: 187

Explanation and Analysis

When Vivien arrives in Vietnam for her vacation, Mr. Ly praises the itinerary that Vivien has created. This reminds Phuong of how, growing up, he had rarely praised her, but had often praised her sister and the other siblings who live in America. In comparing Phuong to a sister that she has never met (and who shares her name), Phuong is, in essence, haunted by a ghost of herself. Vivien represents who Phuong might have been in America, and the fact that her father constantly praises Vivien only makes her want to leave Vietnam to go to America more and more over the course of her life. In meeting her sister for the first time, when she arrives at the airport like a movie star, Phuong also realizes how she wants to join a culture that would give her the opportunities she does not have in Vietnam.

❝ We're all the same to them, Phuong understood with a mix of anger and shame—small, charming, and forgettable.

Related Characters: Vivien, Mr. Ly, Phuong

Related Themes:

Page Number: 193

Explanation and Analysis

When Phuong and Vivien take their father's tour of various remnants of the Vietnam War, Mr. Ly cheers in a way that makes him seem sympathetic to the Communists. While Phuong assures Vivien that this is only an act, Phuong realizes that the tourists have no way of distinguishing a man who is a Communist and a man who was tortured by the Communists. This visit makes Phuong angry and disdainful of the tourists. Nguyen demonstrates yet another way in which the war can have long-reaching aftereffects.

Mr. Ly explains that tourists take his tour because the Vietnam War is the only thing that they know about the country, and yet they still seem unaware of the effects that the war had on individual people like Mr. Ly and his family. This moment serves as a turning point for Phuong, as she realizes that her country has become subservient to those who come from other cultures. Her father plays into this dynamic on his tour, and she also plays into this dynamic in the restaurant in which she works. Thus, her desire to leave Vietnam for America also stems from her desire not to serve, but instead to be served, as she expresses to Vivien later on in the story.

❝ In the Ice Lantern's glow, her sister's face looked more like her father's than her own, the symmetry rendering clear what Phuong could now say. Their father loved Vivien more than her.

The photograph ignited easily when Phuong lit it with a match.

Related Characters: Mr. Ly, Vivien, Phuong

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 207

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of the story, after Vivien has told Phuong that she cannot sponsor her to come to America, Phuong resolves to find a way out of Vietnam anyway. Her resolution to leave Vietnam serves as a rebellion not only against her culture, which she views as being too subservient to Americans and other tourists, but also against her father, who she views in the same way. She sees that her father loves Vivien more than he loves her purely because she has had more opportunity than Phuong has had. This stings Phuong, particularly when she discovers that Vivien is not doing as well in America as she had led the family to believe, and thus her father's preference for her sister is based on lies.

It is particularly striking that the first step that Phuong takes on this journey of leaving Vietnam is to burn the photographs that her family took of Vivien's stay. This symbolic gesture represents the idea that she no longer wants to be haunted by her sister, whose photographs she had been seeing and comparing herself to her entire life. Thus, while Vivien's part in Phuong's life is ending, Phuong's own life, separate from her sister, is just beginning.

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.

BLACK-EYED WOMEN

The ghostwriter describes how her clients come to her: they were often people who had escaped kidnapping and imprisonment for many years, or who had been involved in a sex scandal, or who had survived something typically fatal. They suddenly found themselves thrust into fame, and needed someone to help write their memoirs. Their agents then found her.

Nguyen introduces his first character, who remains nameless. She is known to the reader only by her job—ghostwriting. Her job title is evocative of the main conflict of her story: that she is haunted by the memories of her escape from Vietnam.

The ghostwriter's mother says that the ghostwriter should be glad that her name isn't on her work. She tells her daughter a story: in Vietnam, there was a reporter who said the government tortured people in prison. The government then tortured him, and no one ever saw him again. She says, "That's what happens to writers who put their names on things."

The ghostwriter's mother demonstrates one of the ways in which the Vietnam War affected them: not only in causing them to be refugees, but also in affecting their worldviews. She understands that it can be dangerous to sign one's name on a work, a lesson derived from the stories she has carried from Vietnam.

The ghostwriter has a new client: Victor Devoto. He was the sole survivor of an airplane crash, in which 173 others had died, including his wife and children. She notes that on talk shows and in interviews, his body appears but not much else.

Victor becomes important in helping the ghostwriter to heal from her trauma, because he understands serious loss. And, as the ghostwriter alludes to in her description of him, Victor is somewhat like a ghost himself.

As the ghostwriter begins to work on Victor's story, her own story haunts her. One day the ghostwriter's mother wakes her before dawn and tells her not to be afraid: the ghostwriter's dead brother has come to see them. The ghostwriter's mother leads her into the hall. There is no one there, but the carpet is wet. The ghostwriter thinks that her mother must have opened the door and gotten wet in the rain before coming back inside, and tells her mother that she must be imagining things. Her mother insists that her brother wanted to see her.

The ghostwriter's story becomes more and more present as she and her mother become haunted by the literal ghosts of her past—in the form of her brother. He becomes a representation of a past that the ghostwriter is unwilling to confront: not only his own death, but the version of the life that she would have led without her trauma.

The ghostwriter explains that ever since the ghostwriter's father had died, she and the ghostwriter's mother had lived together. While she liked to write, her mother liked to talk. She constantly tells her gossip, but also ghost stories. Her mother had once told her a story of how her Aunt Six's ghost had appeared in her kitchen and kissed her the evening after she died.

The ghost stories that the ghostwriter's mother tells eventually become crucial to the ghostwriter's ability to confront the past—both her own, and that of other refugees from the Vietnam War.

The ghostwriter's mother recounts this story the morning after she had seen the ghostwriter's brother. She says that her brother looks exactly the same as when they last saw him. The ghostwriter remembers when she last saw her brother, cold and vacant on the deck of a boat. She says that she does not want to see him again: she merely wants to forget him.

The ghost is not only a representation of a past that haunts the ghostwriter, but a mechanism by which she must face that past, as well as a reminder of the future that she lost with her brother.

Looking back, the ghostwriter says, she realizes that their childhood had been spent in a haunted country. The ghostwriter's father had been drafted into the war and he had built a bomb shelter next to their home. The ghostwriter and the ghostwriter's brother had gone to play in it as small children. When they were older, they would study and tell stories in it.

Not only is her present life haunted, but the ghostwriter acknowledges the haunted nature of even her childhood: how the Vietnam War had turned her homeland into a ghost of a country, anticipating the future trauma it would experience.

When the ghostwriter, the ghostwriter's mother, and the ghostwriter's brother had used the bunker in earnest during the war, her bother would tell her ghost stories that he had picked up from the old women in the market. They would tell stories about fallen soldiers: the upper half of a Korean lieutenant in a rubber tree; a scalped black American in a creek near his helicopter; a decapitated Japanese private in a shrub. The ghostwriter had loved these stories from the "black-eyed women," thinking at the time that she would never tell stories like those.

The variety of the ghost stories, like Nguyen's collection, demonstrates the effect that the war has on everyone—not simply the refugees. When the ghostwriter later takes up the mantle of telling these ghost stories, she can be seen as a stand-in for Nguyen taking up the mantle of telling those stories, as well.

The ghostwriter thinks, then, that it is ironic that she makes a living as a "ghostwriter." In her mind, the black-eyed women mock her, asking if she would call what she has a life. As she thinks about them, she lies bed in the middle of the day. She pulls the covers up to her nose, as she would when she first arrived in America.

The irony of the narrator being a ghostwriter is not simply that she enjoys the ghost stories of these "black-eyed women" of her childhood, but also that she has become a kind of ghost herself (for example, by sleeping in the middle of the day and working at night).

The ghostwriter flashes back, describing how terrified she, the ghostwriter's mother, and the ghostwriter's father were those first few years in America. They peeked through the curtains before answering the door, afraid of Americans. Her mother once warned her that another family had been tied down at gunpoint, the baby burned with cigarettes until the mother showed the intruders where they hid the money. The ghostwriter's mother had said that this proved how they did not belong in this country, where "possessions counted for everything." The only belongings they had were their stories.

In this short story, ghosts, memories, and stories become tightly bound together. The ghostwriter's mother understands how their stories become a part of their cultural inheritance. In writing a collection of stories about the Vietnamese refugee experience and its many facets, Nguyen allows his own cultural heritage and life experience to inform his writing, as well.

The evening after the ghostwriter's brother's first visit, knocking wakes the ghostwriter at 6:35pm. She had locked the bedroom door, but the doorknob starts to rattle. She thinks to herself that her brother had given up his life for her; the least she can do is open the door.

As details about her brother begin to emerge, readers can see just how guilty and haunted the ghostwriter is by her own life—as her brother is dead in part because of her.

The ghostwriter's brother is a pale fifteen-year-old, in soaked black shorts and a gray T-shirt, with bony arms and legs; his voice is hoarse and raspy. The ghostwriter welcomes him in and brings him fresh clothes and a dry towel. She is afraid to ask why he is there, so she asks what took him so long. She wonders if he knows that she is not good with children; that motherhood would be too intimate for her. He does not respond, so she assumes that it took a long time for him to swim to America.

The description of this first interaction illustrates the difficulties that the ghostwriter has had in her life as a result of losing her brother. Like characters in other chapters, she wants a sense of intimacy but feels instead that she is isolated from others.

The ghostwriter hears her mother returning and tells the ghostwriter's brother to wait there so that the ghostwriter's mother can also see him. When they return, they find only the clothes and the towel. Her mother tells her that she should never turn her back on a ghost. Her mother asks if the ghostwriter believes in ghosts now; she reluctantly says yes.

Though it is unclear whether the brother is meant to be taken as a literal ghost, or an imagined haunting, his effect on her is tangible because of her unwillingness to confront the past he represents.

The ghostwriter thinks about how no one she knew believed in ghosts, except for the ghostwriter's mother and Victor. Victor had had a difficult time moving on from the crash. Nothing had been touched in his home since the family had left for the airport. "The dead move on," he comments to the ghostwriter, "But the living, we just stay here." The ghostwriter continues Victor's memoir, working through the night in the bright basement.

Victor's statement is a perfect description of the ghostwriter's own situation. Even though her brother has passed, the ghostwriter is unable to move on with her life and remains burdened by the horrors she endured fleeing Vietnam. As she writes Victor's words for him, readers can see echoes between his situation and the ghostwriter's.

One day, on the brink of finishing Victor's memoir, the ghostwriter and the ghostwriter's mother watch a Korean soap opera together. Her mother comments that if the Vietnamese War had not happened, they would be like the Koreans, the ghostwriter's father would be alive, and the ghostwriter would be married with children. Her mother worries that when she dies, no one will come to her funeral—and that her daughter won't leave the house or know what to say. Her mother comments that the ghostwriter's brother would have known what to do, because "that's what sons are for."

The ghostwriter's mother's lament helps to illustrate one of Nguyen's overall points throughout the collection of short stories. While the war had an effect on a massive scale, the horrors caused even to one individual family—or one individual person—are profound.

That night, the ghostwriter returns to the basement to write. Plagued by the ghostwriter's mother's words, she wonders why she lived and the ghostwriter's brother died. As she starts to think back to the day of his death, she hears a knock. She tells her brother that he can come in; it is his home, too. The ghostwriter asks why her brother has come; he says that he has not left this world yet. She understands why—even though she has tried to forget the day of his death, it is unforgettable.

The ghostwriter's invitation to her brother illustrates a theme that emerges from other short stories: that a "home" is often defined by a family, particularly when a person has been displaced from their cultural home. The ghostwriter, her mother, and her father then were forced to create their own sense of home in America.

The ghostwriter and the ghostwriter's brother had been on a refugee boat with a hundred other people. He was fifteen; she was thirteen. Her brother took her into the engine room, cutting off her long hair, binding her breasts, giving her his shirt, and smearing her face with oil.

The story of the ghostwriter's brother's death goes hand in hand with the story of them playing together in the bomb shelter—the difference here, however, is that the children start to fully understand the stakes of their situation. They have lost their innocence as a result of their refugee experience: an innocence that they will never regain.

The ghostwriter and the ghostwriter's brother had then huddled in the dark until the pirates came. They confiscated all valuables and then seized the teenage girls and young women, shooting any men who tried to protest. The girls were thrown onto the pirates' boat.

The ghostwriter explains later that these women haunt her just as much as her brother does, because of the years that they had lost from their lives.

The last pirate to leave glanced at the ghostwriter, commenting that she was "a handsome boy." The ghostwriter's brother then stabbed the pirate, and the pirate drew his machine gun and swung it against her brother's head. He hit the deck with a thud and a crack; dead, and with blood flowing from his temple.

The ghostwriter's guilt is explained here: she is haunted by her brother because she feels that she was indirectly the cause of his death. But the reality, of course, is that her brother's death is not her own fault, but instead due to the massive havoc that war wreaks on people's lives, both before and after they have become refugees.

The ghostwriter asks if it still hurts; the ghostwriter's brother says no, then returns the question. She says yes. The pirate had thrown her to the deck, ripping off her shirt. The ghostwriter's mother and the ghostwriter's father were screaming; she knew that she was screaming, even though she could not hear herself as the men got on top of her. She and her parents would never speak about this assault. But what pained her the most, she explains, was the light beating down on her and blinding her. Since that day, she avoided the daylight. Her brother notices that she is paler than he is. She asks him why she lived and he died. He tells her that she died too, she just didn't know it.

