Seedfolks

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF PAUL FLEISCHMAN

Fleischman was born in Monterey, California. He's the son of Sid Fleischman, who is also a renowned children's author. Both of Paul's parents inspired *Seedfolks*: his father because he kept a hobby garden to take breaks from writing, and his mother because she volunteered in immigrant communities as well as community and therapeutic gardens. When Fleischman was 19, he bicycled cross-country and spent several years living in an 18th-century house in New Hampshire, an experience that influenced many of his historical fiction novels. He then went on to attend the University of California, Berkeley, and the University of New Mexico. Fleischman wrote his first novels while he was still in college, though it was the books he wrote in the 1980s that earned him major accolades. He won the 1989 Newbery Medal for *Joyful Noise: Poems for Two Voices*. This is one of several of Fleischman's novels that reflects his love of music; he's said that as a child, he wanted to write music for orchestras rather than write books. Like *Joyful Noise*, booth *I Am Phoenix: Poems for Two Voices* and *Big Talk: Poems for Four Voices* are intended to be read out loud by multiple readers. Several of his other novels, including *Seedfolks*, have been adapted into plays. Fleischman has two sons and a stepdaughter, and he lives in his hometown of Monterey, California, with his wife.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Seedfolks draws on the American history of community gardens, but it also touches on Cleveland's status as an immigrant destination and on the history of gardening more generally. Cleveland, Ohio, made the leap from minor city to a major manufacturing hub during the American Civil War. It then became a destination for immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe, as well as Ireland. Because of the influx of immigrants, Cleveland's population more than doubled between 1860 and 1870. In the decades to follow and into the 20th century, many Black Southerners moving North in the Great Migration settled in Cleveland as well. In the late 19th century and the first few years of the 20th century, Cleveland was associated strongly with the City Beautiful movement. Proponents believed that making cities beautiful through parks and grand architecture would improve life for poor and working-class residents, as well as create moral and civil virtue. The Cleveland Mall, an expansive public park in Cleveland, is one of the best examples of the City Beautiful ideals. The history of community gardens, however, is much older and stretches back thousands of years. The idea is simple, as a community garden simply refers to a communal area where people can have a plot to grow produce or flowers. Studies have found that community gardens have numerous positive effects including helping people exercise, decreasing food insecurity, and decreasing instances of crime. Turning vacant lots into community gardens, as in the novel, has become especially common in Detroit, Michigan. This can sometimes cause issues because of zoning laws that designate those lots as commercial or residential rather than agricultural, meaning that they could eventually be developed at the expense of the garden. However, since support for community gardens tends to be strong, several cities have retroactively rezoned vacant lots to protect the gardens from development.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The idea that a garden can be a healing force that brings people together isn't unique to *Seedfolks*. Indeed, the children's classic, Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden*, portrays its titular garden as capable of healing illness and curing children of bad attitudes and loneliness. Other children's novels that portray the natural world as a place where kids can learn about the world around them include L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* and *James and the Giant Peach* by Roald Dahl. Nature's healing power is an especially common theme in dystopian novels that take place in the future, like Scott Westerfeld's *Uglies* series and Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* series, In books like these, characters must find relief from a dangerous and lacking manmade world—and figure out how to fix it—in nature. Given that it tackles building community and the immigrant experience, *Seedfolks* fits in with novels as varied as *American Street* by Ibi Zoboi, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* by Julia Alvarez, and the short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* by Jhumpa Lahiri.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Seedfolks
- **When Written:** 1996–1997
- **Where Written:** California
- **When Published:** 1997
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Young Adult Novel
- **Setting:** Cleveland, Ohio
- **Climax:** The neighborhood gathers together for the harvest feast, celebrating their community garden and all they've grown there.
- **Antagonist:** Racism, hopelessness, and language barriers

- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Beans and Death. Though Kim's lima beans are symbols of life and hope in *Seedfolks*, beans—fava beans in particular—have historically been associated with death and the underworld. Various accounts state that the Greek philosopher Pythagoras and other members of his cult refused to eat these beans, as they believed the beans contained the souls of the dead. It's also possible that Pythagoras died due to a dangerous and relatively common allergy to fava beans.

Citizenship in Cleveland. In 2019, a study by a group that assists immigrants with the naturalization process found that Cleveland, Ohio, the setting of *Seedfolks*, is the best city in which to become an American citizen. The study ranked things like processing times and the efficiency of the local U.S. Customs and Immigration Services offices. It found that in Cleveland, it takes an average of four months to become a citizen—compared to an average of 10 months nationwide and just over 17 months in Houston, Texas, the city the study found to be the worst.

PLOT SUMMARY

Seedfolks takes the form of short stories, each narrated by a different person. It follows a community garden in Cleveland from its first crops planted in April through the March of the following year.

The day after her father's death anniversary, nine-year-old Kim takes a handful of dried **lima beans** from the kitchen, fills a jar with water, and sneaks outside. It's a blustery and cold spring day—but it barely seems like spring to Kim, who is from Vietnam and is accustomed to much warmer weather. She wades through the trash in the neighboring vacant lot and finds a spot behind an old refrigerator. As she digs, she thinks of her father, who was a farmer in Vietnam and died before she was born. She doesn't know if his spirit even knows who she is, but she believes that if she shows him that she can cultivate plants like he did, he'll be proud of her.

Ana has lived in the same apartment on Gibb Street since she arrived in the country in 1919, at four years old. It's changed over the years, but it's always been an immigrant neighborhood and nobody stays long. Looking out the window, Ana notices a little girl (Kim) digging in the lot. Since the neighborhood is a violent one, Ana assumes Kim is burying drugs or a gun. She watches for several days until one day, Kim looks up into Ana's window before running away. Knowing that Kim will move her treasure now that she's been discovered, Ana hobbles down to the lot to see what Kim buried. Ana feels horrible when her digging turns up sprouted bean seeds. She replants the seeds and buys binoculars.

One morning, Ana wakes up Wendell, a neighbor on the first floor, with a concerning request to come upstairs quickly. Wendell is angry when he finds that Ana is just upset that Kim's plants down in the vacant lot haven't been watered in several days. He identifies the parched plants as beans and grudgingly agrees to water them. Wendell realizes that the beans have survived the cold thanks to the nearby refrigerator bouncing sunlight down onto the soil. After he waters the first one, he hears something behind him. It's Kim, who's come to water her plants, and she's terrified of Wendell. Wendell smiles and backs away. When he returns later, he decides to plant a garden for himself.

It took Gonzalo two years to learn English after emigrating from Guatemala, while none of his older relatives can function in the English-speaking world of Cleveland. This is why Gonzalo has to watch his great-uncle Tío Juan after school—Tío Juan doesn't speak English *or* Spanish (he speaks a regional dialect) and gets lost if he wanders away. One day, Gonzalo loses track of his great-uncle and finds him trying to talk to Wendell, who's digging a garden in the abandoned lot. Gonzalo leads his uncle home. But Gonzalo's mother asks him to take Tío Juan back with seeds. Tío Juan was a farmer in Guatemala and as Gonzalo watches him plant, he notices his great-uncle seems focused and competent for the first time.

When Leona notices people growing gardens in the vacant lot, she decides to grow goldenrod in her Granny's honor. But Leona also knows that few others will want to grow gardens until the garbage is removed from the lot, so she spends two days on hold with various government officials. On the third day, she takes a bag of smelly trash from the lot to the local health department office. This gets her a meeting almost immediately.

Soon after, 87-year-old Sam sees a crew clearing the garbage to make space for a community garden. He tells a woman watching that it's "paradise." Sam has spent his retirement trying to connect people in his neighborhood by smiling and starting conversations. He decides to start a garden. Sam is too old to do much manual labor, so he hires a Puerto Rican teenager to prepare the soil and convinces the boy to grow pumpkins instead of marijuana. Sam remains convinced that the garden is akin to the Garden of Eden until people begin fencing in their plots with barbed wire. It is, he concludes, just like the rest of Cleveland.

Virgil is excited to spend is first day of summer vacation sleeping, but Virgil's father has other ideas. A Haitian taxi driver who's fond of get-rich-quick schemes, Virgil's father makes his son help prepare six plots in the community garden in which to plant baby lettuce, a hot commodity for fancy restaurants. Virgil is embarrassed to take up so much space, especially when Virgil's third-grade teacher, Miss Fleck, calls them out for their selfishness. It's even worse when Virgil's dad lies that the plots

are for family members. Virgil grows disillusioned as the lettuce fails to thrive—and eventually, Virgil's father learns that lettuce doesn't grow well in the heat of the summer, though he continues to try.

Sae Young immigrated to Cleveland from Korea with her husband years ago, hoping for a better life for their future children. But though their dry-cleaning business was successful, they never conceived—and then, Sae Young's husband died of a heart attack. Not long after, a man robbed and violently assaulted Sae Young. She's spent the last two years terrified isolated in her apartment and terrified of other people. As she passes the community garden one day, she decides she's ready to change. She plants a small plot and slowly makes friends with the other gardeners, especially Sam. Sam organizes a contest to figure out an easy way to water the garden. The winning idea is to collect rain from downspouts in garbage cans, but Sae Young notices that people struggle to fill their watering cans from the big containers. She buys funnels and it makes her feel warm to see people use them.

Curtis comes to the garden in a final bid to win back his ex-girlfriend, Lateesha. They broke up when Lateesha found out that Curtis was unfaithful Curtis has changed since then and to show Lateesha that, he plants her favorite beefsteak tomatoes where she can see them from her apartment window. He finds that he loves gardening—until someone starts stealing his tomatoes. Fortunately, Curtis discovers Royce, a teenage boy, sleeping in the garden. He gives Royce food, money, and protection in exchange for guarding the tomatoes at night. Curtis also fences the tomatoes and makes a sign that says "Lateesha's Tomatoes."

Nora always tries to get her patient Mr. Myles out for walks, no matter the weather. She firmly believes in the healing powers of fresh air. But despite her beliefs, Mr. Myles—an elderly Black stroke patient, who is now wheelchair-bound and nonverbal—seems to be losing interest in life anyway. This changes on the day they pass the community garden. Mr. Myles raises an arm to ask to go in and seems bright and alert. The next day, Nora helps him plant flowers in a raised barrel, which helps him regain some zest for life.

Maricela wants to die. She feels like everyone hates her—she's 16, Mexican, and pregnant. She's secretly been praying that she'll miscarry for months now. She's part of a program that helps pregnant teens get their GEDs, and the program leader, Penny, gets the teens a spot in the community garden. They all hate it, especially since Penny makes them grow vegetables they dislike. One day, as Maricela sits in the garden with Leona, she opens up about not wanting to be pregnant. Leona encourages Maricela to see herself as part of a natural system—and for an instant, Maricela doesn't hope her baby will die.

Amir is used to city living after growing up in Delhi, India, but he hates how in the U.S., people don't know their neighbors. The garden changed that in Cleveland as people, brought together by their desire to grow vegetables, got to know each other. Over the course of the summer, Amir helps other men chase purse thieves. He sees Royce go from a frightening presence to a beloved member of the garden community. At the end of the summer, all the gardeners gather for an impromptu harvest party. At the party, Amir speaks with an Italian woman who called him a "dirty foreigner" last year in his fabric store. When Amir asks the woman about it, she apologizes and says that back then, she didn't know who Amir was.

Florence explains that "seedfolks" are the first people of a family or a community to put down roots somewhere. Her "seedfolks" walked from Louisiana to Colorado after being freed from slavery—and Florence thinks that the people who started the community garden are also "seedfolks." Though these days the garden has new soil, water spigots, and a toolshed, that first year was a struggle. The first winter was especially difficult. Florence was worried that no one would come back to garden in the spring—but one early spring day, she saw Kim planting lima bean seeds, and she knew the garden would thrive again.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Kim – The novel's first narrator—and the first gardener in what will eventually become a thriving community garden—Kim is a nine-year-old Vietnamese girl living in Cleveland. Kim is both the youngest child in her family and the only person in her family who didn't know her father personally. Her father died when Kim's mother was only a few weeks into her pregnancy with Kim. Fearing that her father's spirit won't recognize her as his daughter, Kim decides to plant something in the vacant lot to get her father's spirit's attention and foster a sense of closeness with him. Her father was a farmer, so she figures that growing something will appeal to his spirit and mark her as a part of the family. This choice requires immense bravery from Kim, as the vacant lot is piled high with garbage, and the neighborhood itself is riddled with crime and violence. As time goes on and as others in the neighborhood, like Wendell, help Kim tend to her **lima beans**, Kim becomes a better, more knowledgeable gardener. (Wendell, for instance, shows her how to properly water her plants to protect them from dry spells.) Early on in the novel, Wendell points out that Kim planted her seeds far too early in the season, saying that she's lucky they sprouted at all. That a few wilted bean sprouts eventually lead to a thriving community garden speaks to the transformative power of gardening, but it also points to the lima bean seeds' status as a symbol of hope for the future despite bleak circumstances.

Ana – Ana is an elderly white woman and one of the novel's

narrators; she came to Cleveland from Romania as a small child. She spent years working as a typist at the local police department, and this experience has taught her to assume that all children in the neighborhood are involved in illicit activities. So when Ana sees young Kim digging down in the vacant lot, she assumes that Kim is burying drugs or other illicit substances. However, Ana is beside herself with shame when she discovers Kim's sprouting **lima bean seeds** instead of drugs. After this, Ana buys binoculars so she can keep an eye on the bean sprouts' progress—like many characters in the novel, Ana is inexplicably drawn to the garden and watching its progress. In her descriptions of the neighborhood's history over the last 60 years or so, she describes the neighborhood as a "cheap hotel" where immigrants live only until they can afford to move elsewhere.

Wendell – Wendell is an older white man and one of the novel's narrators. He works as a janitor at a local school. Wendell is unhappy and cantankerous, as in the few years before the novel begins, he lost his son to a shootout and his wife to a car accident. He feels like he spends all week at work being bossed around and can't control anything in his life. However, he keeps an eye out for Ana, who lives four floors above him—and it's their friendship that leads Wendell to the garden. Though Wendell is annoyed when Ana awakens him with a phone call to ask him what's wrong with Kim's **lima bean seeds** down in the lot below—and then tasks him with watering the wilting bean sprouts—he ultimately comes to see the sprouting beans as a sign of hope. As he explains to Ana, Kim planted the seeds too early in the season; most beans wouldn't have survived. But against all odds, Kim's seeds *did* sprout. Wendell decides to take this as a sign that he should stop dwelling on all the things he can't change and instead, dedicate himself to making a little bit of the world better. He's the second person to start a plot in the community garden.

Gonzalo – Gonzalo is a teenager from Guatemala and narrates one chapter of *Seedfolks*. He opens his chapter with his views on how the experience of immigrating to the U.S. changes depending on a person's age. He proposes that since he was a kid when he arrived in the U.S., it was easier for him to learn English—he had the neuroplasticity to pick up a new language by playing with English-speaking kids on the playground and watching cartoons inn English. Learning English, he suggests, effectively made him an adult. In contrast, people who immigrate as adults struggle to learn English and so "get younger"—steep language barriers, the novel suggests, often strip immigrants of their independence and pride. This theory guides Gonzalo's view of his parents and especially his great-uncle, Tío Juan, who speaks a regional dialect that only Gonzalo's mom speaks. Gonzalo is put in charge of babysitting Tío Juan after the old man disappears one day, and he describes his great-uncle as a helpless baby. Gonzalo's thoughts on his great-uncle begin to change, though, as he helps Tío Juan start a plot in the community garden. Seeing how expertly Tío Juan handles his seeds and the soil makes Gonzalo understand that his uncle has a wealth of knowledge to pass on. Further, Gonzalo realizes that he's woefully ignorant about the natural world, and especially where his food comes from. Spending time in the garden gives Gonzalo the humility to see that he doesn't know everything, and it also gives him the opportunity to see his great-uncle in a new light and appreciate his expertise.

Tío Juan – Tío Juan is Gonzalo's great-uncle. He immigrated to Cleveland from Guatemala to be with his family about two years before the novel begins. As Gonzalo explains, Tío Juan used to be the oldest and most respected man in his pueblo in Guatemala, but in the U.S., Tío Juan is essentially like a baby. He's unable to do anything for himself since he doesn't speak English (nor does he speak Spanish; he speaks an "Indian language" that only Gonzalo's mother speaks), and everything about big-city life is foreign to him as a retired farmer. When Tío Juan and Gonzalo begin to work together in the garden, the experience transforms Gonzalo's view of his great-uncle. While Gonzalo realizes he knows nothing about gardening, Tío Juan knows exactly how to cultivate the seeds that Gonzalo's mother buys for him, and he makes a point to help other novice gardeners achieve good results with their own crops. As with many characters in the novel, the garden helps people see fuller, more complex versions of one another.

Leona – Leona is a middle-aged Black woman and one of the novel's narrators. She's the person responsible for getting the garbage cleared from the vacant lot. Leona takes on this task in part because she wants to grow goldenrod, which reminds her of her Granny—as it is with many of the novel's characters, the garden is a way for Leona to connect to her past and family. But she also spearheads the project of getting the lot cleaned because, as the mother of two boys who attend a high school "with more guns than books," she's experienced when it comes to making phone calls and convincing people in official positions to take action. Over the two days that Leona spends on the phone with the city, the state, and the federal government, she comes to the conclusion that in order to be successful, she'll need to make herself real to the people she's speaking to. To do this, Leona packs a bag full of putrid garbage from the lot and goes to the local health department to give them a whiff. This helps her show the officials there how important it is to get the garbage removed—and impresses upon them that real people live in the neighborhood. Later, Leona reappears again when she's one of the only adults who doesn't treat Maricela poorly for being a pregnant teen. Leona also doesn't condemn Maricela for not wanting to be pregnant; instead, she encourages Maricela to see herself as part of a rich life cycle that includes people, plants, and animals.

Sam – Sam is an elderly white man and one of the novel's narrators. He's retired after spending more than 30 years

promoting pacifism and international cooperation in the nonprofit sector. But even though he's retired, Sam sees himself as continuing his work—and indeed, he thinks he's doing even more good in Cleveland than he ever did working on a global scale. He sees it as his duty to "sew[] up the rips in the neighborhood," which he does by showing people, especially immigrants and Black people, that he's friendly. In the interest of this, he makes a habit of starting conversations with strangers whenever he's in public. Sam is amazed when he sees that the city is clearing the vacant lot for a community garden and is the first to declare that the garden is "paradise," likening it to the biblical Garden of Eden. Sam is unable to do much gardening himself due to his old age, but he hires a number of neighborhood children and teenagers to help him tend his plot. He even gives the Puerto Rican teenager who helps him prepare the soil a row and convinces him to grow pumpkins instead of marijuana. Though Sam remains convinced for several weeks that the garden is indeed paradise and is helping the neighborhood close its divisions, he eventually notices that the gardeners organized themselves so that people from the same country have plots next to each other—and he looks on sadly as people begin fencing in their crops and posting "keep out" signs. This, he suggests, is a sign that the garden isn't actually paradise and instead is just a microcosm of Cleveland. But despite this, Sam remains dedicated to his mission of fostering community. Later, he hosts and funds a contest in which children can present solutions to the issue of there being no water source in the garden.

Virgil – One of the novel's narrators, Virgil is a rising sixth grader and an immigrant from Haiti. Though he looks forward to spending his summer vacation sleeping in, Virgil's father has other ideas—on the first day of summer vacation, he drags Virgil out of bed early to cultivate a plot in the garden. But Virgil is extremely embarrassed when he discovers that the garden is part of his dad's latest get-rich-quick schemes and requires that they cultivate six plots instead of one. He's mortified when a former teacher, Miss Fleck, calls Virgil's father out on selfishly taking so many plots. However, this experience helps Virgil humanize his dad. He's never seen an adult lie to get ahead before, and though at first he's embarrassed and angry, he soon comes to feel bad for his dad. On the whole, Virgil doesn't enjoy his experiences in the garden. He participates because his father makes him and because his dad promised to buy him an 18-speed bike with the lettuce proceeds. Instead, though, Virgil is tasked with the difficult work of watering the lettuce and trying to keep it pest-free, all while coming to the conclusion that he and his dad don't know enough about gardening to grow a successful, profitable crop.

