The Sympathizer

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF VIET THANH NGUYEN

Viet Thanh Nguyen left Vietnam with his family in 1975. They first lived in Fort Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania, where there was a camp for Vietnamese refugees. The family then moved to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania before settling permanently in San Jose, California in 1978, where they opened a Vietnamese grocery store. Nguyen recalls that his parents often worked twelve to fourteen hour days, in what was then a rough neighborhood. On one Christmas Eve, they were both shot in an armed robbery. Their efforts, however, secured Nguyen a preparatory school education. He attended St. Patrick School, a parochial elementary school, and Bellarmine College Preparatory, both of which are in San Jose. After graduation, he enrolled in and briefly attended both the University of California, Riverside and UCLA, before settling on the University of California, Berkeley, where he earned degrees in English and Ethnic Studies in 1992. He remained at Berkeley for his doctoral studies and earned a PhD in English in 1997. He then went on to a teaching career at the University of Southern California, where he is currently the Aerol Arnold Chair of English, as well as Professor in the Departments of English, American Studies and Ethnicity, and Comparative Literature. Nguyen's first publication was a work of scholarship. *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America* examines how Asian Americans have used literature as a political tool. The study spans one hundred years, from 1896 to 1996. Other non-fiction works include *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* and *The Displaced: Refugee Writers on Refugee Lives*. In 2017, Nguyen published *The Refugees*, a short story collection. Additionally, he has published numerous essays and reviews and has edited an anthology on the emerging field of Transpacific Studies. *The Sympathizer* won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2016 and *Nothing Ever Dies* was a finalist for the National Book Award in Non-Fiction. In 2017, Nguyen became a MacArthur Fellow. Nguyen is married with a son.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Sympathizer begins during the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975 and follows the lives of Vietnamese refugees, dispersed throughout the United States, after they fled from the North Vietnamese Army's takeover of South Vietnam and the subsequent reunification of Vietnam under Communist rule. The narrator returns to the United States, where he was educated, one year after Richard Nixon's resignation from the presidency in the aftermath of Watergate. Before the scandal, Nixon faced immense opposition from the political left for his escalation of the Vietnam War, resulting from his decision to carpet bomb Cambodia between January 1970 and August 1973. The bombings, nicknamed "Operation Menu," were an attempt to stop the North Vietnamese from infiltrating South Vietnam via the Cambodian border. Many historians believe that the attacks did nothing but foster hostility among Cambodians, convincing them to embrace Communism and join the murderous Khmer Rouge. In April 1975, while Saigon was seized by the North Vietnamese Army, the Khmer Rouge overtook the Cambodian capital, Phnom Penh. The regime, headed by Pol Pot, led a mass genocide of Cambodian men, women, and children, particularly those who were perceived to be from the educated middle-class. The Khmer Rouge collapsed in 1979, following two years of violent clashes with Vietnamese troops, who finally captured Phnom Penh on January 9, 1979. In the United States, the years between 1975 and 1979 were spent reflecting on the Vietnam War, particularly in cinema. The nation was reckoning with its first defeat in war. The second half of the 1970s are often described as a period of disillusionment, hedonism, and increasing lawlessness. In 1975, President Gerald Ford suffered two assassination attempts—the first, from former Charles Manson follower, Lynette "Squeaky" Fromme, and the second, from the political radical Sara Jane Moore.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Despite their marginalization in the American literary canon, there are numerous Vietnamese American writers, who have depicted their experiences of the Vietnam War and their postwar lives as refugees in multiple literary genres. Very often, these experiences are communicated through protagonists who are children. *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* by Thi Diem Thuy Le was published in 2004. It tells the story of a Vietnamese refugee family's relocation to San Diego in 1978 through the eyes of a sensitive child who grows up seeking to cope with her childhood traumas. In 2011, Thanhha Lai published *Inside Out and Back Again*, a modern classic of children's literature about a child's journey from Saigon to Alabama after the Communist takeover of South Vietnam. In the same year, the cartoonist GB Tran published the graphic novel *Vietnamerica* about his family's struggles over fifty years of colonial rule, war, and their difficult relocation to South Carolina, where the author was born. Quan Barry's novel *She Weeps Each Time You're Born* was published nearly a year after *The Sympathizer*. It narrates Vietnam's history through the eyes and ears of a little girl with the ability to channel the voices of the dead. In 2017, the cartoonist Thi Bui published *The Best We*

Could Do, an illustrated memoir about a family's escape after the fall of Saigon and their relocation to California.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Sympathizer
- **When Written:** Summer 2011-2013
- **Where Written:** Los Angeles, California
- **When Published:** April 2015
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary Fiction
- **Genre:** Historical Novel / Black Comedy
- **Setting:** South Vietnam; Camp Pendleton, California; Los Angeles, California
- **Climax:** The narrator is re-educated and returns to a state of nothingness.
- **Antagonist:** The Commandant
- **Point of View:** First-person

EXTRA CREDIT

Apocalypse Now. In the book's Acknowledgements, Nguyen writes that the 1979 film by Francis Ford Coppola serves as the inspiration for *The Hamlet*, the fictional film that the narrator advises on in *The Sympathizer*. Coppola's film, which was based on Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, was also filmed in the Philippines. *Apocalypse Now* stars Marlon Brando as the rogue Colonel Kurtz and Martin Sheen as Captain Benjamin Willard, the Marine officer who is dispatched to find and murder Kurtz. Sheen, who replaced Harvey Keitel as the film's leading man, suffered a heart attack during production, due to stress and alcoholism.

My Lai Massacre. In the novel, Nguyen vaguely alludes to the massacre, which occurred in a small, "mostly abandoned village near Quang Ngai," nicknamed "Pinkville" by a U.S. Army task force. The My Lai Massacre is the most notorious war crime committed by American troops during the Vietnam War. As many as 500 villagers, particularly women, children, and the elderly, were rounded up and shot under the command of First Lieutenant William Calley, Jr., who was later court-martialed for his crime. Some, however, believe that the junior officer was unfairly scapegoated and that true blame for the massacre rested with high-ranking officers.