The ghostwriter's pain is more fully explained: not only did she lose her brother, but she also, in a sense, lost herself. As a result of this day, she became a living ghost and could not go out in the daylight or confront the outside world. Additionally, she lost some sense of intimacy with her parents, because they could not openly confront or address their shared trauma. She became isolated from the only people who could fully understand her experience.

This statement sparks a memory of a conversation the ghostwriter had with Victor. He had said that he believes in ghosts. He sees his wife and children all the time when he closes his eyes; when his eyes are open, he sees them in his peripheral vision. But he also smells them, feels them, and hears them. His wife tells him to check for his keys; his daughter tells him not to burn the toast.

Victor's method of thinking about ghosts is in some ways the opposite of what the ghostwriter has done up to this point: accepts the loss of his family, but refuses to be isolated from them. The final step in the ghostwriter's journey to confronting her past is understanding this way of thinking.

The ghostwriter had asked Victor if he is afraid of ghosts. He says that "You aren't afraid of the things you believe in." She didn't understand statement at the time, but does now. With the ghostwriter's brother by her side, she weeps for the years they didn't have together, for all of the words the ghostwriter's father and the ghostwriter's mother didn't say to each other, and for the girls who vanished that day and did not come back—including herself.

Victor's statement serves as an important turning point in the ghostwriter's thinking. Up until this moment, she has been afraid of her past and was therefore haunted by it. But when she accepts the horrors of what has happened to her, and grieves for the way it has affected her in the present, she is finally able to move forward.

When Victor's memoir is published a few months later, it sells well. The ghostwriter's name is not on it, but her reputation grows behind the scenes in publishing. Her agent calls her to offer another memoir, but she says she is writing a book of her own: ghost stories.

Grieving for her brother allows the ghostwriter to move past being haunted. She takes more ownership over her own life in choosing to write her own work, rather than about the lives of others.

The ghostwriter's mother tells the ghostwriter that the ghostwriter's brother would not be coming back: he had said what he needed to. The ghostwriter implies that she has some past things that have been unaddressed. Her mother looks away, not wanting to talk about the ghosts of the refugees and the pirates, nor the ghost of the girl the ghostwriter had been.

Just like the ghostwriter, her mother has been haunted by the past—but instead of being haunted by her son, she is haunted by the way in which her daughter was affected by the war, and that she could do nothing to stop her assault.

Instead, the ghostwriter asks for a story. The ghostwriter's mother tells a story of a woman whose husband was a soldier. He was reported dead and she had refused to believe it. After the war, she fled to the United States, finally marrying again. She is happy until the day her first husband returns, decades later, having been a war prisoner for nearly thirty years. Her mother shows the ghostwriter a newspaper clipping with these two people, who look shy and uncomfortable together.

The ghost story that the mother tells the ghost writer demonstrates the way in which the Vietnam War has made ghosts out of so many people, and not just her own family. These ghosts are echoes of a former self that was not allowed to become fully realized.

This storytelling becomes a nightly ritual, and the ghostwriter writes all of the stories down. She writes that this is how some of the stories come to her, but more often she hunts for the ghosts. She explains that stories are just things that people fabricate. "We search for them in a world besides our own," she writes, "then leave them here to be found, garments shed by ghosts."

The ghostwriter once again connects stories, memories, and ghosts. She searches for the stories, which are echoes of reality, just as ghosts are merely echoes of the people they used to be. Even though the ghostwriter strives to tell the stories, she understands that they are something that people simply fabricate, and can never fully capture what actually existed because of the way in which the war has disrupted each of their lives.

THE OTHER MAN

Liem, a refugee, arrives at the San Diego airport and meets his sponsor, Parrish Coyne. Parrish is middle-aged and British, and upon meeting Liem, pronounces his name incorrectly. Before Liem can correct him, Parrish says that he didn't expect Liem to be so pretty. Liem is caught off guard by this comment.

Like the ghostwriter, Liem is another example of an individual whose life is irrevocably altered by the Vietnam War. But Liem's situation also introduces the idea that cultural identity is tied to family: here, without any family, Liem feels culturally isolated.

Parrish then introduces Marcus Chan, who appears to be in his early twenties, only a few years older than Liem. Liem notices how nice Marcus looks—his straight posture, his white teeth. Liem nervously introduces himself and the three walk back through the airport together.

Liem's noticing of Marcus's physique and teeth lays the groundwork for the later admiration that Liem will feel toward Marcus, and the intimacy that Liem wishes to have with him.

In the car on the way to Parrish's home, Parrish asks if Liem has had a rough time getting to America. Liem casually responds that it hasn't been that bad, because the prospect of explaining his story again fills him with dread after having repeated it so many times to various immigration officials and refugee services. He gives a shorter account of how he had to leave his parents to work in Saigon before fleeing to the U.S. He is exhausted from giving even this abridged account.

Liem's exhaustion highlights another difficulty facing refugees: that in order to receive aid, people must relive traumatic memories over and over again. In Liem's case, it is also apparent that escaping Vietnam was a difficult choice in and of itself, because it meant having to leave his family, as well as the only life he had ever known.

Parrish and Marcus give some introductory information about living in San Francisco before going on to tell Liem that they are a couple. Liem thinks he must be misunderstanding, until he realizes that they are gay. He is shocked and nervous, but he realizes that he doesn't really have another refuge besides Parrish's home.

Parrish and Marcus's revelation becomes yet another culture shock to Liem; however, unlike the past sexual experiences that he goes on to describe, Parrish and Marcus represent an intimacy that allows them to feel less isolated.

Liem remembers the face of the men he had worked with and known in the tea bar in which he worked in Saigon. At the end of the night, lying together on reed mats, they all masturbated together. Liem realizes that he had forgotten these nights, and tries not to think of them. No one wanted to speak of them at the time, either: he describes what had happened "as if it were an atrocity in the jungle better left buried."

Liem's sexual experiences with other men in Vietnam cause him to be ashamed of himself. As a result, he represses sexual desire entirely and has tried to isolate himself from sexual relationships—that is, until he realizes that he can once again pursue intimacy with Marcus.

The car arrives at Parrish and Marcus's home, which is mauve. The woman at the refugee service had warned Liem that people in San Francisco might be "unique," and for the first few weeks Liem wonders if he should call her and ask her to change his assignment. But Parrish's generosity prevents him from doing so.

Again, Liem's hesitation springs mostly from culture shock. He has tried to forget his sexual relationships with men so much that it fosters disgust for people whom he realizes later that he really loves.

Liem thinks about how he hadn't complained when he had been dispatched alone to Saigon to make money for the rest of his family. He hadn't complained when he had to leave school at age twelve to shine American soldier's boots. He hadn't complained at age eight when he had picked through garbage for toys.

Liem's examples of sacrifices he has made also serve as examples of how deeply tied his life had been to the events of the Vietnam War, and the destitution and hardship that the war had brought to the Vietnamese people as a whole.

In the spring of 1975, six months prior, rockets and mortars began exploding over Saigon, and Liem found himself clawing his way aboard a river barge and shipped to Camp Pendleton, San Diego, waiting for sponsorship. He tries to forget the people who had not made it onto the barge, or who had been shot by soldiers trying to clear their own way to escape.

Like the ghostwriter of the previous story, Liem is haunted by what he had seen in trying to escape Vietnam. Just as she asks why she lived and her brother died, Liem could just as easily have been shot trying to get on the boat instead of someone else.

Liem doesn't mention any of this in the letter he writes to his parents from Parrish's house, only his second letter since arriving in America. He assumes that the Communists will read it, and so he only explains where he is living and how to get in touch with him. Downstairs, Liem finds Marcus and Parrish eating breakfast. They had started arguing more seriously in front of him, and this told him he was becoming more of a part of their household.

This is the first hint that readers receive of what life is like in Vietnam even after the war. For all of the difficulties that refugees have, they can also provide hope and a lifeline back to families who have it even worse. Thus, Liem keeps his hardships from his family.

Despite the fact that Parrish refuses to let him pay rent, Liem finds a job in a liquor store. He runs the shop from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. six days a week. During his downtime, he reads *Everyday Dialogues in English* to improve his English skills. However, he finds that the book lacks guidance for certain scenarios, like when he encounters two prostitutes on the street. He describes how the woman prostitute dismisses him quickly, but the transvestite does not.

It is here that Liem's cultural identity starts to evolve. He makes attempts to assimilate, both by learning English and by getting a job so that he might eventually be able to support himself. Additionally, the descriptions of the two prostitutes once again imply that Liem himself is gay, and that others can see his need for intimacy.

When Liem returns home, he showers off the day's sweat and tries not to think of Marcus's body. After he exits the shower and wraps a towel around his waist, he runs into Marcus in the hallway, who playfully shuffles side to side, not letting Liem pass. He eventually lets Liem go, and Liem hurries into his room.

Nguyen continues to make clear that Liem wants intimacy with Marcus, despite the fact that he continues to try to isolate himself and suppress that desire.

A few months into Liem's stay, Parrish takes a trip to Washington for a conference on nuclear power. Parrish explains that the government buries uranium and plutonium in the desert, threatening both the environment and people's lives. Parrish describes this as "a gigantic minefield in our backyard."

Parrish seems unaware of the insensitivity of his phrasing, as Liem has come from a country littered with deadly mines. This statement implies the ignorance of many people of the conditions of the Vietnam War and its effect on civilians—even those who live in a country that took part in its destruction and who seem to want to rectify some of its damage.

After Liem and Marcus drop Parrish off, they go to Chinatown for food. Marcus explains some of his own backstory: he had lived in Hong Kong until he was eighteen, sent by his father to study business so that he could inherit his father's rubber company. But Three years prior, an ex-lover had sent "very candid pictures" to his father. His father had disowned him, and now Parrish pays his expenses. As Liem listens, he wonders what candid might mean.

Although Marcus and Liem's circumstances are very different, there are some similarities between their two situations—having been thrust into a new culture, and then separated from their families by circumstances beyond their control. This shared experience makes Liem feel less alone.

Liem tells Marcus, in turn, about his own family. In his hometown of Long Xuyen, no one traveled far unless drafted by the army. Liem was the first in his family to leave. Before he got on the bus, his father had told him that he trusted Liem not to lose himself in the city. Liem promised not to, but he forgot to tell his parents that he loved them in his haste to get on the bus. He has not seen them since.

Marcus sharing his own story causes Liem to open up in a way he had not yet previously done, affording the two a sense of shared intimacy. In providing some of his own backstory, Liem reveals the isolation he feels from both his culture and his family.

Marcus tells Liem not to dwell on the past: that the best way to help them is to help himself. Liem thinks that this is a very American way of thinking. Marcus asks him what he wants to do with his life; Liem had never asked himself this, especially because he knows how fortunate he is compared with his friends back home. Liem says in response only that he wants to be good.

Even as Marcus and Liem share some ways of thinking, Liem still feels somewhat culturally adrift. Marcus understands neither Liem's refugee experience nor Liem's cultural attitude about the responsibility he has to his family.

The next day at the liquor store, Liem rushes home when his shift ends. He recalls how after he and Marcus had finished eating, Liem had paid the check. They had then walked through Chinatown together and visited the Golden Gate Bridge. They had then seen a movie, their knees brushing each other, before getting sushi for dinner. They returned to the house and drank a bottle of wine. Never having drunk wine before, Liem had woken up with a massive hangover.

Yet for all of their differences, Liem clearly values and longs for the human connection that Marcus provides. Nguyen demonstrates how they reach a new level of intimacy not only in experiencing new things together, but also through physical touch—like their knees brushing against each other.

When Liem returns from the liquor store, Marcus presents him with a letter from his family. Liem doesn't open it. Marcus says that "they think we've got a Western disease." When Liem looks puzzled by Marcus's comment, Marcus implies that he knows Liem is also gay. Liem asks Marcus what "candid" means. Marcus explains that it means being caught by surprise in a photograph. Or it means someone who's honest and direct. Liem says that he wants to be candid, and puts his hand on Marcus's knee.

In this moment, Liem starts to feel a new tension: between staying true to the culture and expectations of his family, who would not approve of relationships with men, and feeling close and more intimate with Marcus. In this respect, at least, Liem starts to rebel against his cultural identity, in the same way that other characters do in other short stories.

After Liem and Marcus have sex, Liem realizes that things may not have gone well. They did not get undressed smoothly, and his rhythm seemed to be off. Marcus had told him to stop apologizing and just enjoy himself. Liem isn't surprised to discover how little he remembers, as he has tried very hard to repress these experiences.

Liem's difficulty in having sex with Marcus reveals how much he has distanced himself from sexual relationships on the whole, because previously he could only view those relationships as shameful.

Lying in bed, holding Marcus, Liem says, "I love you." Marcus says nothing, and Liem starts to put his clothes on, embarrassed. Marcus tells him to stop, explaining that Liem just got caught by surprise. A week from now, he explains, Liem won't know why he said it, and a year from now other people will be saying it to Liem instead.