Virgil's Father – Virgil's father is a Haitian man and a taxi driver. He used to drive a bus when the family lived in Haiti. A fan of get-rich-quick schemes, Virgil's father latches onto the community garden after a passenger in his taxi told him about the demand for baby lettuce. According to the passenger, fancy restaurants will pay a lot of money for the freshest baby lettuce. Rather than cultivating one plot of lettuce, Virgil's father instead takes six plots for himself—and lies to Miss Fleck that the extra five plots are for family members who cannot garden themselves. Virgil finds his dad's willingness to lie to get ahead both embarrassing and sad. In addition, others describe Virgil's dad as an inconsiderate member of the community garden; he often steps on other people's crops on his way to his plot. Ultimately, Virgil's dad's inexperience dooms his efforts. He plants his lettuce at the height of summer, when it's too hot for lettuce to grow, and pests plague his crop. Despite this, Virgil's dad still manages to sell some of his lettuce, but he's not welcomed warmly into the fold of the garden community the way other characters are.

Sae Young – Sae Young is a middle-aged Korean woman and one of the novel's narrators. She immigrated to Cleveland with her husband years before the novel begins and ran a dry cleaning business with him. Despite their efforts, Sae Young and her husband were never able to have children, and her husband died of a heart attack at only 37 years old. Two years later, someone robbed the business and violently attacked Sae Young until she was unconscious. This traumatic experience ushered in a period of several years in which Sae Young was too afraid to go into public, a major change for her—prior to this, she was outgoing and sociable. When readers meet her, Sae Young is finally able to face grocery shopping herself, and she's at the point where she feels ready to be among people again. The community garden offers her a safe environment to work through her fears of people. When she first starts going, she doesn't speak to anyone and simply enjoys listening to the conversations going on around her. But after a few weeks, she's able to engage with others about their plants—something that makes her happier than she's been in years. As it does with Mr. Myles, the garden transforms Sae Young's outlook on life as well as her mental health.

Curtis – Curtis is a young Black man in his late 20s and one of the novel's narrators. He's muscular, handsome, and constantly attracts attention from women because of this. Curtis comes to the community garden to grow tomatoes with the hope of winning back his ex-girlfriend, Lateesha. He and Lateesha dated five years before the novel begins, but at that point Curtis enjoyed the attention he'd get from other girls. This resulted in their breakup. Now, Curtis is ready to settle down and get married—and he knows that Lateesha is looking for someone to marry as well. When Lateesha spurns Curtis's attempts to woo her back, he stakes out a spot near the sidewalk, in view of Lateesha's window, and plants tomatoes—he remembers that they're her favorite and wants to show her how much he cares. Curtis is also the first person to care for Royce, a homeless boy who sleeps in garden. Curtis supplies Royce with food, a new sleeping bag, some money, and a pitchfork in exchange for

keeping watch over the tomatoes overnight (passersby have been stealing produce). Though it's left ambiguous whether Lateesha decides to give Curtis another chance or not, Curtis's story ends with Lateesha looking at the tomatoes, and Curtis noticing this.

Maricela – Maricela is a 16-year-old Mexican girl and one of the novel's narrators. She's pregnant and doesn't want to be, but this is only one of the reasons Maricela feels alone, trapped, and hated. Being Mexican, Maricela feels as though other people from Central America resent her for being able to immigrate to the U.S. by walking. She also feels that society hates teenagers in general, so this is the third reason why she feels resented and alone. Throughout her pregnancy, Maricela consistently hopes that she'll miscarry. Though she appreciates the opportunity to be part of a program that helps pregnant teens get their GEDs and provides transportation to doctors' appointments, Maricela is dismayed when the program organizer, Penny, requires the three participants to tend a plot in the community garden. Gardening doesn't appeal to Maricela; she hates getting dirty and either doesn't like or doesn't know how to prepare any of the produce she grows. But a conversation in the garden with another gardener, Leona, helps Maricela accept her pregnancy. Leona doesn't condemn Maricela for being unhappily pregnant; instead, she encourages Maricela to see herself as part of a much larger life cycle that includes all other living beings, including plants. Leona's words have a major impact on Maricela—for the first time in her pregnancy, she doesn't hope that her baby will die.

Amir – Amir is a fabric merchant from India and narrates a chapter of *Seedfolks*. As he describes his idyllic childhood in Delhi, he suggests that major cities in India and the U.S. aren't so different when it comes to their size—but he takes issue with how isolated people are in American cities. As Amir details his experiences meeting other gardeners, he comes to the conclusion that he—and nearly everyone else in Cleveland—is, to some degree, prejudiced against people from other countries. Most importantly, he realizes that the stereotypes surrounding people from a certain country don't tell the whole story about that person. Rather, it's necessary to talk with others and share one's history and memories in the process. And this, he suggests, is the beauty of the community garden: it helped bring the people in his neighborhood together and see each other as neighbors with something to give, rather than as stereotypes or people who should be avoided for one reason or another.

Florence – The final narrator of *Seedfolks*, Florence is an older Black woman and a "watcher". Her arthritis makes it too painful for her to bend down and grow vegetables herself, but she nevertheless enjoys watching the garden grow and supporting its efforts. Florence is also the person who explains the origin of the novel's title. "Seedfolks," she explains, are the first members of a family or a community to settle somewhere. She explains how her own "seedfolks," her great-grandparents, were freed slaves who walked all the way from Louisiana to Colorado. She sees all the people who start plots in the community garden as "seedfolks," planting their hopes and dreams for the future and developing the community in the process. Florence tells her story from at least a year after most of the novel's other events. She explains how the community garden eventually becomes the pride and joy of the community—and, for better or for worse, contributes to rising property and apartment values in the area.

Nora – Nora is a British nurse and one of the novel's narrators; she cares for Mr. Myles as his home health nurse. She believes firmly in the healing power of fresh air and nature, especially after watching her own father languish inside some time before the novel begins. As such, she makes a point to get Mr. Myles outside on days that she cares for him. A caring and attentive person, Nora notices when Mr. Myles perks up when they pass the community garden and seems to become more alert. A few days later, Nora fills a garbage can with dirt so Mr. Myles can reach it from his wheelchair and helps him plant flowers. She and Mr. Myles become a fixture in the garden after this.

Mr. Myles – Mr. Myles is Nora's patient. An elderly Black man, Mr. Myles lost his ability to speak after his second stroke and now requires home health nurses, like Nora, to care for him. Nora explains that because he can't speak, Mr. Myles's history and personality are a mystery to everyone. Even though Mr. Myles can't speak, Nora notices him withdrawing in the weeks before they stumble across the community garden. The garden reignites Mr. Myles's desire to live and with Nora's help, he plants a barrel of flowers.

Royce – Royce is a Black teenager who sleeps in the community garden; he's homeless after his dad beat him and kicked him out. At first, the other gardeners are scared of Royce. He's a hulking, muscular figure and Amir describes him as the kind of person whom others cross the street to avoid. But over time, Royce becomes a beloved fixture in the garden. Curtis initially employs Royce to keep watch at night over his tomatoes, which non-gardeners have been stealing. Later, Royce joins several other gardeners in chasing a man who stole a woman's purse—and becomes locally famous after holding the criminal at pitchfork-point until the police arrive. Following this incident, women begin to shower Royce with food and affection. A kind and generous person, Royce often waters for people who are ill or performs other small tasks in others' plots. He never takes credit for his work and seems interested in just helping people.

Miss Fleck – Miss Fleck is a third grade teacher who taught several of the novel's narrators, including Virgil and Maricela. She's a tall Black woman who inspires fear in everyone, students and fellow teachers alike. In her mind, the world is her classroom and she takes it upon herself to lecture or scold anyone who doesn't meet her high standards—though, as Maricela notes, this doesn't always go to plan as Miss Fleck

can't send the adults she lectures in the garden to the principal's office. She tends a plot in the community garden and seems to be a regular, as evidenced by her appearance in several narrators' stories.

Lateesha – Lateesha is Curtis's ex-girlfriend whom he's trying to win back. The two used to date, but Lateesha broke up with Curtis for basking in attention from other girls. Now, five years later, both Curtis and Lateesha are single and want to settle down. Curtis wants to win Lateesha back—but she won't have him. Knowing that she grew up eating tomatoes out of her aunt's garden, Curtis plants beefsteak tomatoes hoping to win her over. It's unclear if he ever does, though Curtis's story ends with Lateesha looking at the garden through her window.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Granny – Leona thinks of her grandmother often—Granny was a firm believer in herbal remedies and outlived all her doctors who tried to tell her not to use them. Her memory inspires Leona to plant goldenrod in the community garden, as Granny drank goldenrod tea with nutmeg daily.

Penny – Penny is the woman who organizes the school program for pregnant teenagers that Maricela participates in. Maricela describes Penny as obnoxiously optimistic and exuberant.

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.

GARDENING AND COMMUNITY

Seedfolks tells the stories of a number of people in a diverse Cleveland, Ohio, neighborhood as they come together over the course of a spring and summer to create a community garden. What begins as nine-year-old Kim's solo attempt to connect with her deceased father through planting **lima beans** turns into a robust community garden, where various neighbors can meet. People who never would've considered talking to each other find that it's much easier to connect when they have a ready subject to talk about: each other's gardens and produce. Through telling the stories of the people who are drawn to the garden, *Seedfolks* shows that gardening has the unique ability to foster community and a shared purpose.

The early chapters of *Seedfolks* paint a picture of a Cleveland neighborhood that's dangerous and cold, in part because it lacks community. It's telling that Kim is initially afraid to enter the abandoned lot to plant her beans. As a nine-year-old girl, she's small and vulnerable—and other narrators later in the novel confirm that Kim *should* be afraid. A teenager named Gonzalo, for instance, notes that sitting in public puts one at risk of "some [] gang us[ing] you for target practice," while a woman named Sae Young tells her story of being robbed at gunpoint and beaten while tending the register of her dry cleaning business. These mentions of violence shows clearly that the neighborhood isn't safe or connected. And indeed, many people in the neighborhood seem suspicious of their neighbors. An elderly woman named Ana is the first to notice Kim planting her seeds in the garden, though she can't tell what Kim is doing from her vantage point at her fifth-floor window. So Ana jumps to a conclusion that she implies isn't so extreme for her neighborhood: that Kim must be burying drugs or is otherwise involved in something nefarious.

The garden, however, soon helps people in the neighborhood learn to trust each other. Several chapters suggest that the neighbors' suspicions of each other are somewhat overblown, and the garden helps them realize this. Ana, for instance, is distraught when she tries to dig up Kim's drugs and finds only sprouted bean seeds. Finding sprouted seeds—the beginning of the community garden—instead of drugs forces Ana to look at her neighbors in a new light, starting with Kim. The seeds encourage Ana to see that not all kids in the neighborhood are criminals in the making. This humbling moment is just the first of many instances like this, where people realize that the assumptions they've made about each other are incorrect and based on unhelpful stereotypes.

Seedfolks suggests that the primary reason why the garden helps people come to these conclusions is because it's hard to vilify someone when it's clear they just want to grow vegetables and flowers. This becomes especially clear in the case of Royce, a Black teenager who begins sleeping in the garden after his father beats him and kicks him out. Several characters describe Royce as intimidating in stature and as making the gardeners nervous when they see him around—but as Royce performs small tasks around the garden such as watering and weeding, he soon becomes a beloved fixture and the recipient of more donated produce than he can eat. Through characters like Royce, *Seedfolks* shows that most people *want* to do nice things for each other—and the garden gives them a way to do so. Whether it's an old man named Wendell watering Kim's struggling lima beans, Leona taking responsibility for harassing city officials until the city clears the garbage from the lot, or the numerous other instances of people sharing produce with each other, the book shows that the small acts of kindness that take place in the garden form the building blocks of a community.

The garden gives the neighbors a shared sense of purpose, which in turn transforms the dangerous neighborhood into a thriving, tight-knit community. Soon, people start looking out for others' produce when passersby try to steal vegetables.

Some people with gardening experience help novice gardeners with their crops, while others share various ways to cook interesting but unfamiliar vegetables. Everyone with a plot in the garden feels that they're part of a robust group of people who all want the same thing: to grow something. This urge to protect the garden and each other's produce soon gives way to grander actions, such as three men chasing another man who steals a woman's purse, and shouting matches with the people who still insist on throwing garbage into the lot. As people connect with and humanize each other, their aims shift from simply growing vegetables. It becomes important to protect the neighborhood and the people who live in it, both from violence and from anything that might threaten the garden itself.

The neighborhood described in the novel's final chapters looks wildly different from the one that Kim and Ana describe in the first two chapters. Near the end of the book, Amir, a fabric merchant from Delhi, encapsulates the difference when he notes that, "the garden's greatest benefit [...] was not relief to the eyes, but to make the eyes see our neighbors." In the garden, he says, "you felt part of a community." And indeed, the community garden's first summer season ends with an impromptu harvest party in which every gardener shows up with food to share and instruments to play—a celebration of everything the garden gave them. Participating in a community garden, *Seedfolks* suggests, isn't just a way to grow vegetables when a person doesn't have the backyard space for a private garden; it's also an important way to nurture and cultivate community.

NATURE, MENTAL HEALTH, AND THE CITY

As a story about a community garden in an urban environment, the tension between nature and the city is central to *Seedfolks*. The abandoned lot that eventually becomes the community garden exemplifies what the novel suggests are the downsides of urban environments: it's covered in smelly garbage, it's an eyesore, and it suggests that the neighborhood cares little for beauty or nature. However, through the narrators' stories of coming to the abandoned lot and turning it into a lush community garden, *Seedfolks* shows that it's essential for people—and especially city-dwellers—to be able to connect with the natural world for the sake of their own happiness and mental health.

Seedfolks positions the city as the polar opposite of the natural world: where the city is draining, dangerous, and cold, the natural world is nourishing. When characters describe their neighborhood in Cleveland, they overwhelmingly focus on its negative aspects, calling it frightening, dirty, cold, and unfeeling. In contrast, characters' descriptions of the natural world—both of the community garden that springs up in a vacant lot, as well of their memories of childhoods spent in rural locations—are almost entirely positive. For instance, Leona, who spent her childhood in Georgia, reminisces about her Granny's goldenrod patch and appreciation for nature, while a Jewish man named Sam says of the community garden that "Squatting there in the cool of the evening, planting our seeds, a few other people working, a robin singing out all the while, it seemed to me that we were in truth in Paradise, a small garden of Eden." While Sam is the only character to describe the garden as being akin to the biblical Garden of Eden, he's not the only one to refer to it as a paradise and a refuge from the ills of the rest of the city. This suggests a natural hierarchy: cities may be a necessary fact of the modern world, but per the logic of the novel, they are perhaps a necessary *evil*—while nature is the antidote.

Indeed, many characters who are new to gardening find that the natural world has more to offer than they ever thought possible. Curtis is delighted as he watches his precious tomato plants grow tall, produce buds and then flowers, and finally produce tomatoes that turn from green to red. The nurse Nora at one point says, "Gardening boring? Never! It has suspense, tragedy, startling developments—a soap opera growing out of the ground." When one is willing to look and notice this natural "soap opera," the novel suggests, it's endlessly entertaining and can provide just as much satisfaction as anything one can find in the city.

Finally, *Seedfolks* suggests that the natural world is also essential to a person's health, particularly their mental health. The novel shows this most clearly in the case of Mr. Myles, an elderly Black man who is wheelchair-bound and cannot speak after suffering multiple strokes. Nora, his nurse, makes a point to take Mr. Myles out for walks, but she notices that he still seems to be withdrawing and declining. This all changes on the day their walk takes them past the community garden. As Nora watches Mr. Myles begin to engage with others and plant flower seeds, she remembers that "ancient Egyptians prescribed walking through a garden as a cure for the mad." There's a rich history, in other words, of nature improving people's mental states. While the city views couldn't spark Mr. Myles's interest and his will to live, connecting with nature through the community garden renews his desire to enjoy what's left of his life. Similarly, participating in the community garden helps Sae Young, a Korean immigrant who has spent the last several years recovering from the trauma of being robbed at gunpoint and then beaten, finds that the garden is an essential element to her recovery. She's always been a gregarious person who, despite developing a crushing fear of people after her assault, desperately missed being around others—and in the garden, Sae Young takes the final steps to overcome her fear and move past her trauma. In this way, the positive effects of the garden on her mental health are immeasurable, as it essentially gives Sae Young her life back.

In addition, *Seedfolks* proposes that it's not necessary to actually cultivate a plot oneself to reap the benefits of the garden; rather, simply having a place to observe and connect

with the natural world is enough to improve city life immeasurably. While the novel focuses many of its early chapters on people who actually cultivate vegetables in the garden, the book's final narrator, Florence, is a "watcher"—that is, a person who isn't able to physically garden, but who still delights in watching the garden grow and flourish. A person doesn't actually have to participate in digging in the dirt to benefit from immersing themselves in nature. A number of other people in the neighborhood enjoy the garden from their windows—and Florence, who narrates from at least a year after the community garden's first season, notes that landlords eventually start charging more for the apartments that look out over the garden. While this raises a whole host of other issues, such as the possibility that the primarily low-income people who started the garden may soon be unable to afford to live so close to it, it nevertheless speaks to the value of carving out space for nature in an urban environment. *Seedfolks* shows that city life is better and healthier for everyone when that city offers opportunities to connect with the natural world.

THE IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE

A majority of the narrators in *Seedfolks* are immigrants. Many hail from Central America or the Caribbean, while many more came to the U.S. from Asia. No matter where the novel's characters come from, though, almost all find their new lives in Cleveland, Ohio, to be challenging because of their immigrant status. By presenting such a variety of immigrant stories, *Seedfolks* shows that immigrants all experience a difficult transition from their home country to their new country for various reasons, including not being able to speak English or experiencing instances of racism. *Seedfolks* makes the case that the best way to smooth that transition from one country to another is through fostering pride, purpose, and a sense of belonging in a person's new home.

Seedfolks shows that Cleveland has been a destination for immigrants for more than a century. Ana, an elderly woman who immigrated to Cleveland from Eastern Europe in 1919 when she was four years old, gives readers an overview of Cleveland's history as it pertains to immigration. She explains how, when she was a child, Romanians inhabited the neighborhood surrounding Gibb Street. But as time went on, the neighborhood changed—the Romanians left, making way for Black people from the American South during the Great Migration and eventually, in the novel's present of the mid-1990s, immigrants from Central America and Asia. Ana describes the neighborhood as a "cheap hotel" that immigrants pass through on their way to someplace better. Rather than it being a permanent home for a tight-knit community, the neighborhood is a revolving door with immigrants constantly coming and going.

Seedfolks suggests that being an immigrant means feeling like—and sometimes being treated like—an alien in a foreign land. This most often shows up in instances when narrators either don't speak English or have family members who speak little or no English. Not being able to speak the country's dominant language, *Seedfolks* suggests, is profoundly alienating. For Gonzalo's great-uncle, Tío Juan, this language barrier essentially turns him into a "little baby," unable to do anything for himself or understand what's going on around him. Other narrators suggest that not being able to communicate makes it hard to connect with neighbors when people speak so many languages. Without a common language binding the neighbor's residents, it's difficult to feel supported, safe, or at home. More sinister, however, are the various instances of racism that all the novel's characters, especially immigrant characters, experience. Sae Young, a Korean immigrant, details her traumatic experience of being robbed at gunpoint and beaten, and an Indian man named Amir shares that a customer in his fabric shop—an Italian immigrant herself—accused him of giving her the wrong change and called him a "dirty foreigner." Instances like these make it impossible for immigrants to feel welcome—or even safe—in Cleveland.

The remedy for this, *Seedfolks* suggests, is to first foster community and belonging. Over the course of the community garden's first summer, the neighborhood's residents eventually find that they're not so different from each other. They may hail from different parts of the globe and speak different languages, but they have things in common, too—many want to grow traditional crops from their countries of origin, and many take solace in digging in the dirt alongside others. The garden, in other words, makes the novel's various characters feel like they're a part of something bigger, which in turn makes them feel like they're valued, essential members of the neighborhood. The garden, in this sense, helps immigrants move away from the feeling that they're just passing through by "planting" them in the garden and the neighborhood.