PLOT SUMMARY

The narrator describes himself to the Commandant, who has imprisoned him at a detention camp in North Vietnam, as "a spy, a sleeper, a spook, a man of two faces." The narrator is both a captain in the South Vietnamese Army and a spy for the North Vietnamese, acting under the instruction of Man, one of his "blood brothers."

The narrator recalls the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975. Claude, the narrator's mentor and a CIA agent, arranges for the General and Madame, a politically powerful South Vietnamese couple, to escape from Saigon with their immediate and extended family. The narrator puts together a list of select staff members who will also be allowed to board this plane, which will include the narrator's other "blood brother" Bon, Bon's wife, Linh, and their son, Duc. The U.S. government prepares C-130 planes for the escape. However, an attack on the airfield, which may have come either from the Viet Cong or from disgruntled South Vietnamese soldiers, destroys the plane. The surviving refugees flee toward another plane, originally intended for active-duty U.S. military. During the sprint, the narrator notices that Bon and his family have fallen behind. When he turns around to look for them, he sees that Bon is sitting on the ground, cradling the bodies of his wife and son. The narrator hurries Bon onto the waiting plane, which first lands in Guam, and later at Camp Pendleton in San Diego.

The narrator, the General, Madame, and Bon settle in Los Angeles. With the help of his former professor at Occidental College, Avery Wright Hammer, the narrator secures a job working for the Department Chair of the college's Department of Oriental Studies. There, the narrator reacquaints himself with American racism and the fetishization of Asian people. He also meets the secretary of the department, Ms. Sofia Mori, and they become lovers. The narrator occasionally works for the General, too, though not for pay, as a chauffeur. At a wedding between the daughter of a Vietnamese marine colonel and the son of the vice president of the Saigon branch of Bank of America, the narrator sees the General and Madame's eldest child, Lan, who goes by Lana, for the first time since she was a girl. Lana left Vietnam to attend the University of California, Berkeley. When the narrator reunites with her, she's living in Brentwood and working at an art gallery, while also pursuing a singing career. Though the narrator thinks that she has talent in addition to being very attractive, Lana's parents are scandalized by her onstage persona, which they believe will ruin her chances for marriage. The narrator also reunites with his old college chum, Sonny, who edits a Vietnamese-language newspaper.

The General opens a liquor store a year after his arrival, where he employs Bon. Meanwhile, Madame opens a pho restaurant. Though she never bothered to cook in her home country, due to the plenitude of servants, her relatively modest life in the United States requires her to do more household chores, in which she discovers her talent for cooking. Funds earned at the liquor store and the restaurant, along with those from the General's charitable organization, the Benevolent Fraternity of Former Soldiers of the Republic of Vietnam, help to fund a guerrilla army that plans to take back control of Vietnam from

the Communists. At the wedding, the narrator also encounters the Congressman, an anti-Communist Republican representative of Orange County, who later organizes a meeting at a country club with other Western sympathizers of the South Vietnamese plight, including the narrator's idol, Dr. Richard Hedd.

The General uses his contacts in California and in South Vietnam to continue fighting a war against the Viet Cong and its sympathizers. One day, during a private discussion in the storeroom of his liquor store, he tells the narrator that he suspects that there's a spy among them. To distract attention from himself as the mole, the narrator offers the name of the crapulent major. Initially, the General doesn't believe this, but his distaste for the major's being both fat and Chinese sways him to think that the major is a sleeper agent. Bon agrees to kill the major. He and the narrator, who quickly regrets identifying the likable man as a spy, await the major at his apartment complex. They know that he'll soon be returning from the gas station, where he works as an attendant. It is the Fourth of July when the narrator presents the major with a bag of gifts that he obtained that day in Chinatown. Then, Bon walks up from behind the major and shoots him in the head.

The narrator leaves California soon after the major's killing, which Bon labels as an "assassination," to go to the Philippines to work on a film entitled *The Hamlet*. The Congressman has recommended him to the film's director, the Auteur, as a script consultant. The narrator's purpose is to ensure that there are Vietnamese characters in the film and that they are depicted fairly. Instead, he clashes with the Auteur and is later nearly killed in the film's makeshift cemetery, during an explosion that has been written into the script. The narrator releases the film studio from any liabilities, in exchange for ten thousand dollars.

When he returns to Los Angeles, the narrator gives half of the money to the crapulent major's widow. Also during his return, he discovers that Sonny is now in a relationship with Sofia, and that the couple is in love. Sonny presents a problem to the General, however, due to his leftist politics and his articles, which encourage the refugee community to put the war behind them. When the narrator expresses his wish to return to Vietnam with Bon, who has agreed to join the General's guerrilla army, the General says that the narrator can go if he is willing to kill Sonny. Though the narrator knows that Man doesn't want him to return to Vietnam, he insists on going to save Bon's life. Therefore, the narrator accepts the General's challenge to kill Sonny, shooting his old friend five times during a visit to his apartment.

The narrator departs for Bangkok, Thailand, where he and Bon reunite with Claude at the airport. While in Bangkok, the narrator sees *The Hamlet* at a local theater. He notices that his name has been excluded from the credits. Bon hates the film, alleging that it failed to represent their people properly. The narrator counters that, if he wasn't for him, no Vietnamese characters would have been included at all. From Thailand, the narrator and Bon go to Laos and nearly make it across the border into Vietnam when they are captured by the Communists after an attack on their camp. The pair are kept in a detention camp for over a year. Under the orders of the Commandant, the narrator is forced to write his confession. He also endures various forms of torture to help him answer the question put forth by the Commissar of the camp, "What is more precious than independence and freedom?" The narrator struggles to answer the question. He also comes to terms with the fact that his captor, the Commissar, is also his old friend, Man, whose face has been burned beyond recognition by napalm. When the narrator realizes that the answer to his question is "nothing," meaning that all that exists for certain is nothingness, the Commissar and the Commandant agree to release him and Bon from the camp. The men are briefly sent back to Saigon. From there, they are ferried across the Mekong River and sent out of the country on a fishing trawler that holds one hundred and fifty people. The vessel is cramped and suffocating. The narrator realizes that he may not survive the trip. However, if he does, he will abandon any cause that is unrelated to the only one that he now believes to matter—his will to live.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