Contrary to Liem's prior sexual relations, with Marcus, Liem realizes that sex doesn't have to be shameful. This intimacy is so overwhelming to Liem that he believes he is in love, demonstrating how in need he was of human connection.

Marcus and Liem continue to hold each other, until Marcus asks whether Liem is going to read his letter. Liem had forgotten about it, and isn't sure what he would write to his parents in return. He could only tell them that he's working hard, making friends, and saving money for them. Liem's mind wanders until he asks Marcus a question he wanted to ask the day before: "Am I good?" Marcus responds, "You were very good."

Marcus's rejection of Liem shows, however, that intimacy only alleviates isolation when it is returned. Marcus's answer to Liem's question reveals that he is focused on their physical intimacy. Liem's question, however, was clearly not about the sex—but instead about his value as a human being. This missed connection and communication makes Liem feel misunderstood and once again isolated.

After Marcus falls asleep, Liem sneaks out of bed and takes a shower. Parrish calls to check in, and Liem tells him that they're doing fine. Liem then opens the letter from his father. His father describes how their family is doing well, and that their uncles and cousins were "reeducated" with the other enlisted soldiers and "donated" their houses to the revolution. He warns his son against a sinful life in America, and sends the family's love.

The letter reveals a tension for Liem: he wants to support his family and he knows that they are struggling under the Communist government, but at the same time he has in some ways rebelled against aspects of their culture. The reference to a "sinful life" is particularly important, because a relationship that is sinful to his family is no longer sinful to Liem.


Liem sets the letter aside and looks out the window. He sees his reflection and realizes that he doesn't recognize himself. Outside, he sees two men walk quickly through the rain. They brush shoulders and laugh at each other. Before, he might have thought they were friends. Now, he sees, they could easily be lovers.

Like the narrator of the previous chapter, Liem realizes that he is in some ways a ghost of his former self. The memory of what he once was has been replaced by his new life, his new attitudes, and his new culture in America.

Liem stares at them, still half-naked, and the two men turn towards him. One of the men waves to him, and he returns the wave. After this fleeting connection, the men pass by the house, and Liem remains with his hand pressed against the window. He wonders if someone, behind a blind or a curtain, might be watching him.

The two men here are echoes of Marcus and Parrish. Liem is drawn to them and looks to them for intimacy, but he realizes that only when that human connection is genuinely reciprocated will he feel less alone.

WAR YEARS

The narrator of this chapter is an unnamed thirteen-year-old boy who begins by describing the boy's mother's normal routine. She is already dressed by the time she taps on his door starting at 6 a.m. and continues tapping every fifteen minutes until he is awake. On Sundays, the family sets out for church. The boy reads comic books in the back of the car while his mother finishes her makeup.

The primary conflict of the boy's story is the tension between one's cultural identity and one's family. While the boy is very close with his parents, Nguyen hints at ways that he is starting to separate himself from them culturally. The comic books serve as a first example of this concept.

The boy then elaborates on his own routine. At this time, he is in summer school. He writes that he likes school because he only speaks English there. When he returns home to the grocery store his parents own, the New Saigon Market, he rarely speaks English and the Vietnamese is always loud. The market is one of the few places in San Jose, California, where the Vietnamese can buy the staples of their cuisine.

The boy then makes his cultural rebellion more explicit, telling readers that he prefers school because of its Americanness. The New Saigon Market, however, represents an old culture that he is steeped in purely because of his family's identity.

Customers crowd the market as they haggle over different goods with the boy's mother. The boy asks his mother why they can't sell TV dinners, or bologna. She tells him that if she can't pronounce it, the customers won't buy it. The boy continues with his job, pricing the cans and packages.

Again, the boy's question here is another example of how he is pulling away from his Vietnamese identity, asking why the store can't sell two quintessentially American products. His mother's response shows how, in turn, she feels no need to assimilate into the new culture, creating a divide between them.

As the boy works, a woman named Mrs. Hoa walks in and introduces herself. She is in her late forties and dressed in monochrome. She tells the boy's mother that she is collecting funds for a guerilla army that's gearing up to fight against the Communists in Vietnam. The boy explains to readers that he has no memories of the war, but Mrs. Hoa says that others have not forgotten.

The boy's backstory distinguishes him from the main characters of the previous two short stories: he is a refugee, but he does not remember the refugee experience. Instead, he merely experiences the consequences of being displaced—perhaps another reason that he is at odds with his parents, who do clearly remember their old home and the lives that they were forced to give up.

The boy's mother says she'd like to help, but that times are hard and she has no money to spare, particularly with her daughter in college. Mrs. Hoa warns that people might talk: another neighbor of theirs, Mrs. Binh, refused to give money, and people are accusing her of being a Communist sympathizer and threatening to boycott her store. Mrs. Hoa tells her to reconsider her answer, and then leaves.

Even though the boy's mother clearly remembers the old country, she is not haunted by her experiences. Instead, she is pragmatic and works to move on—a fact that puts her at odds with Mrs. Hoa, whom they later realize is very much haunted by the Vietnam War.

On their way home that night, the boy asks the boy's mother why she doesn't want to help soldiers fight the Communists—who, to him, are also the Chinese and North Koreans, as well as Cubans and Sandinistas, as President Reagan explained on *World News Tonight*. The boy's mother says that there's no use fighting a war that's over.

Again, the differences in experience between the boy and his parents emerge here. The boy wants to fight the Communists, but his only knowledge of what they mean or represent stems from President Reagan, while his parents actually endured the fallout of that regime.

That night, the boy's father tells the boy's mother that it might be prudent to pay a little hush money. The boy tries to shut out their argument, closing his door just as he hears his mother saying, "I've dealt with worse than her." He thinks about the things his mother has dealt with: the famine at the end of the Second World War that she endured at nine years old. She had told this story as he plucked gray hairs from her head—she would pay him a nickel for each one he found. She described how a dozen children starved to death in her village, and she found a girl she used to play with dead on her doorstep. The boy had not asked questions, focusing only on the strands that would buy him the next issue of *Captain America*.

The story that the boy's mother tells is yet another ghost story, and one that is especially haunting for a nine-year-old girl to experience. Yet it seems that the boy's mother, while she certainly cannot forget what she has seen, has only been made stronger by this experience, rather than being paralyzed. The boy, however, does not seem to appreciate this, caring more about his possessions than about the experiences that shaped his mother's identity.

Over the days following Mrs. Hoa's visit, the boy's mother is clearly unsettled. As the boy and his mother calculate the market's earnings for the day, his mother (who is usually quiet at this time) reports on the rumors of the soldiers organizing in Thailand to try to return to Vietnam. She also speaks about how unknown assailants had firebombed a Vietnamese newspaper editor's office in Garden Grove, California, while another editor had been shot to death. Both had been writing that making peace with the Communists might not be such a bad thing.

The fire bombings elaborate on two aspects of the refugee experience: first, that conflict can follow people around the globe, and one's hardships do not end simply because one has left one's country. Second, a community that has been displaced can be so protective of its own identity that it tries to maintain its attitudes and opinions at all cost. In this example, the community is so anti-Communist that editors that even hint at making peace with them are killed by their own people.

When the boy says that his mother and father always say that the Communists are bad people, the boy's mother agrees. She says, "They don't believe in God and they don't believe in money." The boy's father adds that they believe in taking other people's money—which he had experienced when his old auto parts store was taken under Communist ownership.

In the description of how the father's store had been taken from him, readers can start to see more and more commonalities between the experiences of various refugees. This bears comparison with the letter that Liem receives in "The Other Man," in which several family members had "donated" their possessions to the government.

The boy wonders about his home in Vietnam, and whether there might be a Communist child sleeping in his bed. He wonders what books and movies that child might enjoy, and thinks that if the child had not seen *Star Wars*, then the country surely needed a revolution.

The parallel that the boy draws between himself and a Communist child serves as another ghost—a child who lives the life the boy might have lived if he had stayed in Vietnam. This dynamic is examined more explicitly in the final story, "Fatherland."

The boy's mother says that she hates the Communists as much as Mrs. Hoa, but that she refuses to throw away money on a lost cause. The family finishes their accounting and the boy's father sweeps the money into his satchel. Some of their profits go to the bank, some go to the church, some go to relatives in Vietnam, and some are kept at home in case of calamity. The boy's mother hides some money and jewelry all over the house, but also plants decoys in case of robberies.

Again, Nguyen draws some parallels between these refugees and Liem in the previous story, demonstrating a loyalty to those who have had to remain in Vietnam. Additionally, even though the boy's mother is not exactly "haunted" by the past in the same way that Mrs. Hoa is shown to be, the decoys that the boy's mother plants serve as reminders that she has already experienced quite a bit of calamity in her life, and has therefore learned from it.

The boy's mother's fears of robbery are confirmed one night when someone knocks on the door. The boy answers the door, and when he hears a white man's voice saying that they have mail, he opens it. He would not have opened the door if the man had spoken Vietnamese or Spanish. The man enters with a gun, telling them to get down on their knees.

This incident demonstrates some of the cultural stereotypes that the boy has inherited as a result of growing up in America. Even though he is Vietnamese, he trusts the voice of a white man more than he would trust the voice of a Vietnamese person, exhibiting an internalized bias against his own culture and for the predominant culture in America.

The boy's parents shake with fear, and the boy's father gets down on his knees, as does the boy. But the boy's mother does not get down. The man asks the boy what her problem is, assuming that his parents do not speak English. The boy's mother screams, and the man freezes. She knocks the gun aside and runs for the door; the man stumbles into the bookcase, knocking over a glass vase of coins. The man turns towards the door and the boy's father pushes him outside before slamming the door. They hear the gun go off, lodging itself into the wall of the house.

The robbery incident demonstrates that even when moving into a new country, many refugees still face extensions of the persecution that they experienced in their home country. It is implied that this man came to their neighborhood because he thought it might be easier to target them.

That Sunday, the boy's mother combs the boy's hair before church. He doesn't protest, thinking about what had happened after the robbery attempt. The police had brought his mother home from a neighbor's house. She yelled at the boy's father, saying she saved their lives, and pulled at the boy's ear, telling him never to open the door for strangers. When the police asked the boy to translate, he simply said that she was just scared.

The fact that the boy has one foot in each culture becomes clear here—as does the fact that he is pulling away from his mother. He serves as a translator, but he does not accurately translate his mother's concerns, showing his resistance to her and portraying her as weaker than she is.

The police don't catch the man, and the boy only thinks about him on Sundays, when he is on his knees. One such Sunday, Mrs. Hoa finds their family and says that she still hasn't received a donation from them and will come by the store next week. Mrs. Hoa gives them a copy of a newspaper in Vietnamese, with a picture of the guerilla army that is training.

The difference between Mrs. Hoa and the boy's parents continues to prove the individuality of various refugees. Nguyen works to defy stereotypes that refugees have one singular experience through Mrs. Hoa's and the boy's mother's differing attitudes on how to view this guerilla army.

Mrs. Hoa remarks on the boy, calling him handsome, and inquiring about their daughter's college and what her major was. The boy's mother cannot pronounce Bryn Mawr, and looks down in shame when she says that her daughter is studying philosophy. The boy's father and mother think that she is wasting her education, but Mrs. Hoa says "Excellent!" and leaves.

Just as the young boy has been slowly drifting away from his parents' culture, their daughter has already done so. Instead of adhering to their priorities regarding what they think their daughter should study, she decides to pursue her own passion.

The boy's mother decides to follow Mrs. Hoa home and takes the boy with her. In the car, the boy's mother explains she makes five cents' profit on a can of soup, ten cents for a pound of pork, and twenty-five cents for ten pounds of rice. But Mrs. Hoa wants five hundred dollars to support an army in a war that has already been lost.

The boy's mother here reveals a paradox of being a refugee that many of the other characters also experience. Often they want to help those who remain in their home country, but they are still struggling to make a new life and are also vulnerable in this new country.

The boy explains that he sometimes tries to imagine what the boy's mother looked like as a girl, but he cannot. Without a photo, he thinks, his mother as a little girl did not really exist. More than the people starved by famine, it is the thought of his mother not remembering what she looked like as a little girl that saddens him. Mrs. Hoa arrives home, and the boy's mother takes note of where she lives.

The mother as a little girl is another ghost that troubles the characters in The Refugees. It is a memory of a former self that has been lost to the war, as the young boy points out here.

The following Wednesday, Mrs. Hoa returns to the New Saigon Market. The boy is in a wooden loft at the back of the store, surrounded by stacks of rice and reading about Reconstruction. When Mrs. Hoa reiterates her request, the boy's mother says she refuses to donate money, calling Mrs. Hoa a thief and an extortionist. Mrs. Hoa says that if she won't support the cause, she's just as bad as a Communist. She then turns to the customers in the store and says that shopping at the store means that they are supporting Communists, before storming out.

Nguyen adds in yet another detail demonstrating the cultural contradiction of the little boy. Surrounded by the food of his home country, he is focused instead on his studies of American history. It is also ironic that this period of history represented a period after a civil war between North and South, in which the United States had to come to terms with the fallout of the war, much like Vietnam is grappling with its new government after the war.