Seedfolks suggests that it's also essential for immigrants to find purpose and something to feel proud of in their new home. Tío Juan, for instance, undergoes a major transformation as he and Gonzalo work to cultivate a plot in the garden. It takes only a few days for Tío Juan, who was a farmer in Guatemala, to stand out as a gardening expert. In addition to growing his own garden, Tío Juan makes a point to help other novice gardeners successfully cultivate plants of their choosing. This helps Tío Juan, who speaks no English or Spanish, overcome the language barrier and connect with others by showing them how to stake tomatoes, for instance, or properly water tiny lettuce seeds without washing them away. And being helpful and part of the community like this gives Tío Juan something to feel proud of. For the first time since he came to Cleveland, he has a purpose—to help others discover a love of gardening and nature.

Seedfolks makes it clear that being an immigrant in a foreign

country is profoundly lonely, isolating, and difficult. Immigrating to a new country can deprive someone of their sense of self-worth and their ability to connect with others. And because of this, being able to find a sense of purpose, pride, and connection can be immensely stabilizing—and provide comfort and community in a place that may otherwise seem dangerously different.

FAMILY, MEMORY, AND THE FUTURE

A number of the gardeners in *Seedfolks* are drawn to the community garden not because they personally want to garden, but because a family member does. And while much of the story focuses on how gardening benefits individuals, it's clear that it has a positive impact on families, too. As *Seedfolks* shows, gardening can strengthen families through the generations by connecting people to their memories and family history—as well as helping them carry those memories and old traditions into the future.

Gardening, *Seedfolks* suggests, can be a way for people to remember and connect with deceased family members. The novel's very first chapter articulates this idea. Nine-year-old Kim's father, a farmer, died eight months before she was born, so she never knew him. She decides to plant her **lima bean seeds** the night after his death anniversary, after wondering if her father's spirit even knows who she is. Kim wants to show her father's spirit that she is his daughter by taking part in gardening, something that was essential to his identity. For Kim, gardening helps her feel more connected to a father she never knew, but she isn't the only one who comes to the garden to connect with a deceased relative. Leona, a Black woman who grew up in the South with her Granny, decides to plant goldenrod in her Granny's honor. It gives Leona satisfaction to be able to honor her grandmother in this way, and to pass her grandmother's wisdom about medicinal plants and herbal remedies on to future generations.

Seedfolks shows that gardening also provides a venue through which older generations can connect with younger ones. Many of the novel's young narrators, like Virgil and Gonzalo, only get to know their older family members on a deeper level once they start gardening together. While Gonzalo sees his great-uncle Tío Juan as having nothing to offer at first, he soon realizes he's all wrong about this the moment he sees Tío Juan expertly handle seeds and turn over soil. Tío Juan, a former Guatemalan farmer, has so much expertise to offer younger generations—but he can only share his wealth of knowledge once he and Gonzalo get involved with the garden, where he's an expert. The garden, then, causes Tío Juan to become a fully formed person in his great-nephew's eyes. In this vein, *Seedfolks* shows that the garden provides opportunities for young people to humanize their older relatives. Virgil, for instance, watches in dismay as his father plants six plots of a fancy baby lettuce—and then lies to other gardeners by claiming that each plot is for a family member who can't garden. In reality, Virgil's father intends to keep all the lettuce for himself to sell. Virgil has never seen an adult lie to get ahead before, let alone his own father. But this only makes Virgil's father seem more human to his young son. While *Seedfolks* only gives an open-ended conclusion to Virgil's story, it nevertheless makes the case that through their involvement in the garden, Virgil is getting a more well-rounded view of his father—something he perhaps wouldn't have gotten anywhere else.

Overall, *Seedfolks* suggests that the garden provides families a place to learn to appreciate each other—and a way to pass on knowledge. For Amir and Florence, going to the garden provides them with the opportunity to teach others about respect and kindness. Amir teaches his toddler son, for instance, to not pick produce before it's ready, while Florence coaches adult passersby to not pick others' vegetables without asking. Perhaps even more importantly, though, the garden offers parents and grandparents who spent much of their lives outside of the U.S. the space to teach children and grandchildren about crops native to their home countries. Amir introduces his son to a special kind of eggplant, while a number of narrators describe other parents teaching their children and neighbors about various hot peppers, herbs, or melons. More than just a plot to grow produce, the community garden becomes a place where people can connect with their family members on a deeper level, and where the children of immigrants can learn about their culture. And while it's worth noting that it's not necessarily just gardens with the potential to provide these opportunities, *Seedfolks* nevertheless makes it clear that it's essential that people have a place to get to know their relatives and their history. Only then can people truly understand who they are and keep the wisdom and memories of past generations alive.

SYMBOLS

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

LIMA BEAN SEEDS

Kim's lima bean seeds symbolize having hope for the future even in the midst of bleak circumstances. For Kim specifically, planting the lima bean seeds symbolizes her hope that she'll be able to grow a garden and connect with her father's spirit—he died before she was born, and he used to be a farmer, so she hopes that gardening will help her find a sense of closeness with her late father.

Kim plants her seeds early in the spring—long before it's warm enough for the seeds to do well—and in an unlikely place, hidden from view behind a refrigerator in an abandoned lot. Given her lack of knowledge and their less-than-ideal location,

it seems unlikely, if not impossible, that they'll grow. But, against all odds, the seeds begin to sprout. Wendell, an elderly man who waters the struggling bean sprouts at Ana's request, discovers that the seeds were only able to sprout in these difficult conditions because the shiny refrigerator bounced light and heat back onto the soil, creating a small area that's warm enough to support the seeds. Though he's usually a cynical, closed-off person, Wendell takes this as a sign that it's worthwhile to hope for the better, even when it doesn't seem likely that things will ever improve.

Indeed, Kim's choice to plant her lima beans in the vacant lot is only the first hopeful act that ultimately leads to the establishment of the community garden. And later, both Sae Young and Florence also position the bean seeds as a symbol of hope. After grappling with her husband's sudden death and experiencing a traumatic assault, Sae Young spends years isolated in her apartment, fearful of the world and other people. But when she sees a girl (presumably Kim) tending to lima beans in the community garden, it spurs Sae Young to slowly but surely reengage with the community and rebuild her life. The lima beans—and the garden more broadly—show Sae Young that despite all of the trauma she's faced in the past, hope is not lost for a better future.

The novel comes to a close in early spring, a year after Kim first plants her lima bean seeds. Florence, who loves watching the goings on at the garden, describes seeing an Asian girl digging out in the garden—presumably, Kim planting next year's crop of lima beans. Florence worries all winter that people will lose interest in the garden and that it won't resume in the spring, but Kim's planting gives Florence hope that the garden will continue to thrive.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the HarperTrophy edition of *Seedfolks* published in 2004.

Chapter 1: Kim Quotes

❝ I dug six holes. All his life in Vietnam my father had been a farmer. Here our apartment house had no yard. But in that vacant lot he would see me. He would watch my beans break ground and spread, and would notice with pleasure their pods growing plump. He would see my patience and my hard work. I would show him that I could raise plants, as he had. I would show him that I was his daughter.

Related Characters: Kim (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

Out in the vacant lot, Kim digs in the cold, hard dirt to plant her lima bean seeds and thinks of her deceased father, who was a farmer in Vietnam and died eight months before Kim was born. She shares that she wants to plant the lima beans so that she can connect with her father's memory and spirit. With this, the novel introduces the idea that gardening can be a way for families to connect through the generations and connect to their heritage—concepts that reappear in nearly every chapter in the novel. Though most of the novel focuses on how gardening brings together family members who are physically present and planting alongside one another (like Gonzalo and his great-uncle Tío Juan, or even the pregnant Maricela and her unborn baby), Kim senses that gardening will bring her closer to her deceased father's spirit. By growing the lima beans, Kim can take part in an activity that she believes her father loved and in which he took pride. In other words, gardening will give them something in common besides just sharing blood. And through doing this, Kim hopes to reinforce her relationship with her father's spirit, gain his notice, and reinforce that she is his daughter even though they never met while he was alive.

Kim's tone is hopeful, as she speaks in the future tense: "He would see my patience and my hard work. I would show him that I could raise plants, as he had." The phrase "he would" or "I would" appears six times in this passage alone, and this repetition reinforces Kim's hope that gardening will, in fact, bring her closer to her father's spirit. This is in part why the lima beans that she plants symbolize hope for connection and for a better future—they symbolize her hope that she will be able to connect with her father, and they also symbolize her hope that in the near future, her beans will sprout and thrive.

Chapter 2: Ana Quotes

❝ I never had children of my own, but I've seen enough in that lot to know she was mixed up in something she shouldn't be. And after twenty years typing for the Parole department, I just about knew what she'd buried. Drugs most likely, or money, or a gun.

Related Characters: Ana (speaker), Kim

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

Ana, an elderly woman whose apartment looks over the vacant lot, sees Kim down in the lot planting her beans—but Ana can't tell what Kim is doing and assumes that it must be something illegal. Unlike Ana, readers already know that the black-haired girl digging in the lot is Kim, and that she's planting lima beans in the hopes of connecting with the spirit of her deceased father, who was a farmer. In contrast, Ana's knee-jerk reaction is to think that Kim is burying drugs, money, or a weapon. This speaks to Ana's background as a typist for the police department—she's been exposed to several cases of children in the area who are "mixed up in something [they] shouldn't be"—but it also begins to flesh out the idea that this neighborhood is dangerous, violent, and riddled with crime. Ana's perspective here suggests to the reader that it's actually more uncommon for a child in this neighborhood to be planting beans than to be burying a gun.

Even though Ana has reason to believe something nefarious is going on, she nevertheless looks down on kids in the neighborhood as budding criminals and immediately assigns this stereotype to Kim. This begins to speak to the deep distrust that permeates the neighborhood. As the novel will go on to show, the neighborhood is a revolving door of immigrants—people only stay in the neighborhood until they can afford to move elsewhere, and all of the different languages and cultures abounding on Gibb Street alone means that people struggle to communicate or find common ground with one another.

❝ I tried a new spot and found another [bean], then a third. Then the truth of it slapped me full in the face. I said to myself, "What have you *done*?" Two beans had roots. I knew I'd done them harm. I felt like I'd read through her secret diary and had ripped out a page without meaning to.

Related Characters: Ana (speaker), Kim

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

When Ana finally goes down to the vacant lot to dig up whatever Kim buried, she thinks nothing of the beans she uncovers—until she realizes that Kim has been actually trying to *grow* the beans. Kim isn't involved in illegal dealings at all; she's a little girl trying to grow a garden. In this moment, Ana realizes how wrong she was to immediately suspect Kim of illegal activity and stereotype her as a budding criminal. Realizing that Kim is innocently trying to grow vegetables makes Kim suddenly seem human in Ana's eyes. This is the first of many instances in the novel where the community garden helps people humanize one another and bridge the gap of cultural differences, generational divides, language barriers, or racial tensions.

Importantly, Ana also thinks of the beans as being akin to Kim's secret diary. By making this comparison, Ana suggests that she violated Kim's privacy and overstepped boundaries by not trusting her. What Ana doesn't know but seems to sense, it that the beans *are* very personal for Kim—they're her private way of connecting to her deceased father's spirit, and they're intimately tied to her grief over his death. The idea that gardening is emotionally healing reappears a few times throughout the novel (like when Nora watches the garden heal her patient, Mr. Myles), and it has its roots here with Kim's lima beans.

Chapter 3: Wendell Quotes

❝ "What are they?" she asked.

"Some kind of beans." I grew up on a little farm in Kentucky. "But she planted 'em way too early. She's lucky those seeds even came up."

"But they did," said Ana. And it's up to us to save them."

Related Characters: Wendell, Ana (speaker), Kim

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 12-13

Explanation and Analysis

After Ana calls Wendell up to her apartment, Wendell identifies Kim's parched plants as beans and explains that they're going to die. This outlook suggests that, unlike Ana, Wendell takes a very hands-off approach to the goings on in the neighborhood. While Ana saw it as her responsibility to

find out what Kim buried—and now feels that it's her job to save the wilted plants after digging them up—Wendell doesn't see the situation as his responsibility whatsoever. Here, he takes a fatalistic attitude by declaring that the plants are likely to die because they were planted too early. Kim, in Wendell's opinion, is lucky that the seeds have sprouted at all.

While it's hard to tell in this passage if Ana is more interested in helping the beans themselves or in helping Kim, it's possible to read her desire to save the beans as a desire to save Kim from the heartbreak of losing her plants. It's possible that both readings are valid—in which case Ana saving Kim's seedlings is the first step the community takes toward coming together and forming the community garden. Indeed, as the months go by and more people plant their own crops, this generous spirit becomes integral to the community garden. It's common throughout the novel to see characters like Tío Juan sharing farming expertise with those who are new to gardening, and Ana's impulse to help Kim is the first evidence of this generous, communal spirit taking root.

❝ Out of nowhere the words from the Bible came into my head: "And a little child shall lead them." I didn't know why at first. Then I did. There's plenty about my life I can't change. Can't bring the dead back to life on this earth. [...] But a patch of ground in this trashy lot—I *can* change that. Change it big.

Related Characters: Wendell (speaker), Kim

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

After watering Kim's struggling seedlings, Wendell thinks of a Bible verse and decides it's important to focus his efforts on changing what he can rather than wallowing in what he can't change. The Bible verse is a prophetic passage, in which the writer talks about there once again being harmony among all animals on Earth—and specifically, the idea that, because of this harmony, a "little child" will be able to play safely with dangerous animals without fearing harm. This is the novel's first reference to the idea that the vacant lot that becomes the community garden is akin to the biblical Garden of Eden. Prior to Adam and Eve disobeying God and being cast out of the garden, they live in perfect harmony in Eden. Likewise, in the community garden, divisions between people don't exist the same way they do elsewhere. Another interpretation of this verse is that it's possible for a little girl like Kim to lead someone like Wendell toward a better, gentler way of looking at the world.

As Wendell thinks of this Bible verse, he undergoes a rapid transformation. He suddenly shifts from being an irritable, isolated older man to being someone who's giving and kind to others. It made him feel good to save Kim's seedlings, and even more than that, it inspires him to grow his own garden. This change in outlook means that Wendell and others are going to try to improve "this trashy lot." Through doing so, they'll be improving a place that epitomizes all that the novel suggests is wrong with the city. The lot is dirty, dangerous, and smelly, but cleaning it up and planting gardens here instead will turn it into a safe, enjoyable place in the neighborhood.

Chapter 4: Gonzalo Quotes

❝ He'd been a farmer, but here he couldn't work. He couldn't sit out in the plaza and talk—there aren't any plazas here, and if you sit out in public some gang driving by might use you for target practice. He couldn't understand TV. So he wandered around the apartment all day, in and out of rooms, talking to himself, just like a kid in diapers.

Related Characters: Gonzalo (speaker), Tío Juan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

As Gonzalo introduces readers to his family members, he explains how his great-uncle, Tío Juan, has struggled to adjust to life in Cleveland. Tío Juan is an immigrant from rural Guatemala who speaks only a regional language, so he finds Cleveland to be strikingly different from anything he knew at home. Though the violent nature of the neighborhood certainly plays a role in Tío Juan's isolation, his language barrier means that he can't do anything he once enjoyed, like farming, conversing with others (besides Gonzalo's mother, who speaks the same dialect), or even enjoying television shows. Instead, he's reduced to being "like a kid in diapers," stripped of his independence and unable to do anything for himself.

That Gonzalo specifically refers to the elderly Tío Juan as "a

kid in diapers" speaks to how alienating and undignified immigrating to a new country can be for many people, especially for adults and the elderly. While Gonzalo, a child, picked up English from playing on the playground and watching cartoons, Tío Juan doesn't have the neuroplasticity at his age to pick up a new language so easily. And because he doesn't speak the language and doesn't have anything to occupy his time, Tío Juan has no way to regain a sense of dignity and purpose in his new home—he can't build connections, get a job, or showcase his value or expertise. This is precisely why the garden becomes so important to Tío Juan, who used to be a farmer: it allows him to share his expertise and build community with others in ways that don't require spoken language (for instance, he *shows* Curtis how to stake his tomatoes rather than telling him how to do so).

❝ Watching him carefully sprinkling [the seeds] into the troughs he'd made, I realized that I didn't know anything about growing food and that he knew everything. I stared at his busy fingers, then his eyes. They were focused, not faraway or confused. He'd changed from a baby back into a man.

Related Characters: Gonzalo (speaker), Tío Juan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

On the day after Gonzalo and Tío Juan first discover that people are growing gardens in the vacant lot, they go back so that Tío Juan can start his own plot. This is a transformative moment for both Gonzalo and his great-uncle. Since he used to be a farmer before immigrating to the U.S., Tío Juan is now in his element in the garden as he plants seeds with precision, focus, and care. His attentiveness in this passage contrasts sharply with the usual "faraway or confused" look in his eyes. As the novel has already shown, Tío Juan's severe language barrier (he speaks a regional dialect that only Gonzalo's mother speaks) strips him of a sense of agency or independence, and it also blocks him from creating a purposeful, well-connected life for himself in Cleveland. That's why he usually looks "faraway or confused"—in the U.S., he's isolated, aimless, and illiterate. In the garden, though, Tío Juan doesn't have to use language. He finds a sense of purpose in planting the seeds correctly, and he's able to *show* his expertise and value to Gonzalo just with his actions, even though the two don't share a common language. Gardening, this passage suggests, is like a language in itself, common to all those who work with the seeds and soil.

That the garden helps Tío Juan transcend his language barrier hints at the way that the community garden will help break down all sorts of different barriers between people, not just language, as the novel continues to unfold. Indeed, the garden also helps break down the generational divide between Tío Juan and his grandnephew. Prior to watching his great-uncle in the garden, Gonzalo saw him as a "kid in diapers"—someone who's unable to do anything for themselves or fully understand the world around them. But Gonzalo's apathy and irritation towards his elderly great-uncle begins to transform into awe and respect in this passage as he watches his great-uncle plant seeds with expert precision. With uncharacteristic humility, Gonzalo realizes that he knows nothing about gardening, while his great-uncle is a wellspring of knowledge and experience. In the garden, Tío Juan isn't the old, helpless man whom Gonzalo has to babysit—he's a man with wisdom and experience who could impart his knowledge on Gonzalo. So while the garden has a transformative effect on Tío Juan—it changes him "from a baby back into a man"—it also transforms Gonzalo's view of himself and his great-uncle.

Chapter 5: Leona Quotes

❝ Six and a half hours later I found out the lot was owned by the city. But the people running Cleveland don't usually come down here, unless they take a wrong turn on the freeway. You can't measure the distance between my block and City Hall in miles.

Related Characters: Leona (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

After six and a half hours on the phone with the city, the county, the state, and the federal government, Leona discovers that the city of Cleveland owns the abandoned lot. Leona realizes that this could pose problems for her quest to get the garbage removed from the lot, which is slowly turning into a community garden. The neighborhood surrounding the vacant lot, she explains, isn't usually frequented by city officials—if they end up down in the neighborhood, it's because they made a mistake or got lost.

Leona doesn't expand on why this is the case, but other characters' descriptions of the neighborhood suggest that

it's a largely low-income, violent place, and that it's essentially a revolving door for immigrants, who only stay in the neighborhood until they can afford to move out. In general, then, the neighborhood is an unlikely and unpleasant destination for city officials, and they seem to go out of their way to avoid it. Leona senses, then, that the city government is therefore unlikely to care about the goings on in the neighborhood, let alone pour resources into fixing it up.

It's possible that systemic racism is at play here—that the city is prejudiced against its immigrant population and shuttles resources towards other areas of the city instead of caring for this community. There could also be financial reasons for the city's neglect of the neighborhood: from a financial standpoint, it perhaps makes more sense to city officials to clean up wealthier neighborhood where people (generally) pay more in taxes and can spend more to make the city funnel resources in their direction. It could be, too, that the immigrant neighborhood is just far enough away from the heart of the city that it's easy to forget about and neglect. Any number of these reasons could be why Leona says, "You can't measure the distance between my block and City Hall in miles." For whatever reason, Leona's neighborhood is basically not considered to be a part of Cleveland.

Chapter 6: Sam Quotes

❝ Sometimes I think I've actually had more effect on the world since I retired. What do I do? I smile at people, especially black people and the ones from different countries. I get 'em looking up at me instead of down or off to the side. I start up conversations in lines and on the bus and with cashiers. People see I'm friendly, no matter what they've heard about whites or Jews. If I'm lucky, I get 'em talking to each other. Sewing up the rips in the neighborhood.