The Narrator – The unnamed protagonist of the novel, also known as the Captain. He is twenty-five at the time in which the novel is set, and was likely born in 1945. He is a double agent, working for both the former South Vietnamese Army as an aide-de-camp, intelligence officer, and cultural attaché, and for the North Vietnamese as a spy. He speaks perfect English with an American accent and is knowledgeable about Anglophone culture. He is acting as a refugee in Los Angeles and continues to work for the General and his family, usually as a chauffeur. When the narrator worked for the General in Saigon, he lived with him and his family at their villa. The narrator is highly literate, has a dark sense of humor, and often believes that he's more intelligent than those around him. He is the biracial product of a union between a Vietnamese servant and the French priest for whom she worked. He was born in Ban Me Thuot in North Vietnam and lived there for nine years. He attended lycée, or the French equivalent of high school, with Bon and Man and later enrolled at Occidental College with the help of his mentor, Claude, and Professor Avery Hammer. He graduated from the college, where he wrote his senior thesis on Graham Greene's novel *The Quiet American*, entitled "Myth and Symbol in the Literature of Graham Greene," in 1963. He then went on to obtain a master's degree before returning to Vietnam, where he worked for the North and the South. He also spent some time working as a secret policeman and as an

interrogator at the National Interrogation Center in Saigon. He belongs to a three-man Communist cell along with Man and Ngo. The narrator's mission, assigned to him by Man, is to learn the ways of Americans. The narrator escapes from Vietnam, along with the General, Madame, and their family, on a C-130 Hercules, and goes first to Guam, then to Camp Pendleton in San Diego, California. He returns to Occidental College, with the help of Professor Hammer, to work as a clerk in the Department of Oriental Studies, where he meets Sofia Mori. He leaves Los Angeles, where he shares an apartment with Bon, to work on the film *The Hamlet* for several months in the Philippines. The narrator has a mole on his face, which Man partly uses as his justification for making the narrator a "mole," or spy. The other reason is that the narrator is not an agitator and usually avoids conflict.

The General – The narrator describes him as a "thin man of excellent posture." He is a veteran campaigner who has earned many medals. With his wife, Madame, he has five children, one of whom is Lan. He has only nine fingers and eight toes due to bullets and shrapnel. He is an epicure who enjoys good French wine, and a Christian—"in that order." He favors French and American democracies over Communism. He speaks "precise, formal English." Before arriving in Guam and then in California as a refugee, the General once spent a few months in the United States in 1958 as a junior officer, training at Fort Benning, Georgia with the Green Berets. There, he was permanently "inoculated" against Communism. He and Madame, like the narrator, settle in Los Angeles. They are sponsored by the sister-in-law of an American colonel who was once the General's adviser. They live in a bungalow in a nice part of Los Angeles near Hollywood. He spends his first year in Los Angeles unemployed, alcoholic, and angry with his fate. After a year, he and his wife open a liquor store on Hollywood Boulevard. Among the refugees, however, his reputation as a general stands and he continues to fight against the Communists, ordering the killings of anyone suspected of working with the Viet Cong, including the crapulent major and Sonny. He also uses the funds from his liquor store, Madame's restaurant, and a front organization dedicated to South Vietnamese veterans, to fund his guerrilla army in Vietnam.

Claude – The General's most trusted friend and a friend and mentor to the narrator, though Claude is unaware of the narrator's Communist sympathies. Claude reveals to the narrator that he is one-sixteenth black. They meet when Claude finds the nineteen-year-old narrator on a refugee barge in 1954. Claude presented himself as someone working for refugee relief. He is actually in the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), which, in the 1950s, was called the Office of Strategic Services (OSS). Currently, his cover is working in the American embassy to promote the development of tourism in Vietnam. He trained the narrator in interrogation tactics and worked with him at the National Interrogation Center in Saigon. Claude speaks poor Vietnamese and worse French, though he speaks excellent English. He is six-two and has perfect vision. He keeps in shape by doing two hundred push-ups each morning with his houseboy squatting on his back. He's an avid reader, particularly of the work of the English scholar, Dr. Richard Hedd. In Vietnam, he had a girlfriend named Kim, who he had to leave behind after the fall of Saigon. When the narrator sees Claude again in Los Angeles at Professor Hammer's home, he looks the same, aside from gaining a few pounds.

Bon – One of the narrator's three "blood brothers," along with Man. He is the husband of Linh and the father of Duc, who is also the narrator's godson. He has the appearance of a handsome man who has been "beaten to a pulp." He has large, "parachute-like ears" and a chin that looks as though it is "perpetually tucked into the folds of his neck." His flat nose is "bent hard right." Politically, he is conservative and "a genuine patriot" who has hated Communists since a local group of them forced his father, a village chief, to kneel in the village square and make a confession before shooting him behind the ear. As a former airman, he has the ability to jump out of airplanes, walk thirty miles with eighty pounds on his back, and hit a bull's-eye with a pistol and rifle. Bon and the narrator became friends at lycée, where Bon jumped into a fight to protect the narrator from bullies who called him "unnatural." Bon is a dedicated and obedient soldier. Under the General's orders, he murders the crapulent major, calling it and all other politically-motivated murders "assassinations." Later, they are both sent back to Vietnam to fight the General's guerrilla war against the Communists. They are both also captured and sent to a detention camp for over a year, before being released by the Commissar and the Commandant and sent out of Vietnam.