The boy's mother is nervous about the customers, who would likely tell their friends about the incident until the story spread through the whole community. The boy's mother decides to drive to Mrs. Hoa's house with the boy to give her a piece of her mind. When they arrive, Mrs. Hoa hesitatingly invites them in. The boy's mother says she'd like to speak in private, and Mrs. Hoa brings them to her bedroom just down the hall, past her family eating dinner.

In a way, the Vietnamese community acts in San Jose as an extension of family, bound by a common culture. When the boy's mother refuses to donate money, they see it as an act of rebellion against their culture and themselves, and so she must work to rectify the situation in order to maintain a good standing in the community.

When Mrs. Hoa asks what she wants, the boy's mother notices army uniforms in her closet, prompting the boy's mother to ask if Mrs. Hoa's husband is a soldier. Mrs. Hoa responds that the CIA parachuted him into the north in 1963, and she hasn't heard from him since. Her younger son was sent to Laos in 1972 and also never returned. Her eldest son was killed in the war by the Communists, and the eyes were scratched out of the picture on his grave. When the boy's mother tries to say she's sorry about her husband and sons, Mrs. Hoa insists that her husband and younger son are still alive.

Mrs. Hoa's stories illuminate her motivation and fervor for collecting the money for the guerilla army. Although she certainly wants to fight the Communists, there is a deeper implication here that Mrs. Hoa is haunted by her husband and sons. This is true not simply because they are likely dead, but because she must deal with the uncertainty of wondering whether they might still be alive after all of these years.

The boy's mother takes out an envelope and hands Mrs. Hoa two hundred dollars. The boy is shocked, calculating the cans of soup, pounds of rice, and hours of work that she had just handed over. He thinks back to an incident years ago when she had bribed a general's wife with gold to free the boy's father from the draft. They hadn't talked about it since, and would likely not talk about this.

Like the story of the ghostwriter, there is an element of silence and unspoken tragedy, as many of Nguyen's refugees deal with their trauma and its aftermath with silence. But whereas the unspoken past haunts the ghostwriter, the boy's mother uses silence to allow her to move on from those events.

As the boy and the boy's mother turn to leave, Mrs. Hoa explains that the Communists don't respect anyone, not even the dead. The boy simply says, "I'm sorry." The boy and his mother then leave, while Mrs. Hoa stays in the bedroom, staring at the money. The boy notices that her hair is white at the edges, and thinks to himself that "while some people are haunted by the dead, others are haunted by the living."

The difference between being haunted by the dead and haunted by the living—a distinction the boy makes here—is that to be haunted by the living can also mean being haunted by a possible future together. Mrs. Hoa holds out hope that her husband and sons might one day return to her life, and thus she seems unable to move on from them.

As the boy and the boy's mother drive home, she tells him that he deserves a treat. He doesn't know how to respond—his parents had never given him an allowance before. When he had asked for one in fourth grade, the boy's father had instead handed him a list of expenses he had incurred—including his birth, feeding, education, and clothing—totaling $24,376, and that had been the end of that conversation. The boy's mother stops at 7-Eleven and hands him five dollars. She tells him, "Go buy," in English. He walks in, looking at the covers of the comic books, the video games, the snacks. He wants to take everything home, but he is unable to choose.

The mother's gesture of giving the boy an allowance, as well as the symbolic language change of saying "Go buy" in English, shows that she acknowledges the cultural differences that her son is gaining growing up in America versus how she grew up. Coming out of the incident with Mrs. Hoa, one could argue that the boy's mother views this gesture as a way of moving out of the past and out of her culture, and into a future that is more bent on assimilation into the United States.

THE TRANSPLANT

Arthur Arellano's garage has recently been transformed into a warehouse, inside which are stacked boxes of counterfeit products with brands like Chanel, Versace, and Givenchy. The products have made Arthur uneasy from the second that Louis Vu delivered them, and Arthur often finds himself slipping out of his rented house and into his garage to ponder the goods.

The Transplant is the first story that does not center on a refugee, and instead touches on refugees whose past lives are far behind them. This decentering demonstrates that anyone's life can be affected by war and the refugee experience, even if indirectly.

Every week, Louis tries to quell Arthur's fears about housing the fake goods over lunch at Brodard's, where Arthur has acquired a taste for Vietnamese food. On this occasion, Louis explains why his business does more harm than good. He says that the more fake products there are, the more people who can't buy the real things want them. And the more people buy the fakes, the more the real things are worth.

Louis's life also defies the expectation that the lives of refugees have to conform to one idea or identity. As Louis later reveals, he is Chinese, but he has spent all of his life in Vietnam, and so his cultural affinity for Vietnamese food stems not from his family but from the new cultural into which he was placed—much like many of the refugees who come to America.


Arthur thinks that Louis is simply telling himself what he wants to hear, but he does wonder about some of Louis's reasoning. After all, he asks himself, shouldn't those with limited income also have the right to own something stylish? Ultimately, Arthur knows he agrees at least somewhat with Louis, or he wouldn't let him store the goods in his garage. Yet he and his wife Norma have refused the ten percent commission Louis offered.

Arthur's agreeing with Louis may not simply stem from philosophical reasoning, but also from the fact that Louis has become by this point one of Arthur's only friends, and he wishes to maintain that intimacy and connection by doing Louis the favor of storing his goods.

Arthur sees his actions as a gift—a way of paying back Louis's father, who had inadvertently saved Arthur's life the previous year. Arthur's cell phone buzzes: Norma telling him to pick up dry cleaning. Louis suggests that Arthur pick up some flowers for her as well.

Believing that Louis's father saved his life, Arthur forms an intimate bond with Louis that he seems unable to form with many other people, including his own brother. In this instance, Louis also helps counsel Arthur to have a better relationship with his wife.

Eighteen months prior, Arthur's **liver** had begun to fail—a shock that he was completely unprepared for. When he visited the doctor, he told Arthur that his body was rejecting his liver and he needed an organ donation in order to live. Arthur left the doctor's office convinced he was going to die.

Arthur's diagnosis makes him feel isolated from the world, as he believes that he no longer has a place in it. But it is the connection with his wife that helps him to stay hopeful, and to stay alive.

Arthur has never been lucky, and is a chronic loser of bets. His career as a gambler had culminated in the loss of his home after seventeen years of mortgage payments. Norma had left Arthur to live with one of their daughters, and Arthur had moved into his younger brother Martín's house. Shortly after this separation, he learned of his diagnosis.

Arthur and Norma's relationship is a constant push and pull between wanting intimacy and also needing some amount of separation, as Arthur's gambling causes Norma a great deal of harm.

When Arthur tells Norma of his diagnosis, he bursts into tears, confessing that he has cashed out his life insurance policy. Norma does not ask how he spent the money, and Arthur could not confess his antics at the casino in Temecula where he had lost it. Instead, Norma sits next to him and puts her hands on his knee and his cheek. He realizes that she is going to see him through his illness, and that this is God's sly way of keeping them together.

Norma's decision to take care of Arthur demonstrates her understanding of the fact that Arthur needs intimacy and human connection to literally survive. He could not live, or recover, without her physical and emotional support.

Arthur's one chance is a transplant. He fantasizes about getting a new **liver** and becoming a new man: kinder, more reliable, and hard-working. He receives a new organ (choosing to keep the donor anonymous) and returns to work as an accountant for Martín at the landscaping service founded by Arthur's father.

Arthur's story does have parallels with the stories of the refugees in the book: being granted a new chance at life and a means of starting over. Whereas for some refugees this chance is borne of tragedy, Arthur's opportunity to turn around is borne of the good fortune of receiving an organ.

One day, however, a letter arrives at the home Arthur and Norma are renting from Martín. In it, a computer error at the hospital reveals the name of Arthur's donor: Men Vu. They wonder if the name is Korean, or Japanese, or Chinese. Norma searches for the name and discovers that Men Vu was from Vietnam and had been killed in a hit-and-run. Arthur sets out to try to find someone related to Men Vu, whom he could thank for saving his life. He calls every Vu in the phone book until he finds Louis Vu, who listens to Arthur's story and says that he's the one that Arthur is looking for.

Arthur is never able to get to know Men, nor to understand what his story might have been. In this way, Men represents another ghost—a piece of a person left behind in the world of the living. Men does not necessarily haunt Arthur, however; he instead reminds Arthur that he owes his new life to someone else. He uses this someone—Louis—to kindle a new friendship and gain another kind of intimate relationship.

The evening of Arthur and Louis's lunch, Arthur is back in his living room watching the World Series of Poker. When Norma walks through the door, he realizes that he forgot to pick up her dry cleaning. When he tells her this, he discerns her unhappiness in her response of "hmmm." She gives the same response when he asks what she's cooking for dinner, and the same response when he asks what's for dinner the next day as she washes the dishes.

While Norma has clearly devoted her time and energy to taking care of Arthur, Arthur's attempt to become a new man has clearly faltered, as represented by his return to his gambling addiction and his ignorance of what Norma needs. Arthur once again takes for granted the new lease he has on life, and the donation that Men gave him.

In bed, Norma tells Arthur not to touch her. She asks him if it would kill him to think about her for once in his life. He says that he's still recovering from the **liver**, but they both know that this is a lie. She tells him that either he has to sleep in the living room, or she will. Arthur spends the night on the couch.

Although Norma has tried to give Arthur a deeper sense of emotional connection as she tries to rekindle their marriage, it is clear that she is the one who feels isolated because Arthur is not reciprocating her intimacy.

The next day, Arthur calls Martín, hoping to ask for refuge. But when he hears his brother's disapproving tone, Arthur says that he only wants to say good morning, and Martín hangs up. Arthur pretends to carry on a conversation as Norma pretends that he isn't there. She only acknowledges him as she walks out the door, reminding him to take his pills.

Again, even though Norma is trying to pull away from Arthur, she can't help but offer him some sense of support. Reminding him of his pills is a gesture that shows she still deeply cares about him—it is Arthur who lacks the ability to provide emotional support for Norma.

That morning, at the office, Arthur realizes that he was correct in not asking Martín for help. Arthur has barely started his morning game of blackjack on the computer when Martín enters, describing his family's luxurious vacation that weekend. Arthur can't help but think of the difference between their lives and their fortunes, as their father had bequeathed Arellano & Sons only to Martín when he realized Arthur's bad habits.

Arthur's story adds another dimension to the interplay between identity and family. Unlike some of the other characters, Arthur's family rebels against him (instead of the other way around). Realizing that he doesn't have the same work ethic, his father bequeaths the family legacy to his brother alone.

Martín asks how Arthur and Norma are doing, explaining that he had heard through the grapevine that they were having issues. Arthur, who is focused on his computer game, says he appreciates the concern, but that Martín probably got an account that is pretty different from the truth. Martín glances at his watch, and simply says, "We're brothers, Artie," before heading out the door.

Martín's treatment of Arthur also adds to his feelings of isolation. As he points out, they should be close because they are brothers. Yet they somehow lack the connection that allows them to rely on one another.

Before meeting Louis, Arthur thought that his organ donor might have been like him and Martín: middle aged and of Mexican ancestry. Arthur wonders if Martín would have given Arthur an organ if he could have. And he wonders whether Arthur would have done the same for Martín. Later that evening in Louis's apartment, he says he thinks he would have—that even though he can't stand Martín, he's still his brother. Louis says it's easy for Arthur to say that, as he would never be able to donate because of the drugs he was taking.

Arthur's imagining that the organ donor might be like him speaks to his isolation, as he hoped that the donor would be someone to whom he could relate, because he feels unable to connect with his brother. This realization is what leads him to rely not on his brother for help, but from his newfound friend.

Louis has recently been buying real estate to add to his income. Arthur asks why he doesn't live in one of those houses, as his apartment is pretty bleak. Louis says that the renters pay the mortgage and he'll profit from those houses in a few years. Arthur tells him that not everything is about money, but Louis says that he's tried love, but that it's in the past. He never thinks about the past: every morning he wakes up and he's a new man. Arthur thanks Louis for letting him sleep over, and Louis says simply, "You're my friend."

Louis's own attempt to become a new man, unlike Arthur's, stems from his status as a refugee, which he eventually divulges. Yet even though he writes that love is in the past and he wants to move forward from it, it is clear that, like Arthur, Louis feels the need to have a human relationship on which he can depend, and is happy to reciprocate that support.

The next day gets off to a rough start. The office computer crashes and Arthur's car won't start, leaving him to ask for a jump from Rubén, one of the landscapers at Arellano and Sons who had confessed to Arthur that he was *indocumentado*. Arthur returns home to pick up clothes and a razor, and Norma says that someone called for him.

Nguyen does not comment much at this moment about the undocumented workers at Arellano and Sons, but one can draw a connection between the immigrants and the refugees of this story. Each comes to the United States out of the necessity to make a better life.

Arthur phones the person who called, Minh Vu, and he wonders if this is one of the Vus that he had called months earlier. Minh says that Men Vu was his father. Arthur says that Louis never mentioned that he had a brother, and Minh asks who Louis is. Arthur quickly realizes that Louis has been lying to him and hangs up.

Minh's reveal shatters the friendship that Arthur thought he had with Louis. This deceit makes Arthur feel completely disconnected from Louis.