Related Characters: Sam (speaker), Gonzalo

Related Themes:

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

Sam, who is 87, explains that since he retired from a life promoting global peace, he's refocused his efforts on trying to improve life in his own neighborhood. The way he goes about doing this drives home one of the novel's key points: that when people don't know their neighbors, animosity, prejudice, isolation, and divisiveness can proliferate. Even though knowing one's neighbors seems like a simple, unremarkable thing, Sam suggests that when people don't trust each other or know each other, it's in part because they don' talk to each other. So getting to know one's neighbors is actually a large step in cultivating a safer, more connected community and even bettering society more broadly.

When Sam mentions getting people to look up at him instead of look away, he may be talking about people like Gonzalo's father, who intentionally try to stick to the fringes of the community. Gonzalo mentioned that his father doesn't want people hearing him make mistakes in English, so he tries to only put himself in situations where he can speak Spanish. In other words, he's likely to be one of the people who looks "down or off to the side" when passing others on the street to avoid having to say hello and make his language barrier known. Indeed, the novel frequently underscores that one of the most isolating parts of being an immigrant is not speaking the dominant language of one's new country—Gonzalo's great-uncle Tío Juan is another key example of this. Even though Sam doesn't provide a clear solution for language barriers in this passage, he stresses that having a friendly attitude and putting in the effort to at least *try* to communicate with other people is what will help cultivate more of a community spirit.

Putting in the effort to talk to one's neighbors also helps people dismantle their preconceived notions about a certain people group and be more openminded. For instance, Sam says that he demonstrates his friendliness to other people, "no matter what they've heard about whites or Jews." The implication here is that some people living in Sam's neighborhood believe that white and Jewish people are unfriendly and, possibly, are even dangerous and racist. But Sam's kind, open attitude helps people work through their prejudices and learn to see other people not as a stereotype but as real, complex human beings. It's only through engaging with one's community and people who are dissimilar to them, the novel suggests, that people can dismantle their own prejudices and build a thriving community.

❝ The week after that someone built a board fence. Then came the first KEEP OUT sign. Then, the crowing achievement—barbed wire.

God, who made Eden, also wrecked the Tower of Babel, by dividing people. From Paradise, the garden was turning back into Cleveland.

Related Characters: Sam (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

As the community garden continues to grow, Sam begins to rethink his conception of the community garden as a sort of biblical Garden of Eden, or paradise, within Cleveland. The main issue, he suggests, is that people in the neighborhood don't trust each other, so they put up fences around their produce and make their divisions even more pronounced (and tangible) than they already are.

The Tower of Babel refers to a biblical story that addresses why people speak different languages. The story states that back in ancient times, when people all spoke the same language, a group of people in Babylon decided to build a tower tall enough to get them to Heaven. This great feat, they believed, would make a name for their city. But to God, humankind was overstepping their boundaries by reaching for Heaven. Accordingly, God introduced different languages among the people working on the tower, which caused confusion and ultimately led to the project being halted altogether. In time, these different languages also caused people to dive and scatter in different places.

To Sam, the community coming together to create the garden is much like the Babylonians working together to construct the Tower of Babel. But the fences and signs that begin to crop up begin to dismantle the community spirit that the garden is founded upon. When God introduced different languages among the workers building the tower, it led to discord and division; the barbed wire and fences that the gardeners introduce into the space similarly divide people.

However, in the biblical story, God creates other languages to give humans an important sense of boundaries, not to gratuitously stir up conflict and contempt. Unbeknownst to Sam, the fences in the garden are important boundaries too: people begin putting up fences because non-gardeners start stealing vegetables. Later in the novel, both Curtis and Florence have to deal with passersby with no connection to the garden stealing their produce. Thus, it's possible to see the fences as certainly helping individuals by protecting their harvests, but not as attempts to divide up the gardeners. Instead, the gardeners are trying to fence out the impersonal, disconnected world outside the garden.

Chapter 7: Virgil Quotes

❝ I couldn't believe it. I stomped outside. I could feel that eighteen-speed slipping away. I was used to seeing kids lying and making mistakes, but not grown-ups. I was mad at my father. Then I sort of felt sorry for him.

Related Characters: Virgil (speaker), Virgil's Father

Related Themes:

Page Number: 44

Explanation and Analysis

Chapter 7 focuses on Virgil (a rising sixth grader) and his father, a Haitian man who loves get-rich-quick schemes. Virgil's father decides that he will take a whopping six plots of the community garden to grow lettuce (which he'll then sell to restaurants), and just before this passage he tells his son that their baby lettuce isn't growing because lettuce doesn't grow well in the summer. As this passage shows, the lettuce's failure to grow doesn't just mean the failure of Virgil's father's plan to make a profit—it also means that Virgil's own hopes to profit are crushed (his dad promises him a fancy bike if their lettuce does well).

But Virgil is also grappling with a more profound loss: the loss of his unwavering trust in his father, or in all adults more generally. This process begins for Virgil when he watches his father blatantly lie to Miss Fleck about why they have six garden plots (Virgil's father claims they're for other family members, but Virgil informs the reader that those family members are dead, live in Haiti, or don't exist at all). This incident forces Virgil to come to terms with the fact that adults—even his own father—lie just like kids do. Virgil continues to humanize his father in this passage when he learns that their lettuce has failed to grow, and that his dad won't get rich—nor will he be able to buy Virgil the bike he wants. By this point in his chapter, then, Virgil has to grapple with the fact that adults have the capacity to lie, make mistakes, *and* outright fail. Several chapters in the novel speak to the way that the garden helps people humanize one another and/or see a fuller picture of one another, and Virgil and his father's character arc aligns with this. Virgil's experiences in the garden teach him important life lessons, even if they're not the lessons—or the rewards—that Virgil wanted or expected.

Chapter 8: Sae Young Quotes

❝ Vietnamese girl was working there, picking beautiful lima beans. A man and a woman on other side, talking over row of corn. Hear man say his wife give him hoe for birthday. I want to be with people again. Next day I go back and dig small garden. Nobody talk to me that day. But just to be near people, nice people, feel good, like next to fire in winter.

Related Characters: Sae Young (speaker), Kim

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

One day, about two years after she was robbed and beaten, Sae Young passes by the community garden. Seeing the idyllic garden filled with happy people makes Sae Young decide that she's ready to face her fear of being around people, which she developed after the assault. Sae Young's courageous decision to reintegrate into society speaks to the healing power of the garden. Indeed, Sae Young does go on to become comfortable with her fellow gardeners and is eventually able to hold conversations with them—something she's been too frightened to do for years. The garden, in this sense, gives Sae Young back her ability to be an engaged member of the community. And by extension, the connectivity that the garden gives her helps her heal emotionally from the trauma of her assault, years after her physical wounds healed.

It's significant that one of the things that makes Sae Young want to start a plot is seeing the Vietnamese girl—almost certainly Kim—picking her lima beans. Just like in the first chapter, the lima beans symbolize hope for the future. When Sae Young looks at the beans, she sees for the first time in years that it's possible for her to be around people again. They show her that she can hope to recover emotionally, reconnect with the community, and rebuild a satisfying life.

❝ That day I see man use my funnel. Then woman. Then many people. Feel very glad inside. Feel part of garden. Almost like family.

Related Characters: Sae Young (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

After Sam's watering competition results in using rain barrels to collect water from downspouts, Sae Young notices people struggling to fill their watering cans from the barrels. She purchases funnels for people to use to make this task easier.

In buying the funnels, Sae Young is making a small but significant financial contribution to the garden. Being willing to put one's own money toward things for the garden that will help the entire group of gardeners speaks to how important the garden has become to the community. Charting these shifts allows *Seedfolks* to show how communities arise—they begin when people start to care about each other and a common space, and then start contributing their own resources to keep the community thriving.

Because of these contributions, the garden community now feels like a family to Sae Young. This sense of belonging is important to all of the novel's characters, but it's particularly impactful for Sae Young. After losing her husband, leaving her family in Korea, and then spending the last several years too afraid of other people to leave her apartment, Sae Young has been without the support of a community or family for years. The garden has, in this sense, given Sae Young her life and her mental health back. She was a gregarious person growing up who loved spending time with friends and family. And thanks to the garden, she can be that person again now.

Chapter 9: Curtis Quotes

❝ I got into it. Every day something new. The first flower bud. Then those first yellow flowers. Then the tomatoes growing right behind 'em. This old man with no teeth and a straw hat showed me how to tie the plants up to stakes.

Related Characters: Curtis (speaker), Lateesha, Tío Juan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

As Curtis watches his tomatoes grow, he finds that the tomatoes aren't just a way for him to win Lateesha back. (His ex-girlfriend, Lateesha, loves tomatoes and wants to settle down in the countryside, so Curtis decides that

growing tomatoes in the community garden will show Lateesha that he cares for her.) As time goes on, Curtis finds that he loves the process of gardening and watching his plants grow—regardless of whether or not his efforts will resurrect his broken relationship. This supports the novel's insistence that gardening and the natural world have just as much to offer people as the city does.

The old man with the straw hat is likely Tío Juan, Gonzalo's great-uncle from an earlier chapter. The fact that he helps Gonzalo stake up his tomatoes suggests that over the last few months, Tío Juan has found dignity and purpose through his involvement in the community garden. It's especially significant that as Curtis talks about the old man helping him stake the tomatoes, he doesn't even mention that Tío Juan doesn't speak English. It doesn't matter that he and Curtis don't share a language, as Tío Juan can simply show Curtis what to do and how to do it. The novel underscores throughout that it's important for immigrants to find a sense of purpose and pride, and the garden helps Tío Juan do just that.

❝ You drop bread on the ground and birds come out of nowhere. Same with that garden. People just appeared, people you didn't know were there. Royce was like that.

Related Characters: Curtis (speaker), Tío Juan, Royce

Related Themes:

Page Number: 56

Explanation and Analysis

In the days after someone steals several of Curtis's tomatoes, he notes that Royce "[came] out of nowhere." Curtis finds Royce, a 15-year-old homeless Black boy, sleeping in the garden and provides him the supplies to sleep in the garden in exchange for protecting Curtis's tomatoes at night. Like many characters in the novel, Royce leads a difficult life but finds safety and belonging in the garden. As time goes on, Royce gives back to the garden, too, in return for the security and belonging it provides him with. In this chapter, Royce primarily gives back by guarding Curtis's tomatoes, but later chapters show Royce protecting the garden and the surrounding neighborhood, too.

Royce's character arc and the way the garden fits into his life is similar to that of Sae Young. Both characters lead a hard life and are grappling with a painful family situation: Royce comes from a home with domestic abuse; Sae Young lost her husband to a heart attack. Both characters have also witnessed or experienced physical violence, which left them isolated: the domestic abuse going on in his home led Royce to run away, while the violent assault Sae Young faced while working at her dry-cleaning shop led her to self-isolate for years out of fear of other people. In their own ways, both Royce and Sae Young "come out of nowhere" but are drawn to the garden because it looks like a safe oasis from the hardships they've experienced elsewhere in the city.

Chapter 10: Nora Quotes

❝ Gardening boring? Never! It has suspense, tragedy, startling developments—a soap opera growing out of the ground.

Related Characters: Nora (speaker), Mr. Myles

Related Themes:

Page Number: 63

Explanation and Analysis

As Nora explains that she and her elderly patient, Mr. Myles, became regular fixtures in the community garden, she insists that gardening is never boring. As she sees it, gardening is just as entertaining, if not more so, than any soap opera. With this comment, the novel is drawing a comparison between the natural world and the manmade world, or the garden and the city.

A soap opera is a product of the manmade world, and it's entertaining because it's specifically crafted to be that way: "It has suspense, tragedy, [and] startling developments" that are designed to keep the viewer engaged. But as Nora points out here, gardening (or the natural world), is inherently lively and engaging. Here in the garden, there are no carefully penned scripts or flashy costumes—nature has its own "suspense, tragedy, [and] startling developments," just like "a soap opera growing out of the ground."

Of course, in the city, in order to pay attention to nature's "soap opera," a person needs to have access to nature in the first place. This is why the community garden quickly becomes such an important part of the community. No one, the novel suggests, has the ability to grow a garden in apartment buildings without yards (Kim mentions this in the first chapter), and there's no mention in the novel of any nearby parks. Rather, the community garden on Gibb Street becomes seemingly the only place in the neighborhood

where people can connect with nature and watch its natural "soap opera" unfold.

A fact bobbed up from my memory, that the ancient Egyptians prescribed walking through a garden as a cure for the mad. It was a mind-altering drug we took daily.

Related Characters: Nora (speaker), Sae Young, Tío Juan, Mr. Myles

Related Themes:

Page Number: 64-65

Explanation and Analysis

Once he and Nora begin growing flowers in the community garden, Mr. Myles quickly perks up and starts to show interest in life again. This, Nora realizes, is proof that the Egyptians had it right—gardens and nature are healing, particularly for someone's mental health. While Mr. Myles wasn't "mad" in the sense of suffering psychiatric symptoms (which Nora seems to imply by her use of the word), he did appear depressed and withdrawn prior to coming to the garden. Indeed, Nora felt that he was starting to detach from life and resign himself to his death long before she thought he was actually ready to die. Gardening, then, has restored Mr. Myles's zest for life and his desire to live to see another day, if only to see his flowers bloom. Gardening was, in this sense, a "mind-altering drug" that has greatly improved his quality of life. By showing how gardening has improved Mr. Myles's outlook, as well as that of other characters like Sae Young and Tío Juan, *Seedfolks* makes the case that gardening can be an important and effective way to improve one's mental health.

Most were old. Many grew plants from their native lands—huge Chinese melons, ginger, cilantro, a green the Jamaicans call Callaloo, and many more. Pantomime was often required to get over language barriers. Yet we were all subject to the same weather and pests, the same neighborhood, and the same parental emotions toward our plants.

Related Characters: Nora (speaker), Mr. Myles

Related Themes:

Page Number: 63

Explanation and Analysis

When a sudden rainstorm hits one afternoon, Nora, Mr. Myles, and the other gardeners in the community garden all run for cover under a nearby shop awning. There, they finally introduce themselves and get to know each other.

Nora's descriptions of what people are growing reinforce the novel's assertion that for immigrants, gardening can be a way to connect with their home countries. By growing crops native to their home countries, immigrants can keep the cultural knowledge surrounding those plants alive. This includes how to grow them, any culturally significant stories or legends about them, and how to prepare them properly.

In this passage, Nora suggests that when people are willing to *try* to communicate (in whatever capacity they can), language barriers can seem less intimidating and impossible to break through. As this chapter shows, people can act out what they're growing or try out their English if they're still learning—this is reminiscent of when Tío Juan showed Curtis how to stake his tomatoes without using language. The garden gives people the common ground they need to connect and a safe space in which to do it, which points back to Sam's earlier mention that communities would be far more healthy and connected if only people knew their neighbors.

Despite the different plants that people grow and the different languages they speak, what ties the gardeners together is that they're all living and working in the same neighborhood. The neighborhood, like the garden, belongs to all of them—and so they all know its quirks and its goings on. And the community garden is just a small microcosm of the larger neighborhood. It gives them something to connect over, and shows them that despite all the things that might mark them as being different from each other, they have a lot in common, too. And if they're willing to try to communicate, they might find that these things are more important than the things that seemingly divide them.

Chapter 11: Maricela Quotes

She talked on, how plants don't run on electricity or clock time, how none of nature did. How nature ran on sunlight and rain and the seasons, and how I was a part of that system. The words sort of put me into a daze. My body was part of nature. I was related to bears, to dinosaurs, to plants, to things that were a million years old. It hit me that this system was much older and stronger than the other. She said how it wasn't some disgrace to be part of it. She said it was an honor. I stared at the squash plants. It was a world in there. It seemed like I could actually see the leaves and flowers growing and changing. I was in that weird daze. And for just that minute I stopped wishing my baby would die.

Related Characters: Maricela (speaker), Leona

Related Themes:

Page Number: 72

Explanation and Analysis

When a storm knocks out power in Cleveland one afternoon, Maricela sits with Leona to chat. Leona is seemingly the only person who doesn't vilify Maricela for being a pregnant teen, so Maricela trusts Leona and opens up to her about her fears and feelings about her pregnancy. This connection speaks to the power of the garden—for one thing, it seems unlikely that Leona and Maricela would've gotten to know each other anywhere else if the garden didn't exist. The garden, then, gives Maricela something invaluable: access to a person who doesn't resent or think less of her as she navigates a difficult and alienating season of life.

Because of this trust between them, Leona is able to help Maricela come to terms with her pregnancy. She essentially makes the case that Maricela has been made to feel bad about being pregnant only because *contemporary* American society looks down on women getting pregnant outside of the confines of marriage and when they're in their teenage years. But Leona suggests that if one looks at the cycle of life more broadly, getting pregnant is not abnormal or something to be ashamed of. Maricela may be carrying on the circle of life earlier than most, but Leona stresses that having a baby isn't something that makes her bad or lesser. Instead, it makes her part of a bigger natural system of birth and new life. The novel reinforces the power of nature when Maricela finds comfort in this. Where the modern built world only made Maricela feel small and like a victim, thinking of herself in this larger, natural context gives her the strength and the mental framing to look forward to the future with hope rather than despair.

Chapter 12: Amir Quotes

❝ In India we have many vast cities, just as in America. There, too, you are one among millions. But there at least you know your neighbors. Here, one cannot say that. The object in America is to avoid contact, to treat all as foes unless they're known to be friends. Here you have a million crabs living in a million crevices.

Related Characters: Amir (speaker), Wendell, Sae Young, Kim

Related Themes:

Page Number: 73

Explanation and Analysis

Amir explains the main difference between the cities of India and the United States: in India, people know their neighbors, while in the U.S., people are encouraged to treat others with suspicion. This is one of the novel's biggest critiques of city living. It's profoundly damaging and alienating, the novel suggests, to not feel like part of a community. *Seedfolks* proposes that it's healthier to live in a world where people can trust their neighbors and know that other people in one's neighborhood will look out for them.

It's especially telling that Amir frames this as the primary difference between India and the U.S. This suggests that the individualistic spirit in the U.S. might be one of the most harmful or difficult things that immigrants to the U.S. encounter. And readers can see, looking back at previous chapters, how narrators who were immigrants have internalized the idea that they should suspect their neighbors. Kim, for instance, was terrified of Wendell, even when he was innocently and kindly watering her beans, while Sae Young was afraid of all people and withdrew into isolation after suffering intense violence and trauma.

❝ In the summers in Delhi, so very hot, my sisters and I would lie upon it and try to press ourselves into its world. The garden's green was as soothing to the eye as the deep blue of that rug. I'm aware of color—I manage a fabric store. But the garden's greatest benefit, I feel, was not relief to the eyes, but to make the eyes see our neighbors.

Related Characters: Amir (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 74

Explanation and Analysis

As Amir reminisces about his childhood summers in Delhi, trying to melt into a beautiful Persian rug depicting a garden, he suggests that the community garden in Cleveland provides just as much relief—and in addition, it helps create community in the neighborhood. Amir makes it clear that the community garden improves the look of the neighborhood. This speaks to the novel's insistence that the natural world is superior to the built world of humans. It's

essential, the novel and Amir suggest, to have access to something as beautiful and natural as a garden, as this is one of the most effective ways to improve city life.

More important, though, is Amir's insistence that the garden made people see their neighbors for the first time. By gardening together, battling the same pests, and experiencing similar joys, the gardeners have realized that they're not all that different from each other. The gardeners all come from different parts of the world or the U.S.—indeed, no two narrators have come from the same country, and the ones who moved to Cleveland from another part of the U.S. have all come from different states. But these differences in origin don't actually mean much once, as Amir says, "the eyes see [one's] neighbors."

> When I heard her words, I realized how useless was all that I'd heard about Poles, how much richness it hid, like the worthless shell around an almond. I still do not know, or care, whether she cooks cabbage.