Man / The Commissar – The narrator first identifies Man as his "handler." Man is a Communist working for the Viet Cong, or the North Vietnamese. He, along with Bon, is also one of the narrator's "blood brothers." He is the son of a dentist and has siblings who pretend not to know that he is a revolutionary. He is also an avid reader and storyteller who, if he lived during a time of peace, might have become a literature teacher at his former lycée. He has translated three of Erle Stanley Gardner's *Perry Mason* mysteries into Vietnamese and wrote "a forgettable Zolaesque novel under a pen name." Like Bon, he has studied the United States, but he has never visited the country. During their school days, Man was the leader of a three-man study group consisting of him, the narrator, and another former classmate, which is also a sleeper cell of revolutionaries that studies revolutionary classics while they wait to act. Man was also a junior member of another Communist sleeper cell. His radical anti-colonialist ideas were inspired by both a great-uncle, who was a gravedigger who served in Europe during World War I, and the anti-colonialist French nurse whom he married, who is Man's aunt in Paris. Man directs the narrator to send letters to his aunt, who acts as

a go-between for members of the Communist Party in Vietnam and France. Man and the narrator met at lycée when Man protected him from bullies who called him "unnatural." He's married to a revolutionary who attended the lycée's sister school. He's also the father of a boy and a girl who are around seven and eight when the narrator reunites with Man at the detention camp in North Vietnam. At the camp, the narrator no longer recognizes his old friend, whose face has been badly burned by napalm. At the camp, Man is known as the Commissar.

Madame – The narrator describes her as a woman with "a mind like an abacus, the spine of a drill instructor, and the body of a virgin even after five children." Despite her toughness, she is a delicate-looking woman, making her "the ideal Vietnamese woman." The General is happily married to her. When she and the General settle in Los Angeles with their family, she is the one who finds schools for the children, ensures that the rent is paid, shops for groceries, cooks, does all the chores, and finds a church while her husband undergoes a personal crisis. Later, she opens a pho restaurant, using the profits to help her husband fund his guerrilla army in Vietnam.

Linh – The wife of Bon and the mother of Duc. She has a round face, "mottled and cratered" with acne scars, reminding one of a harvest moon. She dies, along with Duc, during a missile attack on the airport when she, Man, and Duc try to escape from South Vietnam after the fall of Saigon.

Duc – The son of Bon and Linh and the godson of the narrator. The narrator wonders how Bon and Linh, who are described as unattractive people, conceived a child as cute as Duc. He dies, along with his mother, during a missile attack as he and his parents try to escape from South Vietnam by plane after the fall of Saigon.

Mimi – One of a "triumvirate" of Saigon call girls, including Ti Ti and Phi Phi, who awaits a plane to escape from Vietnam, along with the narrator and other evacuees. She is tall with long, straight hair and pink nail polish on her fingernails and toenails. She has a "throaty voice" and speaks with a Hue dialect. Her voice causes the narrator to swoon.

Ti Ti – One of a "triumvirate" of Saigon call girls, including Mimi and Phi Phi, who awaits a plane to escape from Vietnam, along with the narrator and other evacuees. She is "fragile and petite," with "a fabulous beehive hairdo" that makes her look taller. She has pale, eggshell-colored skin and dewy eyelashes. The narrator seems to be particularly attracted to Ti Ti.

Phi Phi – One of a "triumvirate" of Saigon call girls, including Mimi and Ti Ti, who awaits to escape from Vietnam, along with the narrator and other evacuees. She is the leader of the trio. She has a voluptuous figure and smells of the same perfume that the narrator's mother once wore. The scent causes the narrator to fall in love with Phi Phi.

Sarge – A military soldier named Ed who has a surname that Mimi, Ti Ti, and Phi Phi can't pronounce. He guards the embassy and "loves" Vietnamese prostitutes so much that he arranged for them to get safe passage out of the country. He got a bus and drove up and down Tu Do Street, where prostitutes in Saigon worked, and picked up as many as he could who wanted to leave. He got the women to the air base by telling the police that he was bringing them for a "party" where they would entertain the soldiers at the airport.

Professor Avery Wright Hammer – The narrator's former professor and Claude's college roommate. At Claude's urging on the narrator's behalf, Professor Hammer secured a scholarship for the narrator at Occidental College and became his "most important teacher after Claude and Man." Professor Hammer guided the narrator in American Studies and supervised his senior thesis on Graham Greene, despite the subject being outside of his field. Professor Hammer agrees to be the narrator's sponsor, helping him get out of the refugee camp in San Diego. He gets the narrator a clerical job in the Department of Oriental Studies at Occidental. He also takes up a collection, on the narrator's behalf, among the narrator's former teachers. Professor Hammer is a gay man who has a boyfriend named Stan. Claude first mentions the professor's homosexuality to the narrator in 1963 because he doesn't want him to be surprised. He lives in a Craftsman bungalow in Pasadena and owns an extensive jazz collection. When he was young, he was a Communist.

Ms. Sofia Mori – The secretary of the Department of Oriental Studies at Occidental College, where the narrator works as a clerk. She is forty-six years old and was born in Gardena, California. She is a Nisei, or second-generation Japanese-American. She wears rhinestoned, horn-rimmed glasses and, initially, doesn't seem to like the narrator. She is independent, feminist, and espouses free love. Soon, they begin a sexual relationship which Sofia insists will remain casual. Sofia is Japanese-American and dislikes the Department Chair because of his fetish for Asians and his condescending attitude. Despite their physical intimacy, the narrator retains an air of formality with her, usually addressing her as "Ms. Mori." She and the narrator eventually stop seeing each other after he leaves for the Philippines to work on *The Hamlet*. At this time, Ms. Mori becomes romantically involved with Sonny.

Abe Mori – A relative of Sofia's who is likely her older brother, given his eligibility to fight in World War II, though his relationship to her is never specified. The Mori family spent time in an internment camp during the Second World War. In response to America's betrayal, Abe refused to fight in the war when he was drafted. He was imprisoned for his objection. After his release, he left the United States to live in Japan. However, he also felt like an outsider in the land of his ancestors. As of the time that Sofia tells her brother's story, he's still living in Japan. Despite the difficulties of living there as an

American, she claims that he's still happier in Japan than he was in the United States.

The Department Chair – A blond, white male academic who is the head of the Department of Oriental Studies at Occidental College. He is a serious man who lacks a sense of humor. He's between the ages of seventy and eighty years old and enjoys engaging the narrator in long discussions about Vietnamese culture and language. His office is decorated with books and tchotchkes accumulated over a lifetime of exploring the Orient. He has "an elaborate Oriental rug" on his office wall and a Chinese wife, between one-half and two-thirds his age, named Ling Ling, whom he met in Taiwan. They have a son together who is much older than he is in the family photo on the professor's desk.