Arthur tells Norma what has happened as he reaches for his first drink since the diagnosis, saying that he's got to go over to Louis's apartment. Arthur takes three shots of whiskey as Norma tries to convince him not to go alone, to no avail. Arthur tries to get into his car, but pain tears into his side. His vision blurs, and the moon starts to become a hazy whiteness, reminding him of waking up on the operating table, when Norma had called him back to consciousness.

The connection between Arthur's loneliness and his actual ability to live is highlighted here when his liver starts to flare up and he is reminded of waking up on the operating table. Feeling betrayed and alone leads to acute physical pain.

Arthur arrives at Louis's apartment and breathlessly tells him about his conversation with Minh. Louis admits that he deceived Arthur, but says that he never meant to hurt Arthur. Louis explains that his name is Louis Vu, and that he is Chinese but lived his whole life in Vietnam. When he got Arthur's phone call, he wanted to see what it might lead to, and so he played along.

Louis's intentions in playing along with Arthur's story also reveal his own need for friendship and intimacy, because he would not have been able to start a relationship with Arthur (or perhaps with anyone) without going along with Arthur's story.

Arthur demands that Louis remove his things from his garage. Louis refuses, saying that they're friends. Arthur responds that they are not friends, and again reiterates that he wants Louis's things out of his garage. Louis tells him that they'll have to stay, arguing that if he calls the cops, he will have to explain why his garage is full of fake merchandise.

Arthur's anger is caused by the fact that he thought they shared a connection: a true physical connectivity in sharing some of Men's DNA. Subsequently, a friendship had been borne of this connectivity, but when the root of that friendship is taken away, Arthur feels even more isolated.

Arthur says that he will take the things out of his garage himself, but Louis says that if Arthur does that, Louis will report the undocumented workers at Martín's business. It would lead to arrests and deportations, and their father's business would be disgraced. Louis tells Arthur to go home. Arthur drives to his house, opening the garage door and looking at the boxes of fake goods—a garage crammed with "things fashioned by people whom he would never know but to whom Arthur felt bound in some way."

Arthur's statement here reveals one of Nguyen's intentions with this story: to show that refugees are woven inextricably into the fabric of American society. Arthur is not a refugee himself, but his life is affected in many ways by refugees: in the goods that they make, in the friendship that he might have had with Louis, and in the liver that has been donated to him.

Norma calls Arthur's name, waiting for an explanation. He turns to her, extending his hands. But when Norma folds her arms and raises an eyebrow, he realizes what he must look like to her, offering "nothing but empty hands."

In the final image, Arthur is at the pinnacle of isolation. He has lost a friend, he has lost everything he owns, and he is now on the brink of losing his wife, due to his inability to be generous and connect with them in the way that they are generous towards him.

I'D LOVE YOU TO WANT ME

Mrs. Khanh and her husband, Professor Khanh, are at a wedding banquet. They had attended many others like it, usually out of obligation. The professor had jotted down his blessing and the name of the couple, whom they had never met. When the couple visited their table, he called them by their correct names and bestowed good wishes upon them. But Mrs. Khanh can't help but think of the night of the professor's diagnosis, when he had wept for the first time in their four decades of married life.

This short story shares some elements of the previous story. Like Norma, Mrs. Khanh understands her husband's need for emotional and physical connectivity and support, even if she feels more isolated as a result of remaining with her husband. At this point, the professor's diagnosis is unnamed, and therefore readers focus on Mrs. Khanh's experience of heartbreak.

Mrs. Khanh tells the professor that the couple is honeymooning in Paris and the French Riviera. They reminisce about their own honeymoon, forty years prior, when she was nineteen and he was thirty-three. But it is clear to her that the professor's memories are slipping away from him. When the band begins to play "I'd Love You to Want Me," he comments that they used to listen to it all the time before the children were born—but the song hadn't been released before her first pregnancy.

As the professor's diagnosis comes more and more into focus, Nguyen once again associates the loss of memory with tragedy. The professor loses not only his ability to experience the present fully, but his past also becomes erased. This also leads to Mrs. Khanh feeling more and more isolated: despite the fact that she still has a loving husband, he starts to forget their relationship.

The professor tries to get up to dance, saying "You always insisted we dance when you heard this song, Yen." Mrs. Khanh hides her surprise at being called by a name that is not hers. She tells him to sit down, and he obeys, wounded, not realizing that he is in no condition to dance.

The first appearance of Yen is surprising, and Mrs. Khanh does not know how to correct her husband. This hints at her later resignation to being called by this name, effectively making herself into a person she does not know.

As they drive back from the wedding, the professor takes a wrong turn, driving to the community college from which he had recently retired instead of going home. After coming to America, he'd been unable to find work in oceanography and settled for teaching Vietnamese. When he realizes his mistake, he asks Mrs. Khanh why she didn't tell him they were going the wrong way. Mrs. Khanh had not been paying attention, worrying about who Yen might be.

Even in the stories whose main conflict does not center on the refugee experience per se, Nguyen still manages to weave in details that elaborate on that experience: here, the professor could not find work in his field after coming to America, and thus had to settle for a different profession.

The next morning, Mrs. Khanh tells the professor about the previous night's events, as he had asked her to inform him of the moments when he no longer acted like himself. His shoulders sag when he hears about his lunge for the dance floor, knowing that he must have looked ridiculous at his age, and in his condition.

The professor starts to become a ghost of himself, as the memories that people have of him do not fully align with the memories of his own experiences. It is almost as though he becomes a stranger to himself as he hears what he did the previous night.

The professor and Mrs. Khanh's son Vinh arrives, fresh from his graveyard shift at the hospital. He has brought them a gift: a replica of a Picasso painting in an ornate frame that he bought in Saigon the previous month. He says that studies have shown that Picasso's paintings can help people like the professor. Vinh goes on to say that he and his five siblings think that Mrs. Khanh should retire from the library so that she can take care of the professor. Mrs. Khanh argues that she's not old enough for retirement.

Despite the fact that Mrs. Khanh understands her husband's need for support, it is difficult for her to give up both her independence and to isolate herself from the rest of the world, particularly as her husband becomes less and less present through the story.

When Vinh tells Mrs. Khanh to be reasonable, she can't help but think of him as an irresponsible teenager, sneaking out of the house at night to be with his American girlfriend. When the professor had nailed his windows shut, Vinh had eloped soon after his high school graduation. He had shouted that he was in love—and that she wouldn't know anything about that, because her marriage had been arranged. Still, Vinh's marriage had not lasted more than three years.

Vinh becomes another example of characters rebelling against their cultural identity and family. Vinh, believing that his parents never truly loved each other because of their arranged marriage, subsequently pursued love in defiance of his parents.

Vinh continues to argue that Mrs. Khanh doesn't need the money, but that the professor needs her at home. He points to his father's shirt, which is stained by hollandaise sauce. Mrs. Khanh cleans him up. Later, she takes the painting and is disturbed by the image of the woman with two eyes on the side of her face. She sets it facing a wall in the professor's library.

Mrs. Khanh's feelings of being disturbed by the painting echo her feelings about Yen. Both are women who the professor keeps bringing back into her life.

Not long after this visit, the professor and Mrs. Khanh stop attending Sunday mass and gradually see less and less of their friends. The only times she leaves the house are to go shopping or to go to the library, where she was ordering a sizeable collection of Vietnamese books and movies for the residents of nearby little Saigon. When her shift ends at noon, she always leaves with a sense of dread.

Like the ghostwriter in the first story, Mrs. Khanh and the professor slowly become versions of ghosts as they remove themselves from the outside world. Yet Mrs. Khanh still maintains a broader connection to her culture in trying to make sure that there are materials in the library for refugees like herself.

At home, Mrs. Khanh continues to make the home easier for the professor to navigate. She tapes out a path from the bed to the bathroom, and posts lists strategically around the house reminding the professor to do certain tasks. The professor, in turn, hires a handyman to install iron bars on the windows.

The professor even isolates himself more fully by attempting to make it difficult for him to leave the house. Subsequently, they rely on each other more and more for the connection they lack from the outside world.

For Mrs. Khan, the most disturbing problem is when the professor comes home as a stranger. One day, he returns from an afternoon walk with a single red rose in a plastic tube, despite the fact that he was never romantic. When he presents it to her, she takes it reluctantly and asks him what her name is. He responds, "Yen, of course." Mrs. Khanh resists the urge to snap the rose in half.

Even more than the sense of isolation, Mrs. Khanh becomes frustrated by the fact that he seems to have a deeper or more intimate connection with another woman than with her: he brings Yen a rose, which he has never done for Mrs. Khanh.

That evening for dinner, Mrs. Khanh and the professor talk about the postcard they received from their eldest daughter, who works in Munich. The professor reminisces about his own travels. The professor then asks why Mrs. Khanh bought the rose on the table. She corrects him, telling him that he bought it. He is shocked and says he hopes it doesn't happen again. Mrs. Khanh is angry, convinced that he had intended the rose for another woman. As she carries the dishes and glasses to the kitchen, the load becomes too much and she drops them. She sighs and says she'll take care of it.

Mrs. Khanh is particularly disturbed by the professor's hope that he won't buy a rose again. It is an intimate and romantic gesture, but she thinks that he believes she is not worthy of that gesture—and yet another woman is indeed worthy of that gesture. These thoughts weigh on her so much that she has trouble doing her regular tasks, and additionally, her husband is unable to provide her with any support himself.

That evening, Mrs. Khanh goes to the professor's library, which is filled with hundreds of books. He cultivated the collection after they were forced to leave his books behind when they fled Vietnam. She finds the notebooks where he's been tracking his mistakes over the past months, but there is no mention of Yen. Mrs. Khanh writes, under the most recent entry, "Today I called my wife by the name of Yen."

Yen continues to haunt Mrs. Khanh, to the point where she feels she needs to deceive her husband (writing in his handwriting in his own notebook) in order to rid herself of the specter of who this person might be.

Over the next few days and weeks, the professor calls Mrs. Khanh "Yen" again and again. Mrs. Khanh is consumed with curiosity about this woman. She records every incidence of this mistake in his notebook, but each day the same thing happens, to the point where she thinks she might burst into tears if she hears the name again.

Each time the professor calls Mrs. Khanh by the name of Yen, she continues to feel more and more erased. Her mindset reveals that she is nearly going crazy herself in trying to rid the professor's mind of this woman.

One day, Mrs. Khanh finds the professor in the bathroom, naked from the waist down and furiously scrubbing his pants and underwear under hot water. When he sees her, he screams at her to get out. He has never lost control of himself in this way, not even when they'd been desperately poor in the first days after arriving in California. She thinks that that had been true love—going to work every day and not complaining about the lives that they had lost.

Unlike the ghostwriter, who pushed away her memories, and the boy's family in "War Years," who simply moved past their memories in order to create a new life, Mrs. Khanh provides a different perspective. She sees their memories and their hardship as the times that brought them together.

Nor had the professor yelled at Mrs. Khanh when they were lost at sea with their children, huddled together on a refugee boat and hoping for rescue. The professor had made up tales about how they were heading straight for the Philippines. When they finally did see land, she had blurted out, "I love you"—something she had never said in public and hardly ever in private.

As Mrs. Khanh explores her memory, she continues to see the value in what they have experienced: that their adversity in being refugees has provided them with their most intimate moments. Perhaps this is the greatest tragedy of the professor's condition—that their love is found only in memory.

The professor and Mrs. Khanh had never spoken of this incident at sea, even though he spoke of many events of which she had no recollection. Mrs. Khanh begins to worry that her own memory is faltering, but she fears even more that the professor is forgetting who she is. She turns off the phone so that the professor wouldn't answer the calls, afraid that if their children asked for her, he wouldn't know who she was.

Even though the professor is the one who is losing his memory, Mrs. Khanh also fears her own memories are slipping as he starts to replace experiences they shared with experiences that he might have had with other women—like the vacation in Dalat he mentions later.

Mrs. Khanh speaks to Vinh over the phone. She is more forthcoming with him about the professor's condition than with her other children, but she grows frustrated when he encourages her to quit her job at the library again. When she hangs up, she changes the sheets that the professor had bed-wet the previous evening. Her body is sore and tight from doing chores and worrying, and she cannot sleep.

Mrs. Khanh's situation reveals a dichotomy: even though she is providing him with intimacy and support, since he appears less and less like her husband, she feels more and more isolated in having to be her husband's sole caretaker.

Months pass. Mrs. Khanh follows the professor on his walks, discreetly staying at a distance of ten or twenty feet away. They read together, but the professor reads aloud, and very slowly, until one day he realizes that he's been trying to read a sentence for five minutes. He thinks that he is losing his mind. After that incident, Mrs. Khanh reads to him, stopping whenever he begins to recite a memory from their old life, or the trip they had taken to Saigon three years prior.

Even though it is the professor who has started to become merely an echo of who he once was, Mrs. Khanh also leans into this dynamic. In her obsession with making sure that her husband is okay, she literally becomes his shadow: trailing him, and becoming his voice when they read together.

The professor starts to talk about how, when he and Mrs. Khanh had visited their home in Vietnam, a night masseur biked past, and they had heard the clink of a glass bottle filled with pebbles announcing his line of work. He recounts that she had called it the loneliest sound in the world—but she doesn't remember saying that. He talks about how they enjoyed ice cream in Dalat, but he had gone to Dalat only once, without her. As he continues to talk about the ice cream, he calls her Yen once more.