Related Characters: Amir (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 77

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Amir discusses how the garden has changed his perception of his neighbors, giving the example of how his preconceived notions about Polish people changed after speaking with a Polish woman whose plot is next to his. When he asks her why she doesn't thin her carrots, she explains that it the act of thinning out her harvest makes her think of the concentration camp where she spent several of her childhood years. Hearing about her experiences in the concentration camp makes Amir realizes how silly it is that the only thing he knows (or thought he knew) about Polish people is that they cook a lot of cabbage. Buying into the stereotype that Polish people cook cabbage, he suggests, is a way to fool oneself into thinking that a person knows all there is to know about Polish people. Clearly, though, a person's relationship to cabbage says almost nothing about who they are or where they come from. Clinging to this stereotype didn't help Amir get to know the Polish woman—talking to her and hearing about her personal experiences in the Holocaust did. In order to get to know someone, in other words, the story suggests that it's important to talk to them, ask questions, and listen openly to their answers—only then will their story start to emerge.

> She'd gotten quite angry and called me—despite her own accent—a dirty foreigner. Now that we were so friendly with each other I dared to remind her of this. Her eyes became huge. She apologized to me over and over again. She kept saying, "Back then, I didn't know it was *you*..."

Related Characters: Amir (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 81

Explanation and Analysis

At the impromptu harvest party early in the fall, Amir gently confronts an Italian woman who called him a "dirty foreigner" a year before. The earlier interaction illuminates one of the most pressing issues that immigrants face—that of bigotry and racism, sometimes even from other immigrants. The novel underscores that it's impossible for immigrants to feel at home in their new country when they face abuse like this at any time and from anyone.

The way to remedy this, the novel suggests, is by making people real to each other. This points back to Leona's goal when she was making phone calls to the city government to get the garbage removed from the vacant lot. She knew she needed to "make herself real" to the city officials who could help her—and as a voice on the other end of the phone, it was impossible for Leona to make herself real to them. In the same vein, Amir implies that last year, before the community garden was established, he and this Italian woman weren't real to each other. Amir was just an Indian fabric merchant, not Amir the gardener, and the Italian woman was just an angry, racist Italian woman. But through the garden, Amir and this woman both know more about each other, and they see each other as peers and perhaps even as friends. Like Sam suggested earlier in the novel, getting to know one's neighbors is instrumental in dismantling prejudice and cultivating community.

Chapter 13: Florence Quotes

> I think of them when I see any of the people who started the garden on Gibb Street. They're seedfolks too. I'm talking about that first year, before there were spigots and hoses, and the toolshed, and new soil. And before the landlords started charging more for apartments that look on the garden.

Related Characters: Florence (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 83

Explanation and Analysis

While explaining to the reader the origin of the word "seedfolks," Florence reveals that she's telling her story from at least a year in the future. As such, she gives some insight into how the garden changes and develops in the year after Amir ends the story of the garden's first summer. The new things that Florence mentions imply that at some point, the city of Cleveland got involved in the community garden. The city would've had to okay installing water spigots, and the other new items in the garden suggest that they formally okayed the garden's existence. But alongside these positive changes and the increase in resources, the garden has created a new set of issues, too. For instance, Florence points out that landlords have started charging more for the apartments with garden views. Though this suggests that the garden is the pride of the community, it also means that the primarily low-income immigrants who started the garden and lived directly around it might not be able to afford their apartments anymore.

> It was a little Oriental girl, with a trowel and a plastic bag of lima beans. I didn't recognize her. It didn't matter. I felt as happy inside as if I'd just seen the first swallow of spring. Then I looked up. There was the man in the rocker.
>
> We waved and waved to each other.

Related Characters: Florence (speaker), Kim

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 87

Explanation and Analysis

When the first winter rolls around at the community garden, Florence spends the entire season watching the garden and waiting, hoping that people will still be interested in gardening once spring comes. And in this moment, she finds that people are still interested—the little girl is almost certainly Kim, planting lima beans once again just as she did in the novel's opening chapter.

Although the novel has underscored how the garden has brought dissimilar people together, the passage hints that prejudice and stereotypes haven't disappeared in the neighborhood since the harvest party. In contemporary times, referring to a person as "Oriental" is considered rude, or a slur. The term suggests that there's little difference between people who come from any number of Asian countries, and the fact that Florence uses it suggests that she's perhaps not as open and welcoming as she thinks.

Still, Kim's lima beans continue to represent hope for the future. Seeing her out there planting them shows Florence that other people feel the same way she does, and that they care about keeping the garden going for years to come. In turn, seeing Kim planting her seeds gives Florence the opportunity to connect with the "watcher" community once again. As the garden starts to come alive in the spring, people rediscover their connections to each other and their love of gardening.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

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

CHAPTER 1: KIM

Nine-year-old Kim stands in front of the family altar. It's early morning, and no one else is awake yet. She stares at the photograph of her father, hoping his eyes might move and notice her. Yesterday was the anniversary of his death, and everyone cried—though Kim cried for different reasons than her mother and older sisters.

This passage introduces Kim and one of her central concerns: to connect with her deceased father. It also shows that Kim is somehow different from her mother and sisters in how she grieves for her father, which may explain why she's the only one awake and at his altar.

Quietly, Kim sneaks to the kitchen, pulls out a spoon and a handful of dried **lima beans**, and fills a thermos with water. Then she heads down to the empty street. It's Sunday in early April, and a freezing wind blows. Coming from Vietnam, Kim isn't used to weather like this. But here, in Cleveland, this weather is normal for spring.

This passage hints at the idea that life in the U.S. can be lonely and alienating for an immigrant. Cleveland's weather is extremely different from what Kim is used to, and this perhaps makes the city feel less welcoming. The idea that this frigid weather is normal for Cleveland suggests that Kim's new home might be cold and unfeeling on an emotional and social level. The city is not going to change to accommodate her—she has to change and adapt.

Kim crosses to the vacant lot and looks around. No one else is there. She's never wanted to venture near the lot before, but she steps around the garbage strewn about the lot and tells herself to be brave when she sees rats. When she comes upon an old refrigerator that hides her from view of the sidewalk, Kim stops. She digs six holes in the cold, hard ground with her spoon and thinks of her father. Her mother and sisters remember him, but Kim doesn't. She was born eight months after he died—so he doesn't remember *her* either. Kim wonders if her father's spirit even knows who she is.

It's clear that whatever Kim is doing in the vacant lot, it requires great courage. The vacant lot seems dangerous and disgusting, in addition to cold this time of year. In other words, it doesn't seem like the kind of place a young girl like Kim should be, which raises questions about what she's doing and why it's so important. Given that she thinks of her father as she digs in the lot, it's clear that it has to do with him—and possibly, finding a way to connect with her father's spirit.

Kim's father had been a farmer in Vietnam. In Cleveland, Kim's apartment doesn't have a yard, but she knows her father will see her in the vacant lot. He'll watch her beans grow and be pleased to see her be patient and work hard. Growing **lima beans** will show him that she's his daughter. Kim places a bean in each hole, covers them with soil, and waters them. She vows that the beans will grow and thrive.

Revealing that Kim is planting beans to make her father proud is the book's first suggestion that gardening can be a way to connect with deceased family members or family traditions, particularly if gardening was important to one's family. Kim recognizes that because she lives in an urban environment, she's going to have to be resourceful when it comes to finding a place to plant.

CHAPTER 2: ANA

Ana loves to sit and look out the window. It means she doesn't need a TV, as from her window she can see 48 apartment windows and a sliver of Lake Erie. From this window, she's seen history. She moved here in 1919 at age four and watched horse-drawn fruit carts and coal wagons outside. Back then, it was mostly Romanians who lived on Gibb Street. But this is a working-class neighborhood and people only stay until they have enough money to leave. After the Romanians came the Slovaks, Italians, and Black families.

Insisting that she doesn't need a TV because she has so much to look at out her window suggests that the trappings of the modern world, such as TV, aren't as necessary as one might think. Indeed, if one is only willing to look outside, there's a whole world of entertainment available. Ana also gives readers a brief history of immigration in Cleveland. Her history lesson paints things in broad strokes, but it seems clear that the neighborhood encompassing Gibb Street is constantly changing as immigrants come and then leave.

Gibb Street eventually became the line that divided the Black part of town from the white part. Ana lived across town for 18 years and then moved back to take care of her parents—and at that point, the line between Black and white moved too. The white people left first, but once the factories closed, then *everyone* left. Buildings sat empty, men sat drinking, and people killed each other.

Previously, Ana didn't talk about the changing neighborhood as though it was necessarily a bad thing—but here, her story takes a turn for the worse. She suggests that while the constant revolving door of immigrants may have made for a generally unstable community, losing economic opportunity in the form of the factories has turned the neighborhood into a dangerous place. This suggests that Kim was right to be nervous about being in the lot—she might be at risk of experiencing violence out on her own.

Now, Ana sees families from Mexico, Cambodia, and other countries she knows nothing about. There are new languages in the neighborhood, but the one thing that doesn't change is that people still leave as soon as they can. Ana is the only one who stays. She still stares out the same window she did as a young girl.

Ana's tone here suggests that, as the only person who hasn't left the neighborhood, she feels left behind. Insisting that she knows nothing about the current immigrants on the street also implies that the neighborhood isn't tight-knit in the present. It's not the kind of neighborhood where people share stories about themselves and their home countries.

This spring, Ana sees something odd. Down in the abandoned lot next to her building, she sees a little girl with black hair digging in the dirt behind a refrigerator. The girl looks around suspiciously, and it only takes Ana a moment to realize the girl is burying something. Though Ana has no children of her own, she's certain that this girl is involved in something illegal. Ana has spent the last 20 years as a typist for the Parole department, so she's sure the girl has just buried drugs, money, or a gun.

The little girl is Kim, planting her lima beans by the refrigerator. Readers know that Kim looks around with suspicion because she's afraid to be in the lot—but to Ana, who seems generally untrusting of young people, this seems to indicate Kim is doing something illegal. Ana implies that illicit activity isn't unusual in this neighborhood, even for a girl of nine. But it's also worth keeping in mind that in her work for the police department, Ana would've only been exposed to the stories of kids who were getting in trouble. Because of her experience, her perspective may be skewed.

Ana considers calling the police, but she spends the next few mornings watching the girl instead. It rains a few days in a row and Ana doesn't see the girl at all. When the weather warms, Ana sees her several times in the mornings on her way to school, crouching down with her back to Ana's window. Ana's curiosity feels like a fever.

It's telling that Ana's first thought is to call the police, as it emphasizes that Ana deeply distrusts her neighbors. While Ana seems perplexed as to why Kim comes to the vacant lot on some days and not others, readers may pick up on the fact that Kim is coming to water her plants on days when it doesn't rain.

One morning, the girl looks around and glances right into Ana's window. Ana pulls back, hoping the girl didn't see her. If the girl saw her, the girl will definitely dig up her treasure and move it. Ana vows to dig it up first, so she waits an hour after the girl leaves. Then she takes a butter knife and hobbles to the girl's spot in the vacant lot. Ana hacks in the dirt with her butter knife, but only finds some big white **beans**.

Choosing to dig up Kim's treasure before Kim can move it again emphasizes that Ana is distrusting of her neighbors, but that she has reason to believe that something illicit is going on. It also seems that Ana genuinely wants to protect the neighborhood from nefarious activities—given that she's been in the neighborhood for so long, she perhaps feels a sense of protectiveness over it.

Suddenly, Ana realizes what's going on and what she's done. Two of the **beans** have roots and she knows she's harmed them. It feels like she's read the girl's secret diary and accidentally ripped out a page. Ana carefully replants the beans. The next morning, the girl is back and Ana can see her water beans. That afternoon, Ana buys binoculars.

At this point, Ana has to confront that she's made a mistake: Kim is just growing vegetables, not hiding drugs or weapons. To Ana, finding the beans feels even more intimate than discovering something illegal—and it makes Kim seem human and sympathetic in Ana's eyes. This is perhaps why Ana then buys binoculars. She seems to crave human connection, and watching Kim is a way to satisfy that longing.

CHAPTER 3: WENDELL

Wendell doesn't receive many phone calls, which is fine by him. Phone calls are how he learned that his son was shot and that his wife died in a car wreck, so every time the phone rings, he jumps a bit inside. So it's awful when Ana calls and rouses Wendell from a deep sleep. She tells him to get upstairs quickly; Wendell lives on the ground floor of the building and looks out for Ana. They're the only white people left in the building.

Wendell has clearly had a rough life, losing both his wife and his son. In the face of these losses, Wendell seems to be withdrawing instead of reaching out—the way he describes looking out for Ana seems more obligatory than desirable, and he hates receiving phone calls. The aside that he and Ana are the only white people in their building now reinforces the novel's earlier assertion that this is a neighborhood in flux and is primarily made up of immigrants.

Wendell can tell this is serious and he hopes Ana won't be dead when he arrives. But when he gets to her apartment, she drags him to the window and shouts that the plants are dying. She gives Wendell her binoculars and points down to the lot. Wendell is livid, but he studies the plants through the binoculars and listens to Ana's story about the Chinese girl.

Given his past experiences with phone calls informing him of tragedy, it's perhaps not surprising that Wendell assumes he's going to encounter the worst in Ana's apartment after she calls. But his anger when this doesn't happen suggests that Wendell doesn't know what to do when the worst doesn't come to pass. In other words, he's thrown off when Ana simply wants to involve him in what's going on down in the lot. This is similar to how Ana's experience as a typist for the police department made her immediately assume the worst of Kim—that she was hiding drugs or a weapon—even though the situation was completely innocent. Both Wendell and Ana, then, assume the worst of people because of their lived experience, not because they're inherently judgmental people.

The four tiny plants are wilted. Wendell, who grew up on a farm in Kentucky, recognizes that they're **beans** of some sort. But the girl planted the beans too early, he says, so it's lucky the seeds even sprouted. Ana notes that regardless, the beans *did* sprout—and now it's up to them to save the beans. It's May and hot, and Ana acts like the beans are hers. Ana explains that the girl hasn't been to water the beans in four days and Ana's twisted her ankle, so she points to a pitcher and tells Wendell to water the beans.

The aside that Wendell grew up on a farm in Kentucky shows that in addition to international immigrants, Cleveland is also home to people who hail from more rural areas of the U.S. For Wendell, growing up on a farm means that he's able to identify Kim's plants as beans and recognize that Kim didn't plant them at the correct time. When Ana insists that they have to save the beans since they sprouted anyway, she suggests that it must be a community effort to make sure these hopeful little plants don't just disappear. Wherever a person sees hope, the novel suggests, it's their duty to nurture it. It's likely, too, that Ana feels guilty for digging up Kim's beans previously and thinks she is the one who stunted the plants' growth.

Wendell is a school janitor and spends his entire week being bossed around, so he gives Ana a hard look and fills the pitcher slowly. Down in the lot, he finds the girl's plants. **Beans** won't grow unless they're planted in hot weather, but these ones survived the cold thanks to the nearby refrigerator. It bounced sunlight back to the soil and heated it up.

Wendell doesn't seem to agree that he needs to nurture hopeful things when he sees them; he sees Ana's request as just an extension of a job and a life he seems to dislike. But importantly, Wendell nevertheless agrees to help Ana. She is, at this point, all the community Wendell seems to have left, and he seems to understand that it's important to keep their relationship alive.

Wendell feels the dirt and studies the plants. They're definitely **beans** with their spade-shaped leaves. He scrapes the dirt into a ring around the first plant to hold his water and any rain, and then pours water over it slowly. Then, he hears something behind him. The girl is there with her own jar of water. She looks terrified. Wendell gives her a smile and mimes that he's watering her plants. The girl's eyes get big, so Wendell stands up slowly and backs away, still smiling.

It's not surprising that Kim is terrified to see Wendell in the vacant lot, given what she and Ana have said about their neighborhood being dangerous. But Wendell goes out of his way to show Kim that he means no harm—and indeed, is trying to help her. Through this interaction, both Wendell and Kim get a chance to learn of the other's existence and share in the hope that the beans will grow and thrive. This humanizes both of them in the other's eyes.

That evening, Wendell goes back to check on the **beans**. They look better now, and the girl made circles of dirt around the other plants like he did. Words from the Bible appear in Wendell's head: "And a little child shall lead them." He can't figure out why, but then he knows. He can't change lots of things about his life, he can't bring back the dead, and he can't make the world kind. But Wendell *can* change a small patch of earth. He decides it's better to focus on that than lament all the things he can't change. The little girl showed him that.

It's significant that Kim copied Wendell's method of creating the dirt ring around her beans. She's willing to learn and recognizes that Wendell has something to teach. When he realizes this, Wendell experiences a revelation. It isn't useful, he decides, to be upset about all the things wrong in the world. It's better to dedicate himself to growing something and helping others grow their own plants.


Wendell looks around at the three buildings that surround the lot. He finds a spot that's mostly sunny, drags away the garbage, and picks up the big pieces of glass. On Monday, he brings a shovel home from work.

Wendell's task of moving garbage and picking up glass emphasizes that the lot—and the neighborhood more broadly—is dangerous and neglected. But through hard work and the desire to garden, it's possible to improve the lot, in addition to the people and the neighborhood around it.

CHAPTER 4: GONZALO

Gonzalo thinks that the older a person is, the younger they get when they move to the U.S. When Gonzalo and his father moved here from Guatemala, it only took Gonzalo two years to learn English. He learned on the playground and from cartoons. But Gonzalo's father worked in a kitchen with Mexican and Salvadoran men and only shopped at the bodega down the way. He made Gonzalo talk to the landlady and do the shopping at big stores, as he didn't want people to hear his mistakes. In other words, Gonzalo's father got younger, while Gonzalo got older.

Gonzalo proposes that the most difficult thing about being an immigrant, especially as an adult, is not knowing the dominant language in one's new country. Though Gonzalo seems to think less of his father for not learning English, it's worth considering that it's much easier for kids to pick up new languages than it is for adults, because children have more neuroplasticity than adults do. And since Gonzalo attends school that's likely taught in English, he had no choice but to learn. Adults, Gonzalo shows, can sometimes avoid situations where they have to speak a new language. And while it may make immigrants feel more at home to speak their native language in a new country, sometimes clinging solely to one's native language, as Gonzalo's father does here, prevents adults from functioning totally independently in their new countries.

Then, Gonzalo's little brothers, his mother, and his mother's uncle, Tío Juan, joined them. Tío Juan was the oldest man in his pueblo—but in the United States, he became a baby. He used to be a farmer, but there's no farm work in Cleveland. He can't even sit in the plaza and talk , since there are no plazas in Cleveland, and sitting outside puts someone at risk of getting shot by gangsters. So now Tío Juan spends his days wandering around the apartment talking to himself.

Some of Tío Juan's difficulties in Cleveland may come from being disconnected from nature, in addition to not speaking English. This deprives Tío Juan of his dignity; he's stripped of his accolades as a farmer and old wise man and effectively becomes an infant in the United States.


One morning, Tío Juan wanders outside. Gonzalo's mother panics, since Tío Juan only speaks "an Indian language" and doesn't even speak Spanish. Gonzalo finds him in front of the beauty parlor, staring inside. Since this incident, Gonzalo has been tasked with babysitting his great-uncle after school.

Tío Juan is at even more of a disadvantage than Gonzalo's father, given that he speaks an Indigenous language rather than Spanish, which some others in the community speak. This makes Tío Juan's situation even more bleak—he may be the only person in Cleveland who speaks this language, so he may be entirely isolated from the world around him.

One afternoon, as Gonzalo is "getting smart on" *The Brady Bunch*, he looks up. Tío Juan is gone. Gonzalo can't find him anywhere in the apartment building, and he's not at the bodega or the pawnshop. Finally, Gonzalo spots his great-uncle's white straw hat in front of a vacant lot. Tío Juan is gesturing to a man with a shovel.

Insisting that he's "getting smart on" The Brady Bunch *shows that Gonzalo thinks of TV as informative, and it points back to how he learned English by watching cartoons when he first arrived in the U.S. as a younger boy. Although he's implied to be a teenager at this point, it's possible that Gonzalo still looks to TV as a way to continue to absorb himself in the English language and American culture—especially since* The Brady Bunch *is such a quintessentially American show. There is also a contrast in this passage between Gonzalo, who's indoors and glued in front of the TV alone, and Tío Juan, who is outdoors trying to connect with other people. This moment begins to hint that the lot—which seems to be slowly tuning into a garden—will be instrumental in bringing people together and connecting them with nature.*

Gonzalo tries to lead Tío Juan home, but Tío Juan pulls Gonzalo into the lot. Gonzalo recognizes the other man as the janitor at his old school. The janitor has a small garden and Tío Juan is trying to tell him something. But the janitor can't understand, so he goes back to digging. Gonzalo leads his great-uncle back home.