Reverend Ramon – Referred to as Reverend R-r-r-ramon, he is the leader of the Everlasting Church of Prophets in Los Angeles. The narrator gets him to agree to sponsor and employ Bon after "minimal persuasion and a modest cash donation." The reverend is described as a "rotund" man whose church is a "humble storefront" sitting next to an auto body shop and a vacant lot inhabited by heroin addicts. Bon works for Reverend Ramon as a janitor and is paid in non-taxable income so that the church can serve "Mammon and God."

The Crapulent Major – A fat *bon vivant* who enjoys good food and drink, particularly the Chinese restaurants in Cholon—this is why the narrator refers to him as "crapulent," meaning over-indulgent in drinking and eating. The major is of Chinese descent and one of five officers whom the narrator chooses for evacuation after the fall of Saigon. At Special Branch in Saigon, his job is "to analyze Chinese-language communication and to keep track of the subterranean subterfuges of Cholon, where the National Liberation Front had constructed an underground network for political agitation, terrorist organizing, and black market smuggling." For the narrator, the major is his source of information for where he can locate the best Chinese food in Cholon. He serves the same purpose in Greater Los Angeles. The General dislikes and mistrusts him, though his distaste seems to be most directly related to the major's weight. The major has twins, conceived at a refugee camp, whom he and his wife have named Spinach and Broccoli. He named the first in honor of Popeye's secret weapon and the latter after watching American commercials that promoted broccoli as an important source of nourishment. In California, the major takes a job as a gas station attendant. Bon shoots and kills the major on the Fourth of July.

Son Do ("Sonny") – One of the narrator's friends from college who got his Anglophone nickname in 1969. Sonny was a scholarship student at a college in Orange County, California, where he studied journalism. Sonny left Vietnam, promising his parents that he would liberate the country from the United States. He once reported for an Orange County newspaper and lived in a town called Westminster. He edits a newspaper that serves the Vietnamese community. Moved by the refugee plight, he started the newspaper, which is the first to print news in Vietnamese. He is a "naked leftist" who thinks that he's always right, and is always eager to address an opponent's inconsistencies. Depending on one's perspective, he was either self-confident or arrogant during his school days. His grandfather was a mandarin, or a traditionalist elder, who loathed the French. He became so politically inflammatory that the colonizers sent him "on a one-way berth to Tahiti," where he supposedly befriended the painter Paul Gauguin, then died either of dengue fever or "an incurable strain of virulent homesickness." As a student, Sonny led the antiwar faction of Vietnamese foreign students, which assembled each month in the student union or in someone's apartment. Sonny later becomes involved with the narrator's former lover, Sofia Mori. Concerned about the impact of some of his reporting, the General orders the narrator to kill Sonny. The narrator goes to Sonny's apartment and fatally shoots him five times.

The Tax Collector – A South Vietnamese man who has an overbite and hairs sprouting from a mole "the size of a marble" on his cheek. His official occupation is "rice wine merchant," while his black market occupation is "casino operator." "Tax collector" is listed as his hobby. He spends a week in "interrogation" where he is beaten until his questioners are convinced that he is not a Viet Cong, or Communist, operative. He bribes the crapulent major with a year's salary to be released from the interrogation center. The major accepts the bribe and gives the narrator his share, which the latter gives to Man to donate to the revolution.

Lan ("Lana") – The daughter of the General and Madame. She was a tomboy growing up and an excellent student. Her talent in scholastics led to her getting a scholarship to attend the University of California, Berkeley. Her parents initially refused to let her attend, due to their belief that the school was "a communist colony." For each time that they refused, she attempted suicide—first by swallowing a fistful of pills and then by jumping into the Saigon River. When her parents concede, she flies to California in the fall of 1972 to begin her studies in Art History. She graduates from Berkeley, *cum laude*. Her parents are scandalized when she returns to Vietnam, dressed in bell bottoms and tight-fitting tops. She expresses a desire to become a singer. The narrator sees her again, for the first time since she was a school girl, when she performs as a back-up singer at a wedding. She moves to Brentwood, a wealthy enclave of Los Angeles, and works in an art gallery while continuing to pursue her singing ambitions. She is politically progressive and has had numerous boyfriends. While the narrator thinks that she has talent as a performer, her parents detest her sexually suggestive behavior on- and off-stage. The narrator is very attracted to her and they have one sexual encounter on the night that he kills Sonny.

The Congressman – A Republican man in his forties who represents a district in Orange County. The narrator first meets him at the wedding between a marine colonel's daughter and the son of the vice president of the Saigon branch of Bank of America. He served as a Green Beret from 1962 to 1964. He is nicknamed "Napalm Ned," "Knock-'em-Dead Ned," and "Nuke-'em-All Ned." He is a man of large stature who lived for two years in the Highlands in Vietnam, fighting with the South Vietnamese Army. He also seems to speak perfect Vietnamese. He is fervently anti-Communist and this is one of the reasons why he is so welcoming to the South Vietnamese refugees. The Congressman exhibits the aggressiveness of a lawyer and the smoothness of a politician. He lives in Huntington Beach with his wife, Rita, and has a district office in a strip mall in Huntington Beach. Contrary to the bombast he exhibits onstage, he is soft-spoken in private. One of his legislative priorities is regulation of movies and music. The Auteur first consults with him about *The Hamlet* until the Congressman recommends the narrator as a script consultant.

Rita – The Congressman's wife. The narrator meets her, along with Madame and the General, at a lunch at her and her husband's home in Huntington Beach. She is a Cuban refugee from Fidel Castro's revolution. She bears "a passing resemblance" to an aged and plumper Rita Hayworth. She believes that the Cubans and the South Vietnamese are cousins in their shared cause against Communism. She is a housewife with strict rules for her children, including no rock music, no dating until they are eighteen, and a ten o'clock curfew.

Dr. Richard Hedd – An English scholar of Asian Studies and the author of *Asian Communism and the Oriental Mode of Destruction: On Understanding and Defeating the Marxist Threat to Asia*. The book is well-regarded by former secretaries of defense, a U.S. senator, and a renowned television anchor. Hedd is the narrator's idol. They later meet at a dinner at a country club in Anaheim organized by the Congressman.