As the professor recounts more and more memories that she does not share, Mrs. Khanh feels more and more isolated from him—as if they do not have a common past, even though they have been married for four decades now.

Mrs. Khanh tells the professor that Yen is not her name—her name is Sa. The professor is shocked and pulls out his notebook. That evening, when the professor has fallen asleep, she reads the notebook. He had written, "Matters worsening. Today she insisted I call her by another name. Must keep closer eye on her for she may not know who she is anymore." Mrs. Khanh shuts the book abruptly.

Reading this is particularly disturbing to Mrs. Khanh because it starts to nag at her sense of reality and makes her question her own identity and memories.

The librarians throw Mrs. Khanh a farewell party for her last day of work and give her a box of travel guides for the vacations they knew she always wanted to take. When she returns home, she cannot find the professor. She drives her car around the block, and then drives in wider and wider circles through the neighborhood. She shouts his name out the window, louder and louder.

Mrs. Khanh continues to reveal her devotion to her husband in giving up her job, and in isolating herself from the rest of the world. It is ironic that the librarians give her travel books, as she knows that she will never be traveling with her husband while he is still alive.

Mrs. Khanh returns home after dark. She smells gas; a kettle is on the stove but the burner hasn't been lit. She turns it off and sees light spilling from the professor's library. He is shelving the travel guides that the other librarians gave her. When he sees her, he cries out, "Who are you?" She responds, "It's just me," she said. "It's Yen." He calms down and sits in his armchair. Mrs. Khanh pulls out a short story collection that the professor had given her and which she had never read, and begins to read aloud. She realizes she may not know much about love, but she knows what she would do for her husband until the very end.

Mrs. Khanh's final acceptance of the name Yen demonstrates her level of sacrifice: she is willing to make herself into a ghost in order to allow her husband to maintain his sanity. As he loses his memories, so too must she relinquish the memory of who she was and who they had been together in order to prevent him from feeling like he is losing his mind—and to give her some sense of connection to a husband she is losing.

THE AMERICANS

James Carver and his wife Michiko take a trip to Vietnam to see their daughter Claire. James hadn't wanted to return to the country—he knew nothing about it except what it looked like at 40,000 feet—but Michiko wanted to see it and visit their daughter and her boyfriend, Khoi Legaspi.

"The Americans" offers a different perspective on the Vietnam War: that of a man who fought in the war but who had no connection to the country. This demonstrates the sprawling impact that war can have, not only on the people who lived in the country at the time.

Legaspi annoys Carver. On their first tour in Hue, Legaspi tries to sympathize with Carver, who has walked with a limp since falling down and breaking his hip three years prior, by saying that his own father walks with a cane. Carver, frustrated by this statement, quickens his pace.

Carver views the entirety of Claire's life in Vietnam—including her boyfriend—as a means of rebelling against his life and his culture. Thus, he finds nearly everything about the trip to be frustrating.

Along the tour, Michiko and Legaspi speak about his research, which is in robotics. He invites Michiko and Carver to see a demonstration of his robot in action. Carver is hesitant about it: they had visited a war museum in Saigon and he didn't want to see any more horrors. Claire responds that he'll get to see the future of de-mining. They bicker over the merits of the project, especially as it is funded by the Department of Defense, before Legaspi breaks up the argument by saying that they should take a picture next to one of the tombs by the Perfume River.

Despite the fact that Carver participated in the Vietnam War, he seems largely untroubled by the impact he might have had in flying bomber planes (which Nguyen elaborates later). But the museum he mentions, the de-mining site, and many other things in Vietnam remind him of some of the violence that he carried out in the country.

As they take the picture, Carver thinks that he's becoming stupider in old age. He feels as though he hasn't been this slow since Claire and his son William were newborns. He dates the beginning of his decline to six years ago, when his son graduated from the Air Force Academy. William had become a pilot like Carver, but he was unhappy flying a plane that was meant for refueling, believing that it's boring.

Carver views Claire's life in contrast with the life that his son has chosen. Whereas William follows a path very similar to Carver, Claire's path to Vietnam is later revealed to be not only in defiance of Carver, but also in an attempt to rectify the harm that he caused.

Carver is happy that William is flying something safer than the plane he flew: a B-52. But he had never been happier than flying that plane, a "majestic machine" that carried thirty tons of iron bombs. He knows that if he could live life all over again, he wouldn't hesitate to climb into the cockpit again.

Nguyen continues to reveal Carver's ignorance. The fact that the harm that he caused in the war is at odds with the fact that he gained a great sense of purpose and joy from flying his plane in the war.

The next morning, Carver and Michiko take a van to Quang Tri, where Claire lives and where Legaspi's de-mining operation is based. Claire's apartment is not what they're used to: a twin-sized bed, cinder blocks and wood boards for a closet, a shower head on a hose and a drain in the floor. When they ask if she could find a better place to live, she says that this is better than what most people have. Carver tells her that she's "not a native"; she's "an American."

Claire's life in Vietnam comes out in full force here as a point of contention between her and her father. Her rejection of American culture in favor of thinking of herself as someone who feels at home in Vietnam frustrates her father, because he feels as though it is a rejection of his life, his choices, and his culture.

Carver, Michiko and Claire go to a café beneath her apartment. Children giggle and stare at them. Claire says they've never seen a family like theirs before: an African-American man, a Japanese woman, and their daughter. Carver says he's used to it, having traveled in Japan and Thailand and gotten the same reaction. Claire argues that he could always go home, though—but there was never a place that felt like home for her.

The scene in the café reveals some of the trouble that Carver has had with his own cultural identity in various Asian countries, and he doesn't seem to see how Claire has experienced a parallel discomfort in America, which is what drove her to come to Vietnam.

Carver remembers Claire coming home as a teenager, sobbing at a comment from a peer or stranger that amounted to "What are you?" He sees that, in Vietnam, Claire exhibits a confidence she's never had before, as she hails a taxi, gives directions in Vietnamese, and greets her students at the school where she teaches English. At the school, Carver and Michiko discuss how long she's planning to stay. When she says indefinitely, her father is patronizing and confused as to why she would want to stay. Claire says that she feels like she's home—that she has a "Vietnamese soul."

Claire argues strongly that Vietnam is the place where she feels she fits in culturally, in contrast to America where people didn't seem to be able to identify her mother's or her father's culture. However, as family is instrumental in giving a person a sense of cultural identity, Carver only sees Claire's move away from America as a means of separating herself from him.

Carver responds that that's the stupidest thing he's heard. Claire gets upset, saying that he's said that about all of her big decisions, like leaving Maine for school, majoring in women's studies, and going to Vietnam in the first place. Claire begins to cry, and is frustrated when she sees a few students have gathered at her door and can see her upset.

Claire's list demonstrates how Carver cares about Claire's move because it is a rebellion against him, rather than the fact that it is a separation from his culture, because the other examples she cites are life choices with which he disagreed that do not have as much to do with cultural identity.

Michiko tries to calm the situation, taking Claire shopping. This forces Carver to find something to do alone. He passes the time by sitting outside at a bar and watching boys play soccer across the street. He thinks that the beer hasn't changed since he drank it thirty years earlier, that it was "insipid then and it was insipid now."

Carver again reveals some of his ignorance of the consequences of his actions during the war. Rather than trying to get to know the people and the culture thirty years ago, the thing he remembers the most is the taste of the beer.

Carver, Michiko, and Claire set out for the de-mining site the following day with Legaspi. As they tour through the countryside, Carver thinks that the country looked more beautiful from the altitude of his B-52. Seen up close, he thinks, the poverty is not picturesque. The sights and smells depress Carver, combined with the fact that Claire is not speaking to him.

Like Carver's thoughts on the taste of beer in Vietnam, his opinions on the appearance of the country seem quite insensitive to the plight of its people, particularly when taken in conjunction with his actions in the war and the experiences of refugees in other stories.

Legaspi plays jazz on the radio, having been informed by Claire that Carver loves jazz. Of all the places Carver has travelled, he liked France and Japan the best because the people also loved jazz. He had met Michiko at a jazz bar in Roppongi when he was on R & R from Okinawa.

The reference to jazz touches on the fact that even though he and Michiko may not have shared much between their cultures, the commonalities were important in creating a bond. Perhaps this is a reason that it is important for Carver to share some common cultural ground with his daughter.

They reach the de-mining site and two teenage boys greet them. Carver immediately forgets their names, so he nicknames them Tom and Jerry (the same names that he and his roommate had bestowed on their houseboys when staying in Vietnam during the war). They both have prosthetic limbs, and Legaspi explains that they lost them when they were kids. Now, they guard the site and look after the mongooses.

Carver's insensitivity (and even prejudice) comes out again in this moment. He appears not to care about the two young boys, who lost their limbs in the conflict that he took part in, to the point where he also views them as interchangeable with two individuals he had known thirty years prior.

The mongooses, Legaspi explains, are too light to trip mines, and they can be trained to smell explosives. Legaspi goes on to say that he steers the robot with a remote control. When the mongoose smells a mine, it sits up. A human team would take months to clear out the area, and bulldozing would ruin the soil for farming. But their method only takes a few weeks for a fraction of the cost.

Legaspi's work reveals the way in which the Vietnam War has left long-term scars on the country and its people at home, making it difficult for them to use the land and endangering their lives if they tried to rid themselves of these mines even thirty years after the war.

Carver criticizes Legaspi's naïveté, saying that the Department of Defense could figure out a way to put a landmine on the robot and then send it into tunnels to kill terrorists. Claire tries to defend Legaspi's work, and says that he's trying to make up for the things that Carver has done: killed thousands of people with the bombs he dropped. Carver says that he doesn't have to listen to this. He argues that Claire was coddled and protected from what he and Michiko had to worry about in their lifetimes. He then walks away.

The argument between Claire and Carver comes to a head as they clash over both cultural identity and generational differences on war. It is the confluence of these two things that is so frustrating to Carver: the fact that Claire is rebelling against him, and that she is doing it in a way that criticizes his life's choices and his service.


Fifteen minutes later, a monsoon strikes. Carver walks on the road away from the site and thinks about how he had never watched his own payload drop or explode, but he could see the results of what others had done. He thinks that Claire didn't understand the need for striking the enemy in order to protect Americans. This had led her to join Amnesty International in high school and march against Desert Storm at Vassar. She seemed to empathize with masses of strangers who would kill her if given the chance, but did not extend this sympathy to him.

Carver's thoughts on war reveal more complexity than the story has given him up to this point. Nguyen introduces the idea of the necessity of protecting one's own culture and one's own people over others. Yet it seems as though Nguyen is in some ways inherently criticizing Carver, because far more Vietnamese lives were at stake in the war than American lives, and so again Carver seems unaware of the culture he truly fought to protect.

As Carver continues to walk, the rain becomes a deluge. He is uncertain of whether to keep heading back or to return to the de-mining site. Carver hears the car they came in honk behind him, and as he turns toward the car, his step falters and he trips into the mud, his leg locking and his body pitching forward. Legaspi helps him to his feet and into the car, shivering and cold. Legaspi wonders where he was trying to go—he didn't even know where he was.

This incident is symbolic of the fact that Carver feels like his previous perception of the war is slipping away. He is becoming increasingly isolated, as his family no longer sympathizes with the part that he played in the war.

By evening, Carver has a fever and is in a hospital. He dreams about floating in a black stream, then about being in a plane without a pilot. He had risen, passing all of the passengers—all of whom were Vietnamese—and when he opened the cockpit door, the pilot's seat waited for him.

The dream could have several different interpretations, but it is possible that he realizes now the duality of his job during the war. He had caused harm and violence, yes, but he had also protected people who were at the mercy of the North Vietnamese. But perhaps his largest realization is the priority of the Vietnamese people whose lives he affected, not simply the Americans in his life.

Carver wakes up and sees Claire. She gives him water and tells him he's been here for three days. He has pneumonia and a fever. Carver tells Claire he needs to use the bathroom. He puts his arms around her and she pulls him up from the bed. She maneuvers him down the hallway. She tells him he's going to be okay, but he is still frightened.

The final piece of this short story demonstrates that even for the cultural and philosophical differences between Carver and Claire, there is still a familial intimacy that cannot be shaken.

Carver realizes that Claire has been sleeping on a bamboo mat near his bed for three days. Carver starts to remember when Claire had been an infant, she had slept in between himself and Michiko. He was so worried about rolling onto her that he had often climbed down to the floor and slept on the carpet.

This early anecdote has echoes in the present: Claire's need for love and support leads Carver to be uncomfortable and feel more isolated.

A few years after that, when Claire was barely potty-trained, she would wake up and jump onto Carver's chest, demanding to be taken to the bathroom. He would lead her down the hall, her hand wrapped around one of his fingers. In the present, Claire and Carver reach the bathroom. She asks him if he is crying—he says he isn't, even though he is.

Now, with their roles reversed, the intimacy and love between Carver and Claire still exists, but like other parents within Nguyen's short story collection, he must realize that his daughter has grown up and must be given a measure of independence—be it cultural, or simply the freedom to live her life the way she wants to live it.