Recognizing the man as a school janitor makes it clear that this man is Wendell from the previous chapter. Despite Tío Juan's best attempts at communicating, Wendell brushes him off because of the steep language barrier between them. This drives home how profoundly alienating it is to not speak the dominant language in a country. Given that Tío Juan used to be a farmer and Wendell grew up on a farm, readers can intuit that the men would have lots to talk about and teach one another. However, Tío Juan's language barrier prevents the men from connecting, which continues to deprive him of dignity and purpose and keeps both men isolated.

At dinner that night, Tío Juan tells Gonzalo's mother about his afternoon (she's the only one who speaks his language). The next afternoon, she asks Gonzalo to take Tío Juan back to the vacant lot. The old man studies the sun and then studies the soil—he even tastes it. Then, he chooses a spot near the sidewalk to plant the seeds his daughter bought for him. Gonzalo clears the trash away while Tío Juan digs. Gonzalo privately wishes they were further from the street, as he doesn't want anyone to see him.

The mention that Gonzalo's mother speaks the same Indigenous language as her uncle indicates that Tío Juan isn't entirely isolated, but his opportunities to communicate and connect with others are nevertheless extremely limited. Gonzalo's mother seems to recognize that in order to help Tío Juan feel at home in Cleveland, it's important to encourage him in the garden, because it will help him connect to his past as a farmer, show his expertise, and find a sense of purpose.

Tío Juan shows Gonzalo how to space the rows and plant the seeds at the right depth. Tío Juan can't read the text on the seed packs, but he knows how to plant the seeds regardless. When Tío Juan pours seeds into his hand, he smiles at the seeds like he would at an old friend. As Gonzalo watches his great-uncle plant the seeds, he realizes he doesn't know anything about growing food, while Tío Juan knows everything. He also notices that Tío Juan's eyes are focused, not confused—suddenly, he's changed back into a man.

In this moment, when Gonzalo recognizes that his great-uncle has a wealth of experience about planting crops, Tío Juan suddenly starts to look like a real person and not just a baby to look after. This moment emphasizes that gardening can be a way for people and families to connect across language barriers and generational divides. And for people like Tío Juan, who love gardening and are knowledgeable about it, gardening can also be empowering.

CHAPTER 5: LEONA

Leona's Granny didn't believe in doctors, even if the doctor happened to be Black. Leona grew up in Granny's house in Atlanta. Every morning, Granny had a cup of goldenrod tea with a nutmeg in it—the only medicine she'd ever need. Granny's doctors all told her that the tea would kill her, but every doctor died young. Leona accompanied Granny to the doctors' funerals, where Granny always placed goldenrod on the graves. Granny, who lived to age 99, could recite the names of all the doctors she outlived.

Leona's memories of Granny's tense relationships with her doctors elaborate on the novel's insistence that nature and the built human environment are opposites. On one side are people like Granny, who immerse themselves as nature and see it as healing. On the other side in this instance are medical doctors, who discount natural remedies as nonsense—but who nevertheless die long before a person who relies on herbal remedies. Nature, the novel suggests, is far superior to the built human world.

Leona thinks about Granny one day as she walks home from the grocery store. When she comes to the vacant lot, she sees three people in it. She expects that they're searching for money in the lot, so she's surprised to see that they have shovels and are cultivating gardens. Leona decides to plant a patch of goldenrod.

Just as Kim planted her beans to connect with her deceased father, hoping to get his spirit to notice her, Leona decides to plant goldenrod to honor her grandmother. This parallelism reinforces the idea that gardening can be a way to connect with one's family members and honor their interests.

There's another man watching from the sidewalk and a little girl looking down at the lot from a window. Leona figures that there are lots of people who'd like to grow a garden, just like her. Looking around at all the trash littered throughout the lot, she wonders why anyone refers to the lot as "vacant" when there are waist-high piles of garbage everywhere. Some of it comes from the neighborhood, but a lot of it comes from people outside of the neighborhood who don't want to pay to take things to the dump. They think that the people in this neighborhood won't mind a bit more junk or dangerous chemicals in their midst. Ironically, City Hall won't pick up trash over here, but this area can get trash delivered to it.

Leona recognizes that a garden in this lot might also be capable of connecting unrelated people in the community. The mention that people dump trash here thinking that the residents won't mind, and that the city won't pick up trash in the neighborhood, speaks to the possibility that Cleveland doesn't value its immigrant communities very much.

Leona wrinkles her nose at the smell of garbage and studies the gardeners. She knows that nobody will want to join them until the garbage is gone, and she knows this is a job for the phone, not a wheelbarrow. Leona has two kids who go to a school with "more guns than books," so she's experienced at picking up the phone to complain to officials about things. The next morning, a Monday, Leona stretches out on her bed. She knows she'll have to say the same thing to several dozen people, and she might as well be comfortable.

The main thing blocking the community garden from really taking off is the city government, which won't allocate resources for the garbage to be removed in the neighborhood. The book also seems to imply that such an overabundance of garbage is inherent to city life. But Leona nevertheless shows that it's possible to push back on the city and improve her neighborhood.

Leona starts dialing. Her goal in making all of these calls is to get in contact with the person that will make the garbage disappear. After spending six and a half hours making calls to the city, the county, the state, and the federal government, Leona learns that the city of Cleveland owns the lot. But Cleveland government officials don't come down to this area unless they're lost—"You can't measure the distance between [Leona's] block and City Hall in miles."

Leona confirms that the city of Cleveland doesn't really care about the neighborhood around Gibb Street. Given that it's an immigrant neighborhood, the government's indifference (or outright distaste) may have to do with internalized racism—especially since not taking care of this neighborhood means treating the immigrant residents like second-class citizens. In this way, the neighborhood is almost not even part of Cleveland, hence Leona's insistence that it's impossible to measure the distance in miles between her block and City Hall.

Leona continues making phone calls the next day. Each person, organization, or agency tells her to call someone else, who then tells her to call yet another agency. These people are "trained to be slippery as snakes," and they seem to always be on their lunch break. Nobody returns messages, and Leona spends hours on hold. On the third day, Leona realizes that when she makes these phone calls, she's just a voice or a call waiting. She needs to make herself real to these people.

This passage gives readers insight into why the neighborhood's garbage problem hasn't been solved yet. Leona dedicates several days to this task, but even then, it's nearly impossible for her to find the right person to talk to, and it's also difficult to get the people on the other line to care about the problem or take her seriously. In addition, readers may recall that a lot of residents in this neighborhood don't speak English and/or intend to move out of the neighborhood as soon as it's financially viable, so taking on this project of advocating for their neighborhood may seem impossible or like a waste of time and energy.

At this point, instead of making more phone calls, Leona takes the bus downtown to the Public Health Department. She tells the pretty receptionist about the trash, and the receptionist tells Leona to sit and wait with everyone else. Leona does as she's told, but she also opens the bag of garbage she picked up from the lot before she came. The smell is horrific. Everyone notices it, and they call Leona in for a meeting almost immediately. Leona is real to them now—she's no longer just a voice on the phone—but she still brings the bag with her into the meeting to make the situation even more real.

Here, Leona makes the case that it's easy to ignore a problem if it doesn't seem real. When she was just a voice on the phone—or worse, spending hours on hold—Leona struggled to get city officials to realize how real and pressing the garbage problem is. But by bringing the bag of smelly garbage to the meeting, Leona forces the officials in the office to understand that there are people living with the stench of garbage day in and day out—and if it's so awful in this office, it must be even worse in the neighborhood.

CHAPTER 6: SAM

Sam crosses the street to join a group of people who are standing around and watching something. An inmate crew is clearing garbage from the vacant lot. The woman next to Sam says that the land is for anyone who wants to grow a garden, which Sam finds unbelievable. Without thinking, he says, "paradise." The woman gives Sam an odd look. He looks around at the three buildings surrounding the lot and a garden coming up beautifully next to the sidewalk. Sam tells the woman that the word *paradise* comes from a Persian word and means "walled park." This time, the woman smiles at Sam and he smiles back.

It seems like a miracle to Sam that the city has finally agreed to clear the garbage in the vacant lot. It's significant that Sam explains the etymology of the word paradise, *noting that the word in its original form referred to a garden or a park of sorts. This reiterates the novel's insistence that nature, and gardens in particular, are superior to the city—gardens are a form of paradise.*

Just like fishermen mend rips in their nets, Sam tries to "patch up" people. He spent 36 years working with groups that promoted world government and pacifism. Sam hasn't given up now that he's retired, but he's refocused his attentions to his neighborhood. Sometimes it seems like he's been able to do more good since retiring. Most of what he does is smile at people, especially Black people and those from other countries. He gets people to look up at him and not down. Sam starts conversations everywhere to get people to see that he's friendly, no matter what they might have heard about white people or Jews. Ideally, he gets people to talk to each other.

Here, Sam seems to imply that if people ignore each other in small ways—like not saying hello when they pass one another on the street—this can lead them to ignore each other's humanity, which is a serious problem. When he notes that he's had more success pouring out his efforts in his neighborhood than he did on a global scale, Sam suggests that it's perhaps more effective to work at the community level. Especially given who he targets most with his kindness, Sam shows that he's doing his best to make Cleveland a more welcoming place for immigrants—and in this small but significant way, he works to counteract the city's neglect.

Sam hasn't had a garden since he was a kid, but he wants one now. He's 78 and too old to dig, so he hires a Puerto Rican teen to dig up the soil for him. The teenager does a great job and works the soil until it's silky. In addition to paying him, Sam offers the teen a row of his own to cultivate. The teen wants to grow marijuana to sell, but Sam talks him into growing pumpkins instead. Selling pumpkins will earn him some money at Halloween and keep him out of jail.

Being too old to do the manual labor involved in gardening means that Sam has to ask for help from others in the community. This actually helps everyone involved: Sam gets his garden, this Puerto Rican teenager gets to make money and a mentor in Sam, and everyone gets to know their neighbors a little bit better.

Sam and the teenager chat as they plant their seeds. The teen is new to the neighborhood. There are a few other people working in the cool evening while a robin sings. To Sam, it seems like they're in Paradise, or a small Garden of Eden. In the Bible, there's a river in Eden. But here, there's no way to get water to the lot. People haul their water in milk jugs and soda containers all through June. June is a dry month; there are only four days of rain. Sam hires a third-grader with a wagon to haul his water, and later, Sam starts a contest.

Here, Sam revisits the idea that the community garden is a paradise. This time, he takes a biblical angle by suggesting that the community garden is specifically akin to the Garden of Eden. According to the Book of Genesis, God created a perfect, lush, paradisial garden for the first humans, Adam and Eve, to dwell in. Adam and Eve lived here in perfect harmony until they sinned (eating forbidden fruit), at which point they were cast out from Eden. This biblical reference thus suggests that Sam sees the garden as having the potential to be a perfect place where there is harmony among the gardeners. Of course, the garden isn't literally perfect, or at least not yet—the extreme difficulty in lugging water to the lot is one example of this.

Word soon spreads about the lot, and at this point, there are plenty of available plots. Newcomers take spots next to their friends or family members. One Saturday, when the garden is full, Sam takes a moment to look around. He notices that garden is divided into quadrants with Black people together in one corner, white people in another, and Central American and Asian people in the back. It's a copy of the neighborhood. Sam doesn't think he should be surprised at this arrangement, but he is. The groups keep to themselves, speaking their own languages and growing their own special crops.

The community garden may provide a place where all these different people come together and work alongside each other, but this doesn't mean that there aren't still factions and divisions. This saddens Sam, as he realizes that the garden isn't doing a good job of healing the divisions in the neighborhood. On another note, this passage implicitly celebrates the garden for giving immigrants a place to grow their "special crops" from their home countries and cultures. People who may feel homesick or unwelcome in the U.S.—like Tío Juan—can connect with home by planting traditional vegetables.

Garbage is another issue. A few people who live in the surrounding buildings still use the lot as a trash can, emptying ashtrays out of their windows and tossing out other trash, too. One day, someone throws a bottle into the garden. A man throws it back into the window it came out of—and the person inside the apartment hurls five more bottles out. Sam is sure that gunshots will come out of the window next, but fortunately, the people in the apartment just shout at the man in the garden.

Sam's fear of gunshots further validates Kim and Ana's fears in previous chapters, reinforcing how violent and dangerous this neighborhood can be. This passage also emphasizes that change is slow to take root in the neighborhood. Even though the garden is now flourishing, not everyone immediately respects it as a sacred space worth nurturing and protecting.

The "crazy homeless man" who used to sleep on a couch in the lot is also upset that it's not a dump anymore. When he sees that the couch is gone, he starts ripping out plants in anger. People have to call the police. After this, people start worrying about strangers ruining their gardens. A man puts chicken wire around his plot, while another person builds a fence. Finally, someone puts up barbed wire. Sam muses that God may have made Eden, but he also destroyed the Tower of Babel by dividing people. The garden was once Paradise, but now it's becoming Cleveland again.

The Tower of Babel is another biblical reference. The Book of Genesis recounts that in ancient days, all of humankind spoke the same language. During this time, the Babylonians sought to make a name for their city by building a tower that could reach Heaven: the Tower of Babel. But before the Babylonians could complete their lofty project, God scattered new languages among the workers, which caused confusion, permanently halted the project, and eventually caused people to disperse and divide. Sam sees a similar kind of divisiveness brewing here, as people are becoming increasingly protective of their own separate plots rather than being dedicated to the larger project of revamping the lot and creating a flourishing community garden. Similar to how the Babylonians wanted to work together to make a name for their city, the residents of this neighborhood wanted to work together to beautify and improve their neighborhood. But just as the Babylonians succumbed to divisiveness, the residents of the neighborhood also begin to divide by walling off their own separate plots. The physical barriers people construct are also representative of the steep language barriers that separate them.

CHAPTER 7: VIRGIL

Virgil stands with his dad on the sidewalk while men clear the vacant lot. He watches the terrified rats run off in every direction. One rat runs up a drug dealer's leg, and the dealer screeches like a woman in a cartoon. Virgil's dad doesn't even notice. Instead, he's staring at the emerging garden land with a huge smile on his face.

This passage suggests that clearing the lot might do more good than just creating space for a garden. That both the rats and the drug dealer are terrified here suggests that the lot's transformation might scare off some of the people who Gonzalo and Ana suggested are responsible for the cold, unfriendly, and outright dangerous nature of the neighborhood.

Virgil's father drove a bus in Haiti. Here, he drives a taxi—and he drives all the way across town to borrow two shovels after seeing the lot being cleared. The next morning is the first day of summer vacation. Virgil is thrilled to be done with fifth grade and plans to sleep until noon, but instead, his dad wakes him up before the sun rises.

At this point it's unclear exactly why Virgil's father is so excited to grow a garden. It may be a way for him to connect with his son, just as Gonzalo connected with Tío Juan. Regardless, Virgil's father's palpable excitement (seen by waking up his son so early and driving across town just for a shovel) shows that the garden has a reinvigorating effect on the neighborhood and its residents.

Virgil and Virgil's father walk to the garden and search for a plot with good soil. As they dig, they pick out pieces of broken glass and garbage from the soil. In the rubble, Virgil finds a rusty, heart-shaped locket; inside is a tiny photo of a sad-looking white girl in a flowery hat. Virgil doesn't know why he feels compelled to keep the locket instead of disposing of it with the other trash.

Virgil's discovery of the locket seems to suggest that it's possible to find beauty anywhere, even in and amongst all the garbage and rubble of the lot. That Virgil unearths this locket—which seems like a family heirloom—also points to the way that the garden will strengthen family relationships and connect people to their heritage. In addition, that the girl is white—while the neighborhood is mostly made up of immigrants of color—suggests that the locket may be from back when the neighborhood was primarily populated by Romanians, Slovaks, and Italians (as it was when Ana was a young girl growing up here).

Turning up the soil seems to take hours and hours. After a short rest, Virgil's father asks Virgil if he's ready. Virgil thinks they're going to plant seeds now—but instead, they turn four more squares of ground. Virgil's father is dreaming of having a profitable farm, not just a little garden.

Virgil's father's wishes for a profitable farm suggests that some of the gardeners are beginning to stray from the core intentions of the community garden: giving people a place to connect with one another and grow crops from their own cultures. And given that there are few—if any—available garden plots at any given time (during Sam's chapter, he notes that there are none left), the story implicitly questions if it's gluttonous that Virgil's father claims five plots for himself, or if an added value of the garden is that it gives people a money-making opportunity.

Virgil wants to grow pole beans. He saw a seed packet with a picture of a man picking the beans from the top of a ladder. But Virgil's father says no—a passenger in his taxi told him that fancy restaurants will pay lots of money for fresh baby lettuce. He plans to pick the lettuce and then deliver it to restaurants in his cab as fast as he can.

Here, Virgil confirms that gardening isn't *a bonding exercise for him and his dad, nor is it about getting Virgil more interested in gardening (since his father denies his request to plant pole beans). Rather, the garden is how his dad is going to make money, which again raises the question of if this is the right intention to have in a community garden or not.*

Lettuce seeds are tiny, and Virgil is embarrassed to plant such a huge garden in the community space. Suddenly he notices Miss Fleck across the lot. She's the strictest teacher in Ohio and is darker skinned than Virgil's father. She comes over just as Virgil and Virgil's father finish planting. She notes that they've claimed a "large plantation," which makes Virgil burn with shame. He looks away toward their six plots, which they divided up with string. Virgil's father steps forward and with a huge smile, tells Miss Fleck that six of the plots are for relatives. One plot is for his brother; another is for his auntie. Virgil's eyes open wide—both family members live in Haiti, not here.

Virgil seems to have a strong sense of right and wrong—even before Miss Fleck appears and criticizes Virgil's father for claiming so many plots, Virgil intuitively senses that it's unfair that they took six. In referring to the six plots as a "plantation," Miss Fleck references American slavery, and her language may contribute to Virgil's shame and discomfort. As Virgil sees his father openly lie to Miss Fleck, he is forced to grapple with the fact that his father may be willing to use immoral means to get ahead.

Virgil's father continues listing family members, all of whom live far away, are deceased, or don't exist at all. Virgil is in shock, as he's never seen an adult lie before. Miss Fleck asks what these family members asked them to grow. She doesn't seem to buy it when Virgil's father says that they all want lettuce.

Virgil's father's hastily constructed lies suggest that he, too, is aware that taking so much land for himself and using it for profit is unethical. He realizes that the garden is meant for families in the immediate community—not for grand business ideas—which is why he tries to placate Miss Fleck by claiming that he's planting on behalf of his other family members. For some of the book's characters, working in the garden has allowed them to see new sides of their family members—Gonzalo, for instance, begins to see his Tío Juan's expertise and much more lively and engaged side of him. By working in the garden, Virgil also gets to see a fuller picture of his family member, but it's a far more unflattering one.

Tending to the lettuce is like caring for a new baby, and Virgil becomes its mother. Virgil is responsible for watering it. But the lettuce doesn't come up in the seven days it's supposed to, and Virgil's father doesn't know why—neither he nor Virgil know anything about plants. A wrinkly old man in a straw hat tries to show Virgil something when Virgil waters, but the man doesn't speak English. Virgil finally figures it out when the lettuce comes up in wavy lines instead of straight—he washed the seeds out of place.

The old man in the straw hat is presumably Tío Juan, trying to share his expertise and help Virgil be successful. Even though Tío Juan is ultimately unable to share his knowledge with Virgil because of the language barrier that exists between them, his attempt to help speaks to the community spirit that the garden is founded upon—and, by contrast, how Virgil father's six-plot endeavor goes against the grain of what the garden is intended to do for the community.

The lettuce wilts as soon as it comes up. Virgil is sick of hauling water to the garden in a shopping cart and when the weather grows warm, the lettuce shrivels up and dies. Virgil's father almost cries at the sight. Then, bugs start eating the wilted plants. Virgil is certain no one will buy their lettuce. His father promised him an 18-speed bike once they earned some money, and Virgil already told his friends about it.