The Communist Agent – A twenty-two-year-old North Vietnamese sympathizer who tries to swallow a list with the names of important members of the South Vietnamese Army, including the narrator and the General. She is raped by three policemen in a movie theater that is sometimes used as an interrogation room while Claude, the crapulent major, and the narrator watch. She is then sent to prison. After three years in holding, her eyes have faded and her hair is thinning. The narrator promises himself that he will soon have her released.

The Parisian Aunt – She is Man's aunt and a Communist sympathizer to whom the narrator relays letters written in invisible ink. She is a Trotskyist and an anti-colonialist who once worked as a nurse. Man's great-uncle fell in love with her, and she persuaded him to join the French Communists. Together, they remained in France and had a daughter. She lives in the thirteenth arrondissement, or district, of Paris. She has never officially joined the Communist Party and is, therefore, unlikely to be surveilled. She is a seamstress with three Siamese cats and no suspicious links. Man mentions that she has "no children," which could mean that her daughter is no longer living. Very often, the narrator refers to her as "my Parisian aunt."

The Narrator's Mother – She worked as a maid for the narrator's father and began an affair with him, resulting in her becoming pregnant with the narrator when she was thirteen. She is barely literate and writes with "a cramped, shy hand." The bit of education that she has comes from the narrator's father teaching her Scripture and how to count in French. The narrator sees her for the last time the month before he leaves to attend college in the United States. As a parting gift she gives him a box of Pétit Écolier cookies, his favorite since childhood, along with a notebook and a pen. She dies from tuberculosis at the age of thirty-four. The narrator finds out about her death in a letter sent to him by his father when he is in his junior year at Occidental College. Unlike many people of her social status, she was buried in a cemetery with a headstone, paid for by the narrator's father. Not having been present during her burial, the narrator creates an artificial grave for her in the cemetery built for the production of *The Hamlet*.

The Narrator's Father – A French priest who employed the narrator's mother as a maid when she was thirteen. He teaches her how to read Scripture and count in French, and he regales her with stories about life in France. He never acknowledges the narrator as his son, though he does notify him about his mother's death. The narrator's father dies in 1968, soon after the narrator returns to Vietnam from California. He is shot in the head while listening to his assassin's confession at his church.

The Poet – A writer who works as an emcee during a staging of *Fantasia* at the Roosevelt Hotel in Hollywood. He is "a modestly built" and "modestly dressed" bespectacled man whose writing has appeared in literary journals and newspapers. The narrator describes his poetry as "gentle and nostalgic" and "about the textures of everyday life." The narrator thinks that his most memorable poem is about washing rice. He has also written a few columns for Sonny's newspaper describing "the vagaries of American life" and the cultural miscommunication between Americans and the Vietnamese community.

Stan – Professor Hammer's boyfriend. He is a doctoral student at UCLA and the same age as the narrator. He's writing his dissertation on the American literary expatriates of Paris. He has white teeth and blonde hair, giving him the appearance of a model in a toothpaste ad, "where his role would be the young father of toothsome cherubs." The narrator meets him when he's invited to dinner at the professor's home.

The Auteur – The director of *The Hamlet*. He's an Oscar-winner with a home in the Hollywood Hills. His personal assistant is a woman named Violet. The narrator notices that he has hair

along his forearms and inside the collar of his shirt, a sign of masculinity that reminds the narrator of his own relative hairlessness. The Auteur's last two films, beginning with a picture called *Hard Knock*, have made him the hottest writer-director in town—the critically-acclaimed film about a Greek American youth growing up during the Detroit riots was "loosely autobiographical." His other film, *Venice Beach*, was about the failure of the American Dream for a married couple writing "competing versions of the Great American novel." Like Violet, he speaks in short, brusque fragments.

The Thespian – The Thespian portrays Captain Will Shamus in *The Hamlet*. He started his long career off Broadway. He is known for immersing himself so much in his role that he stays in character and refuses to shower and shave so that he can feel what it's like to be a frontline soldier who has been in the jungle for days. The narrator notes that he gives off an aroma like "slightly less than fresh ricotta." He also demands to sleep in a pup tent instead of in an air-conditioned trailer.

The Idol – The Idol portrays Sergeant Jay Bellamy in *The Hamlet*. He started his career as a singer who became a star after releasing "a bubble-gum pop hit." *The Hamlet* is his first film role. He prepared for it by going through military drilling and shaving his hair into a GI haircut.

The Watchman – The leader of cell C-7 of terrorist unit Z-99. The terrorist unit is based in the secret zone of Binh Duong Province and has been responsible for hundreds of grenade attacks, minings, bombings, mortarings, and assassinations that have killed a few thousand people and have terrorized all of Saigon. The terrorist unit's specialty is the dual bomb attack, with the second designed to kill rescuers. He gets his name due to his ability to turn wristwatches into triggering devices for these improvised bombs. He removes the second and hour hands from watches, inserts a battery wire through a hole in the crystal, and sets the minute hand to the desired delay time. He is "a tiny, shivering man with a full head of coarse hair." He is a graduate of philosophy from the University of Saigon and the eldest son in a respectable Catholic family who has disowned him due to his radical activities. Before becoming a terrorist, he was an actual watchmaker.

Ngo – The third member of the cell of Communist conspirators to which the narrator and Man belong. He dies in a provincial interrogation center, arrested for possession of anti-government pamphlets. He loved the poetry of Charles Baudelaire. During their lycée days, the three of them would meet in Ngo's garden and his mother would serve them snacks.

James Yoon – A Korean-American actor in his mid-thirties who plays the older brother, Binh, in *The Hamlet*. He dislikes the young actor playing his younger brother, Danny Boy, because the boy tends to upstage him. Yoon is the best-known actor on the set, an "Asian Everyman" who has worked mostly in television. People tend to recognize him without knowing his name. He has "generically handsome features" and an overpowering smile. He is best known for a highly popular and recurring television commercial selling Sheen, a brand of dishwashing soap. The slogan that he utters in the commercial is "Confucius say, Clean with Sheen!" Otherwise, he has had small roles in films with major stars, such as Frank Sinatra, that usually involve him being killed by the lead white actor. He has an extensive death scene in *The Hamlet* that he hopes will lead to an Oscar nomination. Yoon is gay and, during the filming of the movie, makes a pass at the narrator. Yoon is also an alcoholic.