SOMEONE ELSE BESIDES YOU

Thomas and his father (Mr. P.) drop by his father's girlfriend Mimi's condo. Thomas has never met Mimi before; when he meets her, he sees that she is slender and has full, auburn hair. Thomas thinks about his mother, who by the end of her life had gained weight and worn wigs because her hair had faded.

Thomas sees the relationship that his father has with Mimi in contrast to the relationship that his father had with his mother. She becomes like a ghost to him, her memory creeping into all of the interactions that Thomas has with his father.

Thomas goes to the bathroom (although saying he had to use the bathroom was just an excuse to go to the condo and meet Mimi), and when he returns, Mimi is preparing coffee in her kitchen, which has a stainless steel oven and electric stove. Thomas's mother had had a vintage gas oven and stove, and she had been in her kitchen when she died of an aneurysm the year prior at age 53. Mimi offers Thomas coffee, but Thomas says that he only came by to drop his father off because his father's car had been stolen the previous night. Mimi tries to make more conversation, but Mr. P. says Thomas has to go.

Once again, the memory of Thomas's mother lingers as he surveys Mimi's apartment. Like many of the other stories, this ghost provides a glimpse into what a different future might have looked like. Thomas's mother's death at such a young age becomes a point of contention between Thomas and his father, as Thomas eventually reveals that he believes his father drove his mother to her death by cheating on her.

Thomas explains that he is 33, but that Mr. P. didn't think anyone was a man until he became a father. His father had had five children, and though all of his sons had outgrown him, his height became largely forgotten. He is a broad-chested man and still trim enough to fit into the paratrooper's uniform he'd worn during the Vietnam War.

Mr. P.'s experiences in Vietnam, though they help to shape his identity and the way in which he relates to his sons, largely fade into the background. This demonstrates that refugees do not have to be defined by a single culture or a single experience.

Mr. P. walks Thomas to the door and says he'll need a ride home the next morning, and then he closes the door. Thomas thinks back to when his father had arrived at his apartment six weeks prior with everything he owned in the car. While Thomas had struggled with the suitcases, his father, at 63, had braced them with his leg and dragged them up the stairs. Thomas had realized that living with him now would be harder than it was during his childhood.

Even though Mr. P. projects an outwardly tough appearance, there is a tension in his character between intimacy and isolation. Even though he wants to remain independent and feels somewhat at odds with his son, he clearly desires intimacy following his wife's death and relies on his son to provide it.

The next morning, while Thomas processes refunds and listens to his service representatives, Thomas pictures Mimi and Mr. P. lounging on the couch together. She is the first of his father's mistresses and girlfriends that he's seen, though he (and his mother) had known that there had been many others.

The fact that Mr. P. had many mistresses even while his wife was alive complicates Thomas's feelings about him. Thomas understands the desire for intimacy, but not at the expense of his mother's feelings.

During Thomas's lunch break, he calls his ex-wife Sam's home number just to listen to her answering machine. Sam is a tenth-grade geometry teacher, while Thomas is a customer service manager for a company that sells hearing aids, oxygen tanks, and wheelchairs, and at night he is a watchman at a luxury high-rise.

Thomas calling Sam reveals the crux of his own conflict: he feels isolated, as well, to the point where he calls her phone simply to hear her voice, even if he cannot have a real conversation with her. Yet, as Nguyen will reveal, he also has his own struggles with intimacy.

Thomas says that the job is perfect, because after Sam left him and Thomas's mother had died, he could no longer sleep. He mostly sits in the lobby, watching video monitors. He reads the newspaper or plays solitaire, occasionally calling Sam and saying nothing, just to hear her say "Hello?"

Thomas's need for intimacy appears more and more desperate, as Nguyen reveals that he calls her sometimes, but never actually speaks to her.

Sam is patient, but her patience ran out the previous year when she turned thirty-four. She had told Thomas she wanted a child, but he wasn't sure if he was ready to be a father. This was not the first time they'd had this conversation. He thought about Mr. P., who had treated his sons like his own personal army and cheated many times. Sam had told Thomas that he is not going to turn out like his father.

The limits of Thomas's desire for intimacy are revealed here, as he isn't sure that he would be a good father. This determination can be seen in comparison with the ghostwriter's comment that motherhood would be too intimate for her in the first short story.

Thomas's shift ends at dawn, and he returns to the apartment into which he'd moved after his divorce. By the time Thomas's mother passed away, he was very familiar with loneliness, and invited Mr. P. to live with him, suspecting he might also be lonely. His father, to his surprise, had said yes.

Moving in with Thomas allows both Thomas and his father to combat the isolation they feel as a result of having lost their wives. Yet each of them still feels somewhat empty, because they have a difficult time expressing love for each other.

Thomas sleeps for two hours, and then drives back to Mimi's apartment. Mr. P. is showering, so Mimi makes Thomas a cup of coffee and he tells her a bit about his two jobs. Then Mimi says that it's not good for a boy his age to be without a woman and begins describing some young women at her temple. She explains that Vietnamese women are better for men than American women, and that they liked men like Thomas: "Neither too American nor too Vietnamese."

Mimi's comments reveal not only certain stereotypes within the Vietnamese community, but also some of the changing culture, as well. Thomas could be seen as a grown-up version of the young boy, caught between two cultures. Mimi's counsel is also in direct conflict with the way that Thomas's father feels: he believes that Thomas should follow his love, rather than marry because of a shared culture, like he did.

Mr. P. appears and he and Thomas leave soon after. In the car, Thomas's father asks when the last time Thomas spoke with Sam was. Thomas responds that they spoke after his mother died. His father asks how he would get her back without talking to her and chastises him for giving up too easily. His father also notes that he looks terrible—that Thomas was only "half a man" before he met Sam, and he is now half a man again.

Mr. P. points out the way in which Sam's love made Thomas a better and more whole person. Now, without that intimacy, Thomas is in some ways a ghost of who he could be. Later he sees this more concretely when he realizes that he doesn't want to miss out on the possibility of being a father.

Thomas questions Mr. P., asking if he's going to marry Mimi and then find another woman to have on the side. He remembers once when Thomas's mother had asked him where his father disappeared to on Friday nights. He had no idea, and was terrified by her questioning.

Even though Thomas understood his father's need for intimacy, he is more sympathetic to his mother because of the collateral emotional damage that Thomas had endured as a result of his father's affairs. Perhaps this is why, even though he understands his father is much happier with Mimi, he still harbors some bitterness towards him,

Mr. P. says that Thomas should never have let Sam go. Thomas starts to cry. He remembers that he had not cried during Thomas's mother's funeral, but when he drove from the church to the cemetery, the tears gushed out. In that instance, his father had waited until Thomas was finished before saying anything. But now, his father says that it's time they did something about Thomas's situation.

Thomas understands that he would be much happier with Sam, but his fears about fatherhood continue to plague him. As Nguyen continues to elaborate on the dynamic between his mother and father, one can see that Thomas's fears also spring from the fact that he had a difficult childhood due to issues in his parents' marriage, and his own father's difficulty in parenting.

Thomas doesn't know what "doing something" means; only that Mr. P. usually said it when he was going to punish his sons. It is also what he'd said when Thomas had come home one day from fourth grade and reported that a kid had spat on his lunch and called him a "slant-eyed fag."

The discrimination and bullying that Thomas faces is exemplary of the discrimination that many refugees face in a new country, as they are viewed as both foreign and easy targets.

Mr. P. had taken Thomas to the boy's home and knocked on the door. He spoke with the other boy's father in low, angry tones so that Thomas couldn't hear what he said, until his father kicked the man in the groin and then punched him in the throat. As the man fell down on his porch, Thomas saw the kid behind him, wide-eyed. They had then left.

This reaction again plays into Thomas's conflicted feelings about his father. He agrees with the sentiment, asserting that he belongs in America, but perhaps not the violent way in which his father goes about it. Likewise, he agrees that love in relationships is important, but cheating on his mother was unethical.

Thomas and Mr. P. go to pick up a rental car, then to a barbershop, where Thomas gets a very short haircut. Thomas's father then takes him to Sam's doorstep. As he knocks on the door, Thomas says that this is a mistake. His father says that they'll have the advantage of surprise, but neither one of them is prepared for the fact that Sam opens the door and they see she is pregnant.

Thomas's haircut, and his decision to go with his father to try to win Sam back, are representative of his relenting to his father's opinions and outlook on life. Thomas doesn't have to listen to his father, but by accepting his plan, he still clearly needs the support from his father to chase after what he wants.

Sam is surprised to see them, and says they should have called. Thomas says they were just taking a drive and thought they'd stop by. She is skeptical, but she lets them in. Thomas enters cautiously, looking for another man. Sam and Thomas start to catch up, and Thomas explains that Mr. P. has moved in with him. Sam responds that that must be an interesting situation.

Now with the knowledge that Sam is pregnant, Thomas's outlook has shifted. He worries about the man who could be the father of Sam's child, not only because he wants to win her back, but because he slowly comes to the realization that he is jealous of the depth of the relationship that this man could achieve, and which he could not.

Mr. P. compliments Sam on the house, but she says that most of the decorations are her roommate's. Thomas's father points to a pipe on top of the TV and asks where she bought it. He and Thomas are surprised to hear it's from Hue, and that Sam visited Vietnam. Thomas's father says he would never go back—that the Communists would call him a war criminal. Sam goes to the bathroom, trying to avoid an argument.

This discussion of Vietnam between Sam and Mr. P. highlights the difference in the way that many tourists treat Vietnam versus the way that some Vietnamese people treat Vietnam (a dynamic that is explored further in the next short story, "Fatherland"). It demonstrates the difficulty for refugees to return to their home country, even decades after having left it.

When Sam leaves, Thomas looks for traces of a man, but can only find mementos from their life together. When Sam returns, she shows them pictures of her vacation. When Thomas sees a picture with her and a man with sandy-blond hair, he asks if this is the father. Mr. P. excuses himself out the front door. Sam tells Thomas that a woman doesn't need a man to have a child. He says that she might as well say the earth is flat. He asks her who the father is, but she says he doesn't have the right to ask her.

Thomas's feelings take a sharp turn here, as his jealousy flares. He realizes, upon seeing Sam pregnant, the possibilities and the future that he gave up with her. Thomas is not haunted by a literal ghost, but he is haunted by the hypothetical child that he lost due to his uncertainty about his ability to be a father.

Thomas leaves and gets in the car with Mr. P. As they pull out of the street, Thomas's father sees Sam's car and tells him to stop. He gets out of the car and slashes all four of Sam's tires. When he gets back in, Thomas yells at him, asking why he would do something like that. His father asks why he didn't say or do anything—he could have easily stopped him.

Again, Thomas may agree with his father's emotion (he is, after all, angry with Sam over her actions), but he does not agree with his methods. Yet his inability to stop his father also validates his father's assessment that he has lost courage as a result of leaving Sam, and can only feel whole when he is with her.

As they argue and drive away, Mr. P. claims that Thomas wouldn't know right from wrong because he never makes any choices. Thomas questions if it was right of his father to cheat on Thomas's mother, or if it was right to drive her to her grave. Thomas's father says he never loved Thomas's mother. He wants Thomas to be with a woman he loves.

Thomas's father's attitudes throughout his life become more clear here: he prioritizes deep emotional connections, even at the expense of Thomas's mother. Thus, he feels that Thomas's goal should be to rekindle the connection he had with Sam.

At home, Mr. P. takes a pill, thinking he might have pulled a muscle in his neck, and Thomas gives him a massage. After he falls asleep, Thomas hangs his shirt in his closet and notices his mother's wig on a Styrofoam mannequin.

Even though Thomas's father never loved his mother, Thomas still sees the respect that he held for her and that he has not completely forgotten her.

The next day, the police find Mr. P.'s missing car. His father goes with Mimi to retrieve it from the impound lot while Thomas sleeps between shifts. When they return, his father goes to clean the car, leaving Thomas alone with Mimi. Seeing his father and Mimi together, he realizes that Thomas's mother and father should have married other people, even though he would not have been born. He wonders if Sam had realized this before he did, and that's why she divorced him.

Perhaps Thomas's biggest issue is that he is haunted by the incidence of his own birth. Knowing that his parents might have been happier with other people, he wonders if it were better for him not to have been born. Yet Thomas also realizes that he does in fact love Sam very deeply, and that their child would not experience the same conflict that he does.

Mimi starts to chat with Thomas, but he's in a dull mood. He asks her, "You know he's going to cheat on you, don't you?" Mimi doesn't react at first, but then she gets up and walks over to the door. Before she leaves, she turns back and says, "Aren't there times when you'd rather be someone else besides you?"

Mimi means her question to point out that Thomas is being cruel to her. But the question is also important because Thomas felt incomplete as a son and as a husband, and he worries that someone else might have been better for Sam than him.

Thomas goes to work, changes his clothes, goes to his second job. Near dawn of the next day, he falls into bed until he hears a knock on the front door: Sam. She asks how he could have slashed her tires. Thomas retrieves an envelope full of cash that he had withdrawn the day before and gives it to her. He had planned to slide it under her door that evening.

Even though Thomas's father's methods were odd, his actions ultimately enabled Thomas and Sam to rekindle their romance. Like the story of the bully at school, he took the actions that Thomas was unable to take in order to allow them to regain their intimacy. This action is in some ways parallel to Thomas inviting his father to live with him, preventing him from feeling isolated.