While there was a genuine language barrier between Virgil and Tío Juan, this passage suggests that had Tío Juan been able to help Virgil and his father learn how to properly plant and care for their plants, their crops would have been successful. Again, Tío Juan's attempt to help Virgil is reflective of what the community garden is supposed to be: a place that brings people together and allows them to help one another. But in trying to do the planting and tending all on their own, without receiving help from the community, Virgil and his father only harm themselves. In other words, this passage underscores that an independent spirit and motivation to make a profit are unwelcome—and unrewarded—in the community garden.

Virgil's father asks all of his taxi passengers what to do about his crops. Someone finally tells him that lettuce does best in the spring or fall; it's too hot in the summer. After his father shares this news, Virgil stomps outside. He can feel his bike slipping away. He's used to seeing kids lying, but he's never seen an adult lie and make mistakes. At first he's angry at his father, but then he feels sorry for him. That night, Virgil pulls out the locket and stares at the picture inside. He'd studied Greek myths in school, and he thinks the girl in the picture looks like the goddess of crops and the earth. Virgil cleans the locket as best he can. Then he opens it and whispers to the girl to save their lettuce.

Through the garden, Virgil is forced to confront the fact that adults—even his own father—lie and make mistakes just like kids do. In this way, Virgil begins to humanize his dad, which points back to the idea that working together in the community garden allows family members to see new sides of one another. The goddess Virgil refers to in this passage is probably Demeter, the goddess of harvest.

CHAPTER 8: SAE YOUNG

There were always lots of people in Sae Young's house when she was young. She had five sisters and lots of friends—and she likes being with people. She left Korea with her husband to work in the United States. They bought a dry cleaning shop and lived the next block over. Dry cleaning shops are better than restaurants, since you don't have to speak much English and only work six days per week. Sae Young and her husband worked together every day, 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. In the evenings, she sewed alterations. They saved for their children to go to college and tried for years to conceive, but they never had children.

Through her story, Sae Young articulates her version of the American Dream. For her, this meant moving to the U.S., starting a successful business, growing a family, and eventually being able to send their children to college. Even if the day-to-day experience of living in the U.S. is difficult for immigrants, as the book's other narrators have shown, Sae Young seems to realize that having a sense of purpose and point of pride (e.g., a thriving business, a family, a good education for her children) will make the immigrant experience easier.

Sae Young's husband died of a heart attack when he was only 37. Though she still had her friends, Sae Young nevertheless felt totally alone. Some time after her husband's death, Sae Young was alone in their dry cleaning shop when a man came in with a coat—and under the coat was a gun. He stole all of the shop's money, pushed Sae Young down, and screamed profanities at her. He then kicked her so hard that she went unconscious.

Despite her big dreams about what she wants to achieve in the U.S., Sae Young experiences one tragedy after another: failing to conceive, losing her husband suddenly to a heart attack, and being the victim of a brutally violent robbery. Her assault underscores that the U.S. can be dangerous and unwelcoming for immigrants. Although readers don't get insight into what exactly the robber says to Sae Young in this passage, the fact that he yells horrible things at her and is physically violent even after he's stolen the money suggests that he is hateful towards Sae Young as an immigrant, and possibly targeted the shop for this reason.

After this incident, Sae Young didn't like to be with people anymore and even became afraid of them. She spent the next two months in her apartment. She didn't even leave to go to the store—her neighbor bought groceries for her. She hired a Korean man to run the dry cleaning shop, and she wouldn't even open her apartment door for friends. This was all two years ago, and Sae Young has been getting better recently. She can now buy her own food at the store. Though she's lonely, she's still terrified.

The assault didn't just harm Sae Young physically—it also destroyed her connections with other people, her outlook on life, and her view of humankind overall. Once again, the novel shows that being an immigrant can be profoundly lonely and alienating.

One day, Sae Young passes by the garden and notices a Vietnamese girl picking beautiful **lima beans**. On the other side of the lot are a man and a woman, talking about the hoe the man got for his birthday. Sae Young wants to be with people again. The next day, she goes back to the lot and digs a small garden. Nobody talks to her, but it feels good to be near nice people. July is hot and humid. People tend to come early in the evening when they get off work to water and pull weeds. Sae Young doesn't talk to anyone, but she listens to everyone else talking and working. She feels safe.

The girl picking lima beans is presumably Kim. This reference to Kim and her lima beans reminds readers of how, in the first chapter, the lima beans symbolized hope. They seem to hold similar symbolic significance for Sae Young, as they make her more willing to quietly participate in society for the first time in two years. It's also telling that she feels safe in the garden, even if the city feels severely unsafe. Being in the natural world, surrounded by people who also want to grow vegetables and be around others, is fundamentally comforting.

One day, a man walks over and asks about Sae Young's peppers. She grows hot peppers like the ones grown in Korea. She's so glad that someone is talking to her that she can barely speak. The man's name is Sam. He's American, smart, and talks to everyone. He's so smart that when people complain about carrying water, he starts a contest. Sam insists that adults can't solve the problem, so they should let the children try. He offers $20 to the child who comes up with the best idea for how to get water to the lot.

Growing hot peppers from Korea allows Sae Young a way to connect to her Korean roots and nurture this part of her identity even while living in the U.S. With this, the novel suggests that it's important to connect with one's past, but Sam's watering contest also shows that it's necessary to invest in the future—that is, future generations (the children he creates the contest for) and the future of the garden. From the garden, kids can learn about their family members' history, but they can also practice their problem-solving skills and share their own unique gifts.

Sam nails a flyer announcing the contest to a post. For a week, kids prepare. Then, on Saturday, everyone comes with plans. Sam gives each child a chance to share their idea. A girl who lives in a building on one side of the garden offers to fill people's containers from her tap, but the girl's mother objects. Several boys suggest running hoses from Lake Erie or the fire hydrant. For each suggestion, Sam explains how much the idea will cost to implement. Then, a little Black girl suggests capturing the rain from downspouts in garbage cans. Sam gives the girl $20, and others pitch in to buy the cans.

That Sam's contest generates so much interest in the community implies that the garden has now become a beloved fixture in the community. Even the children recognize that the garden is worth fighting for and trying to solve its problems. The novel shows this again when everyone seems willing to pitch to purchase the garbage cans. The garden is a worthwhile investment—and even more importantly, it's worth it for people to invest in something that helps everyone, not just themselves. In a similar vein, that Sam crowdsources both the idea for how to solve the water problem and the money to implement said solution again points to the community spirit of the garden.

There's a thunderstorm the next day, and the rain almost completely fills the cans. The girl who came up with the idea to collect rainwater is very proud. Sae Young watches people struggle to scoop water out of the garbage bins and into their watering cans, so she goes to the store and buys three funnels. With the funnels, it'll be easier to fill the watering cans. Later that day, she watches lots of people use her funnels. It makes her glad, and it makes her feel like she's part of the garden. It's almost like a family.

Through her contribution to the garden, Sae Young is able to feel like a part of a community and feel like she provides value. The garden is, in many ways, breathing life back into her, and she pays this forward by investing her resources into the garden, too.

CHAPTER 9: CURTIS

Curtis used to take pride in his muscles and work out every day—but then Lateesha broke up with him. They had a great relationship. Lateesha was a few years older and always talked about having a family and living out in the country, but Curtis didn't really listen. He was only 23 and enjoyed getting attention from other girls. When Lateesha found out about this, she slammed the door in his face. This was five years ago.

By emphasizing that he used to *take pride in his appearance and enjoy getting attention from girls, Curtis suggests that he's become more humble since that time in his life. On another note, the mention that Lateesha always wanted to live in the country speaks again to the draw of the natural world. This idea runs throughout the story on a smaller scale, as characters find themselves drawn to the community garden.*

Now that he's lost Lateesha, Curtis understands her value. He's done messing around—he's looking for a wife, and he knows Lateesha is looking for a husband. This is because back in May, when Curtis moved back from Cincinnati, he ran into Lateesha's brother. He said that Lateesha is still single and still lives in the same apartment. But later, Lateesha refused to talk to Curtis when they ran into each other in the street. She shut down his attempts to talk twice—so now, Curtis is going to *show* her how much he loves her.

Given that the garden is instrumental in bringing people together—and Lateesha wants to live in the country, surrounded by nature—this passage suggests that the garden will be pivotal in Curtis's plan to court Lateesha again. So far, the book has shown that the community garden has the power to bring together dissimilar people—connecting them across generational gaps, cultural differences, and language barriers. The clear animosity Lateesha has for Curtis, then, raises the question of if the garden can heal romantic relationships, too.

Lateesha lives across from the garden, so Curtis claims a plot by the sidewalk that'll be easy for her to see. Then he buys six little tomato plants. Lateesha loves tomatoes—she eats them in sandwiches and eats them plain like apples, and she always talked about eating tomatoes out of her aunt's garden when she was a kid. Curtis figures that by planting the tomatoes, he'll show her he was listening. The tomatoes will also make it clear he's waiting for her.

Lateesha's love of the natural world gives Curtis the idea to plant tomatoes for her in the first place. Curtis thus sees the garden as symbolic of his love for her, the fact that he was paying attention to her while they were dating, and his desire to resume their relationship now that five years have passed and he's a changed man.

Curtis plants beefsteak tomatoes since they're the biggest. It doesn't take long before he enjoys gardening, even though he's never grown anything before. There's something new to see every day as his plants create buds, then flowers, and finally tomatoes. An old man with a straw hat shows Curtis how to stake the tomato plants so that their vines have something to cling to, while another person tells Curtis about all the diseases that plague tomatoes. This makes Curtis worry, as he doesn't want Lateesha to see the plants wilting or dying.

As before, the man in the straw hat helping newcomers with their plants is implied to be Tío Juan, who is eager to share his wealth of knowledge about agriculture. It seems that Tío Juan has finally found someplace where he's valued and has a sense of purpose, which the novel suggests is deeply important for immigrants and can help soothe their loneliness. This passage also suggests that he's learning to work through his language barrier, as he shows Curtis how to stake the tomatoes rather than telling him. And unlike Virgil, Curtis appears to warmly welcome Tío Juan's assistance, which suggests that Curtis may be a better fit for the garden's community and goals than Virgil and his father (who were set on profit) were.

Curtis checks on the tomatoes right after work every day. He flicks away bugs, pulls weeds, and fertilizes the plants regularly. Gradually, the tomatoes grow from tiny green marbles to big orange and red globes. Curtis keeps looking up at Lateesha's window, waiting for her to see. But the only people who look back are the drunks that hang out on her building's ground floor, in the boarded-up liquor store. They call Curtis a "field slave" and a "share-cropper," and they ask how "Massa's crops" are doing. Curtis knows he could beat the men and make them stop, but he doesn't. That's the point; he wants Lateesha to see that he's not a "beast" just because he has muscles.

The racial slurs that the drunks use towards Curtis are one of the few times that the book touches on race and racism. The other clear moment was when Miss Fleck (who has dark skin) likened Virgil's father's expansive, six-plot garden to a "plantation." Through this reference to slavery in the American South, Miss Fleck implied that, like plantation owners, Virgil and his father were being unethical and gluttonous in using the community garden to make a profit. Here, though, the drunks are likening Curtis not to a plantation owner but to a slave working in the fields at a plantation. Even though the garden is a place that brings people from all walks of life together, the drunks who are just across the street reveal that the neighborhood is still a divisive, dangerous place.

Curtis also stops working out and taking off his shirt, even when it's really hot. Girls still walk by and compliment him, but when he responds to them he always acts like they were complimenting his tomatoes. His friends start to call him Tomato, but Curtis just smiles.

The opening of this chapter—before Curtis started his gardening project—suggested that he's gained a lot of humility since his breakup five years ago. So while the garden isn't responsible for all of his character development, it's nevertheless continuing to aid in his personal growth. While he used to be preoccupied with working out and showing off his muscles—that is, focused on himself—he's now focused on growing his tomatoes and winning back Lateesha.

The tomatoes get as big as billiard balls. One day, Curtis discovers that his biggest tomato is gone. The next day, another one is gone. He's angry, especially since the tomatoes weren't even ripe yet. To guard against thieves, he puts chicken wire around the tomatoes and on top, but people can still get their hands in. Curtis can't spend all day guarding his tomatoes, but fortunately, Royce shows up just in time.

Earlier in the novel, Sam was saddened by the fact that people were starting to fence their gardens, seeing this as divisive, possessive, and perhaps even selfish. Here, the novel provides an explanation as to why they put up fences in the first place. For Curtis, the thieves threaten his chances of getting Lateesha back. It's important, then, that Curtis isn't selfishly trying to hoard his produce for himself—his focus still remains on reconnecting with Lateesha through gardening, so his overarching goal still aligns with that of the community garden.

Curtis discovers Royce sleeping in the garden one morning on a pile of grass clippings. Royce is only 15, Black, and muscular, but his face is bruised and swollen. Royce shares that his father beat him and threw him out, so Curtis takes the boy out for breakfast. Then, they cut a deal.

Like many characters in the novel, Royce perceives the garden as a safe place—or at least safer than his home. Once Curtis discovers Royce, the garden also gives Royce access to community and people who can help him. Up until this point, the book has shown how those involved in the community garden help one another and share their resources, but this has all been gardening related—like Sae Young donating funnels, everyone chipping in to buy trash bins, or Tío Juan sharing his gardening expertise. But Royce isn't a gardener, and Curtis still reaches out to him by taking him to breakfast, which suggests that being involved in the community garden may spur people to invest in their community and neighbors in other contexts, too.

Curtis finds Royce a hidden place where the police won't see him, but that's close to the tomatoes. He buys Royce a sleeping bag, gives him money for food, and gets him a pitchfork. Royce agrees to attack anyone who tries to steal the tomatoes with the pitchfork. To protect the tomatoes during the day, Curtis paints a sign with the words "Lateesha's Tomatoes" and puts it by the sidewalk. He thinks that if people know that something belongs to a person, rather than the government, they're more likely to leave it alone. One day, while Curtis waters his tomatoes, he looks up at Lateesha's window. He can see her staring down at the sign.

This passage again emphasizes that Royce, like many characters in the novel, feels safe in the garden and sees it as a refuge from the dangerous outside world. Royce also finds he can give back to this community by protecting Curtis's tomatoes, which gives him a sense of purpose. Curtis also echoes Sam's earlier sentiments when he says that people respect other people more than they respect the government. This is perhaps why Sam felt he was having more success improving Cleveland than he ever did on a global scale.

CHAPTER 10: NORA

Nora always tries to get Mr. Myles outside for a walk and some fresh air. She's not sure if his other nurses do this; she might be so insistent on the fresh air because she's British. In England, it's common to see people pushing babies in strollers in the middle of winter. Nora also watched her own father "vegetating" by the fire all the time, and she firmly believes you can't stop living before your time is up.

Nora seems to imply that in Britain, it's part of the culture to value nature and fresh air, and that being outdoors (as opposed to "vegetating" inside) is part of living a full, satisfying life.

One morning in the middle of summer, Nora pushes Mr. Myles up Gibb Street in his wheelchair. This is a new route, and it's not a pretty view. Lots of storefronts are empty. Mr. Myles probably remembers something very different, though—according to his landlady, he's been here a long time. He lost his ability to speak after his second stroke, so he can't tell anyone what he remembers or not. He's also losing interest in the world. These days, when Nora stops in front of a store window to let him see his dignified reflection, she often finds him asleep. She fears his time is coming.

Through the conversations with Mr. Myles's landlady, Nora is able to help readers better understand how the neighborhood has changed, which is similar to how, in the book's second chapter, Ana detailed how the neighborhood's population has shifted over the decades.

But then, as they walk along, Mr. Myles throws out his arm, indicating he wants to stop. Nora stops and looks to the left, where people have begun planting gardens. They stop and watch for a moment, and then Nora starts to walk on. But Mr. Myles's arm goes up again and he points to the garden. Nora obligingly wheels him back to the garden and onto the soil. She can see his nostrils flaring as he takes in the smell of the soil and his eyes moving over the gardens.

Mr. Myles's sudden change when they come across the garden speaks to the invigorating power of nature. While he's usually falling asleep in front of storefronts, Mr. Myles is now curious, engaged, and insistent. Even if he's just watching, being in the garden and seeing others work the soil seems to invigorate him.

Nora and Mr. Myles watch the gardeners. They admire the brick paths and borders of flowers, as well as a garden gate made out of a car door and a trellis of bedsprings. There's a hummingbird feeder, a grill, and a gardening hat. Nora decides that Mr. Myles should do more than just watch, even if he is in a wheelchair.

Nora's descriptions of the garden suggest that it's a place where people from all walks of life come together. It's where people with the funds to create proper brick paths can garden alongside those who have to turn trash like bedsprings and car doors into trellises and gates. These creatively repurposed items also seem like a subtle nod to what the empty lot used to be: a dumping ground for garbage.

Two days later, on her way to Mr. Myles's house, Nora stops at the garden to unload a plastic trash barrel and a shovel. Then, an hour later, she wheels Mr. Myles to the garden. As he sits in the wheelchair, she cuts holes in the bottom of the barrel and shovels dirt into it to bring it up to his level. Nora then offers Mr. Myles a dozen seed packets. He chooses the flowers and ignores all the vegetable options. Nora wonders if he's remembering his mother's flower garden, but she reminds herself it's impossible to know. After 30 minutes, Mr. Myles has planted hollyhocks, poppies, and snapdragons. On the way home, he smells the soil on his fingers and seems satisfied.

Mr. Myles's behavior in the garden—like his clear preference for flowers over vegetables and the way he smells his hands after gardening—suggests that gardening may indeed be getting him in touch with his past by bringing up certain memories. However, on a small scale, gardening is also connecting him to the future. Nora previously noted that Mr. Myles was rapidly losing his will to live, but planting flowers perhaps gives him something to look forward to in the future. This is similar to how the garden gives Tío Juan—another bored, isolated old man who can't communicate verbally—a sense of purpose.

Soon, the garden becomes like a second home for Nora and Mr. Myles. Gardening is never boring; it's like a soap opera, complete with suspense and "startling developments." It's amazing to watch Mr. Myles inspect the seedlings, which are coming into a world he'll soon leave. His eyes become livelier as he weeds and waters the plants. Nora thinks about how ancient Egyptians used to prescribe garden walks to cure madness. Gardens, she believes, are a "mind-altering drug" they take every day.

By describing gardening as a soap opera with "startling developments," Nora suggests that immersing oneself in the natural world can be just as entertaining and stimulating as anything the city or the built world has to offer. As she describes Mr. Myles's transformation, she also proposes that being in nature is healing—perhaps on a physical level, but definitely for one's mental health. It's as effective as medication, she suggests, in improving one's outlook on life, and Mr. Myles is a clear reflection of that.

For a while, Nora and Mr. Myles keep to themselves, off to one side of the garden. Their only visitors are the cats who come to the garden in search of the sardines that a child buried with her seeds. Then one day it rains. Everyone in the garden runs down the street to where there's an overhang. In the small space, Nora and Mr. Myles meet all the regular gardeners. Most of them are old, and most of them grow produce from their native countries. They often have to resort to pantomime to communicate, but they all deal with the same weather, pests, neighborhood, and parental feelings toward their plants. People begin to express concern when Mr. Myles is gone for a few days. Now, Nora and Mr. Myles are "planted" in the garden.

When all the gardeners come together and start to talk thanks to the rainstorm, it further suggests that the natural world has the power to bring people together. While the garden does bring people together organically, this rainstorm forces them together, as they all crowd in close proximity to wait out the rain. As other narrators have done, Nora notes that many people are growing plants that are important to them culturally, which shows that the garden helps people connect to their cultural history. But even if people are all planting different things and come from different countries and cultures, they all deal with similar struggles and joys—and this creates a sense of community and belonging. Many of the struggles and joys that Nora lists here are related to the garden, which again suggests that the garden is an equalizer of sorts.

Nora tells all of this to out-of-town guests and takes them up Terminal Tower. On the observation deck, they step to the railing to look for the garden. But tall buildings hide the garden from view. Nora looks around at all the tourists who have no idea the garden even exists. They think they're seeing all of Cleveland. Nora has to stop herself from shouting about the existence of the Gibb Street garden.

Terminal Tower is right in the heart of downtown Cleveland. It's telling that from there, it's impossible to see the community garden. This gestures back to Leona's earlier insistence that the distance between downtown and Gibb Street can't be measured in miles. From downtown, it's impossible to see the Gibb Street area—so to those who only visit Cleveland's downtown, it's almost as though the neighborhood doesn't exist at all.