Asia Soo – The actress of mixed-race descent who portrays Mai in *The Hamlet*. Her mother is a British fashion designer and her father is a Chinese hotelier. She is in her early-twenties, a high-end fashion model, and a lesbian. Nevertheless, the narrator flirts with her at the pool at their hotel. Predictably, she rejects him, and they become friends.

Danny Boy – The name of the character in *The Hamlet* who is the younger brother of the characters Binh and Mai. The boy is later informally adopted by Sergeant Jay Bellamy and taken to live in St. Louis with the sergeant and his millionaire parents. The narrator refers to the child actor playing the role by his character's name because he can't remember the boy's actual name. The young actor is the scion of a Filipino acting family. His mother pampers him on the set and tells the narrator that her son, who also sings, is destined for Broadway. He wins over everyone on the set by singing "a high-pitched version" of the song "Feelings." The young actor's mother notes how he can pronounce the "F" in "feelings" due to lessons in elocution. The only person working on the film who doesn't like Danny Boy is James Yoon, due to the child actor's tendency to upstage other actors. Danny Boy mimics the Thespian by insisting on staying in character at all times.

The Tall Sergeant – One of the four Vietnamese extras playing Viet Cong in *The Hamlet*, known in the film as King Cong. He participates in a scene in which he and the other extras torture James Yoon's character, Binh. He, along with the other extras, is a refugee and a former South Vietnamese Army soldier.

The Admiral – The leader of the remaining armed forces of the Republic of Vietnam. He is a slim man with "a familiar, avuncular smile." His face is "angular, gaunt, and almost handsome." The narrator perceives him as having the classic nobility of "a scholar or mandarin." His hair is gray, but not white, and thinning a bit on top. He has a "neatly sculpted" goatee. Like Ho Chi Minh, he asked to be called "uncle." He dresses simply, in a black blouse and pants that match the wardrobe of his guerrillas. His quarters are sparsely furnished with reed mats, bamboo bookshelves, and a simple bamboo desk and chair. After the Americans left Vietnam, he allied with the Thai. He swore on a ship before his men that they would fight for decades, if necessary.

The Affectless Lieutenant – The leader of the three marines. The narrator remembers the group from a haphazard meeting, along with Bon and Man, in an alley in Saigon some years ago. The three marines were drunk, and the narrator pulled a pistol on the affectless lieutenant for being disrespectful. The affectless lieutenant has lived in the Mekong Delta for his entire life. He has dark skin, but he is more distinguishable from the other two marines, who are darker. He and the narrator are reunited to fight the General's guerrilla war. While returning to his camp site after a bathroom break, he loses his leg during an explosion, and dies from the injury.

The Commandant – The officer in charge of the North Vietnamese camp where the narrator and Bon are prisoners. He has "the high cheekbones and delicate features of an opera singer" and a morose character that the narrator attributes to homesickness. Otherwise, the narrator describes him as "eminently reasonable," though the Commandant is a rather fanatical Communist who is eager to execute dissenters. He fought a war for ten years from a cave in Laos. While the narrator makes his confession, the Commandant strikes out what he doesn't like using a blue pencil because, as he tells the narrator, Stalin also used a blue pencil. The Commandant fears the ideas to which the narrator was exposed in the West. To "correct" him, he forces the narrator to undergo a process of re-education, which involves various forms of torture.

The Baby-faced Guard – A young guard at the prison in North Vietnam who peers through the slot in the narrator's iron door to mock and degrade him. He has a tattoo on his biceps written in blue ink that reads "Born in the North to Die in the South." The narrator describes him as having "a gamy smell."

The Doctor – The man who metes out most of the torture methods used on the narrator. He injects the narrator with truth serum and shocks him with a device that delivers static electricity. Near the end of his release, the doctor delivers another ream of paper and orders the narrator to recopy his confession. The narrator obeys, including additional information about what he experienced in the examination room. The revised manuscript pleases the doctor.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Violet – The Auteur's personal assistant. She sends the narrator the script for *The Hamlet*. When they meet, she is dismissive of him, leading him to think that she's probably racist. She is very brusque and clearly ambitious. She has a blunt, square haircut and blunt, clean fingernails.

Harry – The head of production, leading an all-male production crew on *The Hamlet*. The narrator meets him shortly after he arrives on the film's location in the Philippines. Harry is responsible for constructing sets and preparing wardrobes. He is originally from Minnesota.

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.

CULTURAL DUALITY

Viet Thanh Nguyen's novel *The Sympathizer* uses duality as an overarching theme to explore the narrator's personal racial ambivalence, as well as the social ambivalence of the Vietnamese refugee community in the United States. The story follows the nameless narrator to California after the fall of Saigon in 1975 (which marked the end of the Vietnam War), where he and other refugees must rebuild their lives. However, the narrator is also a sleeper agent for the Viet Cong, reporting on the activities of the refugees to his Communist superiors. When writing about the Vietnam War, the clearest dualities are the political ones between the Communist Viet Cong and the purported advocates of Western-style democracy in the South Vietnamese Army, as well as the geographical and cultural dualities between the North and the South, the East and the West. The narrator is the personification of these divides. He's rejected by both the East and the West due to his failure, through no fault of his own, to be ethnically, culturally, and ideologically whole. Meanwhile, the refugee community learns to integrate into American culture without losing their native identity. This, too, requires the adoption of dual sensibilities. Nguyen examines how the narrator and other Vietnamese refugees establish identity, not by choosing sides, but by embracing dualism.

The narrator's cultural ambivalence arises out of Vietnam's colonial history. He must write his confession to the Commandant, a high-ranking Communist officer who imprisons the narrator in a detention center after his attempt to invade Vietnam with a handful of guerrillas, including his friend Bon. The narrator starts his confession by defining himself as "a man of two minds...able to see any issue from both sides." This sense of twoness first comes from his biracial identity—he's the son of a thirteen-year-old Vietnamese maid and a French priest. This makes him an embodiment of Vietnam's exploitation in the context of benevolent Western paternalism.