Sam tells Thomas that when she saw the tires, she wanted to kill him—but that she also thought he cared in some strange way. Thomas steps forward and puts his hands on Sam's stomach. He places his ear against her belly. He speaks softly to the life within it, saying, "I can be the father." He says it again, louder, to make sure that Sam can hear it.

Thomas's resolution stops him from being haunted by his earlier indecision. Whereas before he thought he had given up on the possibilities that the future might hold, now he understands that he wants to own and be a part of that future with Sam.

Sam tells Thomas to stand up and asks if he knows what he's saying—or what he's doing. He says he has no idea. Thomas reaches up to touch her face, noticing age spots that had not been there when they'd divorced the year before. They hear a floorboard creak upstairs: Mr. P., who has crept out of his bedroom and is wondering and waiting for what is to come, just like Sam and Thomas.

Though the story ends with a degree of uncertainty between them, Thomas finally acts and proclaims his definitive desire for intimacy with Sam, fully reciprocating her earlier wish to have a child with him. Thus, their uncertainty stems from a hopeful sense of possibility, rather than the fear of the unknown that had plagued Thomas earlier.

FATHERLAND

Phuong's father (Mr. Ly) had named his second set of children after his first, and Phuong, who is the oldest of this second set of children, had believed throughout her life that her older siblings were much more blessed. The first Mrs. Ly had sent many letters and **photos** over the years from America, and the first Phuong (who goes by Vivien) seems much more beautiful and more accomplished, as the letters say that she is a pediatrician in America. Mr. Ly had laminated each of the photographs to protect them.

Phuong's story explores the legacy of refugees, both for those living in America (her older siblings) and for those who were forced to remain in Vietnam (herself and her younger siblings). Vivien and the photographs come to represent, for Phuong, the alternative life that she might have led in America.

The children had never written them letters, however, until Mr. Ly receives a letter from Vivien. Phuong thinks that she must have taken her name from Vivien Leigh, star of *Gone with the Wind*—her father's favorite film. Vivien plans to come to Vietnam for a two-week vacation and hopes she can stay with them.

Even though Phuong believes that her half-sister took her name to be connected with her father, it also represents a way of distancing herself from his culture and assimilating into American culture (giving up her Vietnamese name for an American one).

When Vivien arrives, she is wearing enormous sunglasses, glossy lipstick, and has crimson luggage. Phuong is thrilled to see that she bears no resemblance to the Vietnamese people around her. Even after a week, Vivien is more easily mistaken for a weary Japanese tourist, her makeup melting under the sun.

Vivien lives up to her namesake by arriving like a movie star, again connecting herself more to her American culture than her Vietnamese family, as Phuong notices. This is appealing to Phuong, who has an immense desire to leave Vietnam and follow in her sister's footsteps.

When Vivien takes the family out to dinner at Nam Kha, however, she is clearly more in control of her domain. Phuong had worked as a hostess at the restaurant for two years, but had never eaten there because it was too expensive—yet Vivien insists on paying for the family. Mr. Ly and Phuong's mother object to the expensive tourist prices of the restaurant. Phuong, on the other hand, says she could get used to this treatment.

Throughout Vivien's stay in Vietnam, Phuong continues to see the dichotomy between herself and her sister. While she works as a hostess in a restaurant whose food she cannot afford, Vivien treats the family to dinner in the restaurant. Vivien represents, in Phuong's mind, the better life that Phuong might have had in America.

Phuong observes the other guests in the restaurant, all white except for one Indian couple, who take pictures and comment on how the people are so "delicate and tiny." Night after night she had observed comments like this and was often forced to pose for pictures. She had pretended not to be a hostess but instead a model, or a starlet, or Vivien. She never knew what she really looked like, however—no one ever sent her the pictures.

Phuong is also frustrated by the commercial tourism that Vietnam has fallen victim to. Like during the Vietnam War, foreigners feel more connected to what the country represents (i.e., the fight between capitalism and communism) than the actual people living within it. For the tourists, Phuong comes to realize, the Vietnamese people are interchangeable.

When Vivien had arrived, she carried an itinerary of sights she wanted to see. Mr. Ly, who worked as a tour guide, told her that he couldn't have made a better one himself. Mr. Ly rarely praises anyone, except his first three children. The first Mrs. Ly had fled with them after the war, when Mr. Ly had been banished to a labor camp for five years and his mistress had come demanding money. When he returned, he married his mistress (Phuong's mother) and had three more children.

In this story, Nguyen introduces a different kind of refugee—a refugee within one's own country. Mr. Ly was forced to leave his home and he lost everything as a result. When he returned, he then attempted to rebuild his life, just like many of the characters in the other short stories.

Mr. Ly often compared Phuong with Vivien as she was growing up, which gave her a sense of yearning for her sister and also jealousy. Sitting in the restaurant, Mr. Ly asks Vivien what she'd like to do the following day. Phuong's brothers, Hanh and Phuc, ask if they can go to an amusement park. Mr. Ly suggests that she come take his tour instead. Vivien agrees, and they clink glasses.

By comparing Phuong and the sister that she's never met, Phuong is haunted by a ghost of herself, essentially, as Vivien represents the person she might have been in America. Readers can see the connection between this story and the imaginings that the boy has in "War Years" about the communist child who might be sleeping in his old bed in Vietnam.

Mr. Ly comments that they are a lucky generation. When Phuong tries to protest, he says that she has never appreciated what she has. He talks about his experiences in the labor camp, where he ate roots and rice with worms in it to survive. Every week, he says, he had to come up with a different way to criticize himself for being a capitalist. Phuong sighs; she's heard this all before.

Phuong's father highlights again the disastrous nature of war for those who were forced to remain in the country—not only in terms of the physical hardship of near starvation, but also in terms of the mental hardship of being forced to bend to ideas in which one does not believe.

Vivien, who has been listening intently, asks Mr. Ly why he named his second set of children after his first. He says he knew she would want to come back to see the daughter he named after her. Vivien glances at Phuong before toasting once more with her father.

Mr. Ly's statement implies that he thought Vivien might also be haunted by the half-sister she never knew in Vietnam, just as Phuong has wondered about her half-sister in America.

Mr. Ly had never asked Phuong to take one of his tours. Though she had never wanted to go, she thinks that it might have been nice to be asked. Yet Vivien doesn't seem to appreciate her father's special regard. Instead, as they take the bus to his tour, she complains about the heat and the mosquitos, even though she wears T-shirts and short shorts and neglects to wear mosquito repellant.

Phuong is again frustrated with her father's special treatment of her sister, particularly as he views her as someone to be treated like an American rather than as Vietnamese, again highlighting the life that Phuong has missed out on.

Mr. Ly gives his tour in English, showing off various remains of the Vietnam War: a trapdoor for capturing soldiers; a tunnel where guerrillas would hide and attack Americans; a shooting range where tourists can use a machine gun. Phuong is confused why tourists would want to visit, but Mr. Ly explains that the war is all they know about the country.

The war continues to be a source of disruption for the Vietnamese people who have remained in Vietnam, not only because of the hardships the people have endured, but also because their country is defined by it in the eyes of the world.

The American tourists take pictures, and Mr. Ly asks for volunteers to go into the tunnels. When no one does, he scowls and raises his fist, crying "We reunite our country through courage and sacrifice!" Phuong assures Vivien that this is an act, but she also knows that the tourists cannot tell the difference between a Communist and a man that the Communists had exiled. She grows frustrated, realizing that all Vietnamese people are the same to them.

Like in the restaurant, Phuong is upset that their cultural identity appears to be in service of foreigners (particularly Western foreigners) who come to the country as tourists, and she is also frustrated with her father for playing into this dynamic.


On Vivien's penultimate evening in Saigon, she and Mr. Ly drink four flasks of milky rice wine at a Chinese restaurant. While Mr. Ly and Phuong's mother go on a walk, Vivien and Phuong go upstairs to the room Phuong shares with her parents. Vivien takes out a gift from her suitcase: lacy black **lingerie**. Phuong blushes and protests that her parents would never let her wear them, but she tries them on. She is thrilled by sight of her body in the underwear.

The lingerie that Vivien gives to Phuong serves as a physical representation of the life that she might have had—and might be able to have—in America: a life that is more exciting, less conservative, and less constricted by her parents. Additionally, the gesture creates a sense of intimacy between the two sisters.


Phuong puts her pajamas back on and she and Vivien lie in bed together. Vivien says that she wants to tell Phuong a secret: that she doesn't love Mr. Ly, because she doesn't remember him. They hear their parents climb the stairs, and become silent. Phuong realizes, in the darkness, that her sister has brought her to the realization that she pities her father and does not respect him.

The intimacy between the two sisters only grows as Vivien confesses to Phuong the fact that she doesn't love her father. Following the pattern that Nguyen has set up, however, this statement makes sense: Vivien and her father do not share a sense of cultural identity, and therefore she doesn't feel connected to him in a familial way.

At the amusement park the next morning, Mr. Ly takes **photos** of his children with the disposable camera that Vivien had brought them. They drive the bumper cars before moving on to the Ferris wheel. As Vivien and Phuong survey the park in their own cabin, Vivien reveals that she once worked at an amusement park so that she could meet boys. Vivien tells Phuong about her boyfriend, Rod, and how they would drive home together and kiss on side streets.

The photos that Mr. Ly takes become mementos of his time with his daughter, but later on in the story they become reminders to Phuong of Vivien's lies and the fact that Vivien gets to continue her life in America while Phuong is stuck in Vietnam.

Phuong, who is still wearing the **lingerie** from the previous evening, tells Vivien that she hasn't had a boyfriend because doesn't want anyone holding her back. When Vivien asks from what, Phuong says that she wants to be like Vivien—she wants to go to America and be a doctor. She doesn't want to spend her life waiting on people. She doesn't want to marry a boy with no future and have children too soon.

Back in the restaurant, Mr. Ly saw Phuong's desire for a better life as ingratitude, but Phuong is simply ambitious and doesn't want to be stuck doing the same things her parents have been doing. Armed with this sense of individualism and a desire for opportunity, she is more culturally connected to Vivien than she is to her family.

Vivien reluctantly confesses that she and Vivien's mother did not tell the truth about her life. She is not a doctor, she is a receptionist. She had dated her boss, and when he broke up with her and she lost her job, she decided to take a vacation to Vietnam. She used her severance package to fund her trip. Phuong is shocked, but she still presses her case, saying that Vivien doesn't have to be a doctor to sponsor her.

Vivien's lies reveal the pressure that she is under, as someone who has been able to leave Vietnam and to make a better life in America, to appear to be doing well. This attitude is what prompted the lies that her mother told the family—that often refugees are under enormous pressure to be exceptional in order to feel like they are worthy of the life that they have been given.

Vivien starts to cry, saying that when she gets back, she has to put her life together. She has to pay off her credit cards and her student loans, and she won't have time to worry about a little sister. The Ferris wheel has made a full rotation, and Vivien steps out, followed by Phuong. Mr. Ly snaps a **photograph**, but when it is developed, Phuong realizes that Vivien is visible, but Phuong cannot be seen.

These lies have shaped Phuong's sense of what she might be able to achieve or accomplish. Whereas before she thought she might be able to generate a relationship with her sister and be able to create a new identity for herself in America, now she feels more isolated than ever.

A month after Vivien's visit, the family receives a letter from her with a stack of pictures enclosed. The letter recounts her memories and how much she wants to come back. Mr. Ly instructs Phuong to have the **photographs** laminated so that they'll have something to remember her by until she returns. Phuong contemplates telling him the truth about Vivien, but refrains. All she can think about is how she will leave Vietnam someday, as well.

The end of Phuong's story, and her resolution to leave despite her sister's inability to help, highlights some of the complicated contradictions of the refugee experience. The legacy of the war prompts her to want to leave not because of the difficult living conditions, but because she sees the life that she might be able to build in another country.

The next morning, Phuong is alone in the house and she decides to look at the **photos**. The first picture is from their last stop at the amusement park that day—the Ice Lantern, an enormous refrigerator with ice sculptures of the world's landmarks. Phuong had taken a picture of Mr. Ly and Vivien, who looked more like her father than her sister. It is clear to Phuong now that their father loved Vivien more than he loved her.

Phuong's bitterness stems from the fact that her father loves her sister because she is more successful, but Vivien's success is due to the accident of her birth, the fortune of being able to make it to the United States, and the lies that she and her mother have told rather than anything Vivien has actually accomplished. Still, Phuong does not resent her sister—she still views Vivien as a model towards which she aspires.

Phuong lights the **photo** on fire with a match, dropping it into a bucket. She feeds the fire with more photos until only one is left: a photo of Phuong and her sister at the airport. Vivien is smiling, but Phuong is not. She lights this final photograph and scatters the ashes in the alley next to her home. A gust of wind catches them and sweeps them up into the clear blue sky.

In burning the photos, Phuong symbolically rids herself of the ghost of her sister, who has haunted her throughout her life. This serves as a turning point in her story and her life, as she is determined to make it out of Vietnam and to make a better life for herself outside her given family and her given culture.

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