CHAPTER 11: MARICELA

If a person's Mexican, then Cubans and Puerto Ricans hate them and assume that the person snuck into the U.S. illegally. Teenagers are widely hated, too. And the world hates pregnant teenagers even more. So Maricela, who's 16, Mexican, *and* pregnant, wouldn't care if someone shot her. In a way, she's already dead. She used to be attractive, but now she's fat. She dropped out of school, she hasn't been invited to any parties, and even the guy who got her pregnant hasn't asked her out. Her parents were mad at first about her pregnancy, since they wanted her to graduate high school, but abortion or adoption weren't options. Then they started to get excited about the pregnancy and prayed for the baby. Maricela, however, prayed she'd miscarry.

Maricela sees her pregnancy as the end of her life as she knows it. The life ahead of her isn't the one she's always wanted as a teenage girl—there are no parties or dates, and it seems unclear whether or not she's ever going to graduate high school. In this way, she seems much like how Nora described Mr. Myles in the first paragraphs of Nora's chapter. Like the old man, Maricela has lost her desire to live—and she hopes that her baby's life will end, too.

Maricela and two other girls from her high school enrolled in a program for pregnant teens. It provides rides to the doctor and help students earn their GED at home. It seems great, except Penny, the woman who runs the program, got the girls a plot in the community garden. She wants them to practice taking care of something and see "the miracle of life." Maricela thinks that Penny probably also wants to keep the girls from eating their babies or abandoning them in dumpsters.

Penny seems to want to impress upon her students that being pregnant isn't the end of their lives—it's the start of new life. Other participants in the community garden have made the connection between parenthood and gardening (Virgil, for instance, feels like the lettuce's mother because the crop requires such constant care), and Penny makes the same connection here.

Since it's the middle of summer already, Penny has the girls plant fast-growing radishes—even though the girls all hate radishes. A rodent destroys the little leaves as soon as they sprout. Maricela doesn't share with Penny that she hopes the same thing will happen to her baby. Penny is always so cheerful, but it's no wonder—*she's* not the one vomiting or getting huge.

That Penny has the girls growing radishes despite their distaste for them suggests that liking the produce (i.e., wanting to eat it after harvest) isn't the point of this project. In fact, it actually seems fitting that Penny has the girls practice tending to a crop they all hate, because Maricela has contempt for the baby she's growing inside of her, too.

Penny then has the girls plant squash and Swiss chard. Nobody knows how to eat Swiss chard, and Maricela is seven months pregnant and hates bending over to garden. The girls complain, but Penny just smiles. Working in the garden is a chore, and all the girls hate it. When one of the other girls breaks two of her fancy nails and curses for 10 minutes, another woman comes over to lecture her on proper behavior. Maricela can't believe it—it's Miss Fleck, her third-grade teacher. She prays Miss Fleck won't recognize her, but Miss Fleck does, and she asks all the usual questions. (Maricela thinks to herself that she should get the answers printed on cards to hand out.) A week later, when a man throws a can out the window and into the garden, Miss Fleck goes to the man's door and yells at him.

Miss Fleck's reappearance in the narrative indicates that she's a regular fixture in the garden. Even though she makes her former students feel embarrassed whenever she turns up (as she did previously with Virgil and here with Maricela), it's clear that Miss Fleck is committed to making the garden into the best place it can be. Earlier in the novel, this took the form of her criticizing Virgil's father for greedily taking so many plots for himself, and here, she protects and betters the garden by scolding the litterer.

People come into the girls' part of the garden for various reasons. One Puerto Rican kid's pumpkin plants keep invading Maricela and her classmates' plants, which gives him an excuse to talk to 15-year-old Dolores, who's still pretty despite her pregnancy. Maricela can't wait for her to get big. Sometimes, a big Black man who tries unsuccessfully to grow lettuce tramples through the garden. He always pulls up in a cab, slams on the brakes, and then picks lettuce as fast as he can. People also stop by to give the girls vegetables, as well as unsolicited advice on growing Swiss chard, childbirth, and raising kids. Maricela tunes them out.

Here, Maricela brings up two characters who appeared earlier in the novel: the Puerto Rican teen who helped Sam turn the soil, and Virgil's father who planted six plots of lettuce. Virgil's father is clearly acting on his plan to sell the lettuce to restaurants. Despite Miss Fleck's earlier scolding, he still appears to be selfish and focused on profit, which sets him apart from everyone else in the community garden. As the novel has already shown, sharing advice and expertise and forming connections with others are integral to the community garden. But to Maricela, these behaviors are unwelcome.

One day in August, it's just Penny and Maricela in the garden. Leona comes over to chat and gives Maricela some yellow flowers called goldenrod. Supposedly, if Maricela makes them into tea, it'll help with the delivery. Leona knows that Maricela doesn't want to be pregnant, and she's the only person Maricela can talk to about it. Maricela can hear various TVs and radios, as well as an approaching storm. When it hits, the electricity goes off instantly. Everything goes quiet in the neighborhood—but an old man continues to pick cucumbers as though nothing happened.

By giving Maricela the goldenrod for tea, Leona is able to pass her Granny's knowledge of herbal remedies down to future generations. This is another reflection of how generously sharing expertise and advice is integral to the culture of the community garden. As the only person Maricela can talk to about her unwanted pregnancy, Leona takes on an important mentoring role in Maricela's life. Like the relationship that forms between Curtis and Royce, this friendship speaks to the way that the gardeners begin to help one another with things unrelated to gardening. While the garden brings people together, their connections grow even deeper roots beyond sharing produce and gardening advice.

Leona remarks that the city shuts down when the power goes out, but the garden keeps going. She continues to talk about how nature doesn't run on electricity or clocks; instead, it runs on sunlight, rain, and seasons. Maricela's body is part of this system. Maricela feels herself fall into a daze as she thinks about being related to dinosaurs and plants. This system, she realizes, is much older and stronger than human civilization. Leona insists that it's not a disgrace to be part of nature—on the contrary, it's an honor. Maricela stares at the squash leaves. She can almost see the leaves growing and changing. For just a moment, she stops hoping her baby will die.

It's significant that Maricela briefly stops hoping her baby will die when she realizes that she's part of a much bigger, natural system. This speaks again to the way that the novel glorifies the natural world above the manmade world. In terms of the natural system and cycles of life, Maricela has done nothing wrong by becoming pregnant. It's modern society that looks down on pregnant and makes Maricela feel so miserable—and nature can perhaps provide her some emotional relief.

CHAPTER 12: AMIR

India has lots of big cities, just like the U.S. But in India, everyone knows their neighbors. Here, people avoid contact and treat everyone like an enemy until they prove themselves to be a friend. When Amir first saw the garden, he thought of his parents' Persian rug, which depicted vines, rivers, grapes, flowers, and birds. Rugs like that are portable gardens. Amir remembers how, in the middle of the hot Delhi summers, he'd lie on the rug with his sisters, trying to enter the cool, lush world depicted on the rug. The garden in Cleveland is green and just as soothing as the rug was. But the garden isn't just beautiful—it also makes people see their neighbors.

Though much of the novel criticizes city life, Amir takes a more nuanced perspective here when he suggests that city life can be satisfying and nourishing as long as a person knows their neighbors, like they do in India. From his perspective, the core issue with American cities is the lack of community, which is what makes the community garden so rare and special. On another note, in talking about the "portable garden" of his family's Persian rug, Amir suggests that gardens and nature are a form of escape from the outside world. Other characters in the novel have felt this way about the community garden, too—like when Sam referred to the garden as paradise or Eden.

Amir grows a variety of vegetables, including eggplants. The eggplants first turn an eerie, pale shade of purple. They're the only things in the garden that color, and Amir's toddler son desperately wants to pick them whenever he comes to the garden. Lots of people come over to ask about the eggplants. Amir recognizes some of the people, though none of them have ever spoken to him before. The eggplants become an excuse to "break[] the rules and start[] a conversation." People seem happy to be able to be friendly.

Here, Amir discusses the "rules" that govern how people interact with each other. These social codes, he implies, dictate that it's unusual to go up to someone and start a conversation out of the blue. The garden provides a way to subvert those rigid codes of conduct by giving people things to talk about. People seem relieved to break free from these behavioral norms that force them to keep to themselves. Many of the characters are longing for connection, belonging, and community, and the garden fosters exactly that.

These conversations tie the gardeners together. One night, someone dumps a load of tires in the garden, crushing four rows of young corn. In the morning, it only takes a group of gardeners an hour to get the tires piled by the curb. A few weeks later, Amir and some other men hear a woman scream down the block. A man with a knife stole the woman's purse, and three men—including Amir—run after him. To Amir's surprise, they catch the thief. Royce holds the man to the wall with his pitchfork until the police arrive. Afterwards, Amir asks the others if they've ever chased a criminal before. They haven't, and they probably never would have if it weren't for the garden. The garden makes them feel like part of a community.

Just as Miss Fleck scolded the man for throwing garbage into the garden, Amir and the other gardeners now feel like it's their duty to protect their garden space—and the safety of the surrounding neighborhood. This shows clearly that the garden isn't just a way to make friends and grow food; it also spurs the gardeners to take care of the surrounding community, too. Royce's reappearance shows that he's probably still living in the garden (earlier, he noted that the garden is safer than the domestic abuse he faces at home). Because the garden protects him, Royce feels compelled to protect the garden and surrounding community, too.


Amir came to the U.S. (specifically to Cleveland) in 1980. The city is one of immigrants and is known for its Polish population. Amir had always heard that Polish men are steelworkers, while Polish women cook lots of cabbage. But he'd never met a Polish person before working in the garden. She's an old woman with a garden next to Amir's, and they discover they live near each other too. They talk often.

It's significant that Amir, an Indian immigrant, admits that he buys into stereotypes about people from other countries. Accepting and perpetuating stereotypes is a human impulse, but the garden helps to dismantle people's preconceived notions of one another. This is similar to how the garden helped Gonzalo see a fuller picture of his Tío Juan.

When they watch their carrot seedlings come up, Amir asks why the woman doesn't thin hers (i.e., pull out baby plants to leave behind one healthy plant every few inches). She knows she should, but the process reminds her of living in the concentration camp. Prisoners were inspected every morning and divided into two lines, one to live and one to die. Her father was an orchestra violinist who spoke out against the Germans, leading to the family's arrest. Hearing this, Amir realizes he's never heard anything useful about Polish people. What he's heard only hides the richness of Polish culture. He doesn't know or care whether the woman cooks cabbage.

Indeed, as Amir listens to the woman talk about living in a concentration camp during World War II, he realizes that the stereotypes surrounding Polish people aren't at all useful. Stereotypes—like the idea that Polish women cook a lot of cabbage—only distract from the richness and depth of a culture and fashions people into one-dimensional versions of themselves. Accepting stereotypes is similar to the social code that dictates that people should keep to themselves rather than strike up conversations—at least in this neighborhood, it seems to be an unspoken rule. But the garden dismantles both of these social norms and gives people something to connect over (here, the carrots), from which their relationship can then grow (here, talking about the concentration camps).

The whole garden learns this same lesson through Royce. Royce is young, Black, and "look[s] rather dangerous." At first, people seem relieved whenever he leaves the garden. But as Royce spends more time in the garden, the other gardeners find out more about him. He stutters, has two sisters, and likes the cats in the garden. He also enjoys working with his hands. Before long, all the women try to feed Royce—and these are the same women who would've crossed the street to avoid him weeks earlier.

Just like the Polish woman does for Amir, Royce helps the gardeners learn to challenge stereotypes and not make assumptions about people. It's clear to Amir and to readers that Royce isn't a dangerous person; he's a homeless teen in search of community, and the garden provides him with exactly that.

In return, Royce waters for people when they're sick. He also makes repairs, weeds, and makes brick paths. But he always pretends that he wasn't the one who did these tasks. It becomes an honor to be chosen by Royce. Soon, he's trusted and liked, and after chasing the thief with the pitchfork, he becomes famous. He becomes more than a Black teenage boy—he's Royce.

In this passage, Amir emphasizes that it's necessary to get to really know a person as an individual rather than relying on stereotypes about a given people group. And getting to know one's neighbors, the novel suggests, improves communities by imbuing people with the desire to support, protect, and better the neighborhood for the sake of the entire community.

In September, Royce and a Mexican man collect lots of bricks and build a big barbecue. Amir is in the garden on a Saturday when the Mexican family pulls up with a dead pig. They build a fire and start to roast the pig. Soon, their friends start to arrive with food and instruments. It's unclear if they're celebrating a birthday or just having a party for no reason. It's a beautiful day; the garden is just starting to change from green to brown. Before long, everyone working in the garden feels the party's spirit. Soon, the entire garden is full of people.

The way that this party morphs from a private celebration to a block party mirrors the garden's transformation over the course of the novel. What began as Kim's solo endeavor to grow lima beans to connect with her deceased father eventually transformed into a communal space where everyone can find connection and belonging.

The party turns into an impromptu harvest festival. People bring food, drinks, and more instruments; Amir fetches his wife and son. They slice open watermelons, show off their produce, and trade vegetables. The gardeners also give food away freely, even Amir, who was trained as a businessman to always make a profit. The garden offers an excuse to break that rule.

Again, Amir makes it clear that the garden is responsible for cultivating the spirit of community and generosity that now grips everyone. Because they feel like part of community and as though they're among friends, it's easy to give away vegetables.

Amir speaks to many people at the party. As he tells them where he's from, he wonders if they know as little about Indians as he did about Polish people. One Italian woman says that she's been admiring Amir's eggplants for weeks and is thrilled to meet him. They chat, but something bothers Amir. Then he remembers: last year, this woman claimed that she'd gotten the wrong change in Amir's store and had angrily called him a "dirty foreigner," despite being an immigrant herself. Amir brings up this incident. The woman apologizes and says that "Back then, I didn't know it was *you*."

This Italian woman's line that she didn't know it was Amir encapsulates the novel's insistence that people must get to know others on a personal level rather than rely on negative stereotypes about certain people groups. Though it's unclear if meeting Amir changes her contempt for other immigrants, it nevertheless changes her perception of Amir: because of the garden, he now has a name and a history, and she considers him a friend. This passage also underscores that feeling unwelcome is a common element of the immigrant experience. The community garden is a remedy for this, because it gives people from all walks of life a common sense of belonging. While they may all belong to different cultures or have different home countries, they all belong to this neighborhood and the smaller garden community.

CHAPTER 13: FLORENCE

Florence's great-grandparents walked from Louisiana to Colorado in 1859. They were freed slaves and wanted to get as far away from cotton country as they could. That's how Florence's grandpa, father, and she and her sisters came to live there, the first Black family in the country. Her father called Florence's great-grandparents their "seedfolks," since they were the first of the family to live in Colorado.

Finally, readers learn the origins of the novel's title. Seedfolks, *as Florence explains, are the first people in a person's family to live in a certain place—they plant the seed that grows into a larger community of folks, or family. The term itself suggests that moving somewhere new is a way of planting oneself and one's family, just as one might do in a garden.*

Florence thinks of her great-grandparents when she sees the people who started the garden on Gibb Street. Those people are also "seedfolks." That first year, the garden lacked spigots, hoses, a toolshed, or nice soil. That was back before the landlords started charging higher rents for the apartments overlooking the garden.

In this passage, Florence makes it clear that she's narrating from at least a year after the previous chapters took place. She explains how the garden has transformed in the intervening years: now, it seems to be supported by the city, and it's increased property and rental values in the neighborhood (for better or for worse).

Florence would've been working in the garden if she didn't suffer from arthritis in her hands. She grew up in the country, so she misses "country things." Her husband is from Cleveland, so he doesn't know about how hayfields smell, or about eating **beans** off of the vine. Florence settled for being a "watcher," along with many others. Some people sit on fire escapes or stand on the sidewalk, like Florence. One day she looks up and sees a man watching the gardeners from his rocking chair.

By describing herself as a "watcher" and making it clear that she still gets a lot out of the garden from this vantage point, Florence makes the case that it's not necessary to dig in the dirt oneself to reap the benefits of nature. Like so many others in the novel, Florence finds that merely being close to the garden is a way for her to connect to her roots and her childhood spent in the country.

Florence thinks of her grandmother's childhood sampler, which reads "Be Not Solitary, Be Not Idle." Following that maxim was easy when Florence worked in the library. But now that she's retired, it's harder. She tries to walk every day, and this is how she found the garden in the first place. She always stopped to see what was new. Even though she was just a watcher, she was proud and protective of the garden. She almost lost her composure with a man when he tried to grab a tomato growing by the sidewalk. The man pulled his hand back and said he thought it was a community garden.

Here, Florence seems to be referring to an embroidery sampler—a piece of embroidered fabric that shows off an embroiderer's skill and often includes little sayings like this, along with various shapes and patterns. Like many of the other narrators, Florence tries to stay busy and engaged in her old age, and the garden gives her a way to do so. As a "watcher," Florence also acts as the garden's protector—much like Royce and his pitchfork, who also guards Curtis's tomatoes. Once again, the novel shows that those who participate in the garden (even the so-called watchers) feel get so much joy and nourishment out of the experience that they are compelled to give back to the garden in return. On another note, the man who nearly picks a tomato here suggests that he misunderstands the concept of the community garden—to him, a community garden means that it's produce for the community to take, not space for the community to grow their own produce. This perhaps explains why Curtis's tomatoes were going missing—it's possible that neighbors didn't know they were stealing.

Florence thinks that it's sad to watch the garden turn brown every fall. The first year was the hardest, especially after finally seeing people supporting themselves financially instead of waiting for welfare checks. It was refreshing to see a part of the neighborhood look better every day and to smell the growing plants. But then the green left, the frost hit, and the wind through the cornstalks made an eerie noise. All the color of the garden was gone once the boy sold his pumpkins. Some people cut up their dead plants and dug them back in, but there was nothing to do after these jobs were done.

Earlier in the novel, Leona told Maricela that nature runs on its own cycle that's governed by the seasons. The community garden has to abide by that cycle, too, and so it turns brown and barren in the fall. In the fall and winter, then, people have to come up with other ways to connect with each other and create the community spirit that the garden did.

It was cold that winter. Whenever Florence passed the garden covered in snow, she'd try to remember how it looked back in July. Someone put up a Christmas tree that stayed up until March. In the winter, it's hard to tell the difference month to month—it's all just winter and cold. Florence missed many of her walks, but she always went past the garden when she did get out. Nothing was growing, but sometimes she'd find a gardener looking around, too.

The Christmas tree in the garden is an attempt to create the sense that people still care—they care enough about the garden to attempt to make it look festive, and show others that they're still invested in the community they've cultivated. As Florence sees other gardeners watching the garden, it makes it clear that she's not the only one eagerly awaiting spring and another season of gardening.

It's impossible to see Canada across Lake Erie, but it's still there. Spring is like that, too—people have to have faith that it will come, especially in Cleveland. They have two April snows that year, which is sad for the gardeners. When the snow finally melts, it reveals last year's leaves in the garden. Florence is overjoyed to be able to go out without a heavy coat and boots.

The natural seasons can be difficult, Florence suggests, because people have to trust that each season will end and give way to the next. And in the winter, when life can be so cold and miserable, it's hard to trust that Spring will bloom just like it always does. But as Leona suggested earlier, people can and should trust the rhythms of the natural world—it may get cold and dark for a while, but the beauty of the garden will always reemerge in the spring.

It's still too early to plant anything, though. Florence begins to wonder if anyone will come. It's possible that no one is interested anymore, or that the city shut down the garden. Then, one day, Florence passes someone digging. It's an Asian girl planting **lima beans**. Florence doesn't recognize her, but this doesn't matter—seeing the girl digging makes Florence feel happy. She looks up and sees the man in his rocker. They wave at each other.

Here, Florence raises some concerns about what could theoretically keep the garden from thriving a second season, such as being shut down by the city. Given that the novel began with the city government being reticent to care for the neighborhood or their gardening project, it's possible that the city still fails to see the garden as a valuable community hub. In addition to this, the novel is also bookended with Kim planting lima beans—and planting too early in the season, once again. But given that Kim's planting interrupts Florence's anxious thoughts, this moment reinforces the lima beans' status as symbols of hope for the future and for connection. Seeing the beans being planted after a long, cold winter shows Florence and the man in the rocker that the garden will continue, and the community will thrive again.

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