The narrator's father, the priest, never acknowledges him, while his mother refers to him as "her love child." He is both wanted and unwanted. Legally, he is an "illegitimate son," while the Oxford English Dictionary defines him as a "natural child." Thus, he exists as a biological fact, but not as a legal one, due to being the product of an interracial affair between unmarried people. This, along with the priest's ability to hide his crime

behind his vow of celibacy, makes the narrator seem illegitimate among Westerners.

Meanwhile, Vietnamese people refer to the narrator and other biracial children in the Pacific—the products of colonial rule and American occupation—as "the dust of life." The narrator is thus regarded as what is left over after an activity has ended—in this instance, colonial occupation and war. In other instances, he's "a bastard" who "[doesn't] look like anyone" in his home country. He's an outsider due to his failure to meet a test of racial purity. In each of these examples, the narrator is constructed as a victim of colonial history. To escape from this construction of his identity, he defines himself as "a man of two faces" and "a man of two minds," thereby embracing the duality that his people reject.

Self-definition under Western domination requires the colonized subject to compromise. The narrator describes how non-white people have to learn who they are while they also learn how to anticipate and satisfy the needs of white people in order to survive. Nguyen applies W.E.B. DuBois's concept of "double-consciousness"—that is, the sense of having a divided identity, which makes it difficult, or altogether impossible, to define oneself as a fully-realized individual. Double-consciousness is necessary in helping the Vietnamese refugees both to remain connected to their own community and to assimilate into American culture.

During the Congressman's lunch at the country club, for example, the General demonstrates how it's possible to defend one's own values without offending white people. He manages to disagree with Dr. Richard Hedd about the relative importance of Vietnam on the world stage by using language from the scholar's own book, in which he validates the importance of fighting the Soviets and "their servants" in Vietnam. This tactic allows the General to assert his point while also validating the scholar's ideas. The General feigns the attitude of self-effacing meekness that whites sometimes expect from Asians, while also defending the importance of his country.

In regard to their lives in the U.S., the narrator describes how the refugee community tries to blend in with other Americans, while still maintaining connections to their own community, particularly through food. The refugees learn American culture by eating the same food as Americans and watching popular films. They ingest the culture through their senses. They also spend hours chewing on dried squid, which becomes "the cud of remembrance." Sensory experience helps the Vietnamese to integrate into American culture, while it also keeps them connected to their own culture. As a result, they develop dual sensibilities, both to survive and to remain connected to who they are.

In his depictions of the narrator's identity as well as his illustrations of the various ways in which the refugee community assimilates without abandoning its connection to Vietnam, Nguyen asserts that the refugees' cultural identity requires them to embrace the duality that they would have previously condemned in the narrator. The narrator's biracial identity exemplifies what the Vietnamese have become as a result of both French colonialism and the Vietnam War—products of the East and West and survivors of a contentious history between the hemispheres.

ASIAN IDENTITY IN THE UNITED STATES

Aside from exploring the centuries-old divide between the East and the West, Nguyen more specifically addresses the racism that Vietnamese refugees endure in the United States, due to persistent stereotypes about Asian people. The author uses two key Western institutions—universities and movie studios—to explore how racism and misrepresentation are systemic. Nguyen observes how Americans, who lost the Vietnam War, still control the narrative of the war, refashioning themselves as heroes and the Vietnamese as hapless victims waiting to be rescued. These images, perpetuated through film and often validated in academia, misrepresent the Vietnamese community while using some of its members to tell a distorted narrative. Nguyen demonstrates how the community has not only been undermined by colonialism and war, but also by its inability to tell its own stories.

When the narrator returns to California and his alma mater, Occidental College, he gets a re-education in how institutions define American culture. With the help of his former instructor, Professor Avery Wright Hammer, the narrator gets his first job as a clerk for the Department of Asian Studies. He works with the department's Japanese-American secretary, Ms. Sofia Mori, with whom he embarks on a romantic relationship. The Department Chair is a white American with a fetish for all things Asian. He condescends to both the narrator and Sofia, believing that his scholarship entitles him to explain their identities to them.

The Department Chair enjoys engaging the narrator in long discussions about Vietnamese language and culture, due to no one else on the faculty possessing any knowledge of Vietnam. This absence reveals the limitations of academic departments in teaching about a region as large and diverse as Asia. However, it seems that the Department Chair doesn't really listen to the narrator or make an effort to learn about him. He assumes that the narrator is Amerasian and gives him a homework assignment for which he is asked to write down "Oriental" and "Occidental" qualities. The Department Chair imagines that the narrator's biracial identity can offer a bridge between the hemispheres. This attitude positions the narrator not as a person, but as a blending of races, a socially-imposed construct that erases his individuality.

Ms. Mori faces similar problems with the Department Chair, though his condescension toward her is complicated by her

gender. The Department Chair knows that Sofia is a second-generation Japanese American and chastises her for not knowing the language of her ancestors and not taking more of an interest in Japan. The Department Chair expects Asians to have a commitment to cultural authenticity that he would not expect from himself or other Americans of European descent. Worse, Sofia's feminism and assertiveness counteract the stereotype of the Asian woman as "a dainty little china doll with bound feet" or "a geisha who's ready to please." Despite her aversion to these stereotypes, she's still eager for the approval of white people and notes how they merely "like" her, while they "love" the narrator. Ms. Mori's conflict lies in wanting to be perceived as any other American, though she relies on white people to foster that perception.

Perceptions about Asians have been strongly influenced by cinema. The narrator's experience working as a script consultant on the Hollywood film, *The Hamlet*, positions him against another nameless white male authority, who is known only by his grand title: the Auteur. *The Hamlet* is a film about the Vietnam War with not a single Vietnamese actor in the main cast. The narrator's clashes with the Auteur, the director of the film, over the script demonstrate what can happen when a member of a misrepresented and underrepresented group challenges the narrative authority that white supremacy requires.

Despite not being Vietnamese, the Auteur thinks that he's the proper authority to tell the story of the war. He is pleased to have the narrator working with him on the script because there are so few Vietnamese people in Hollywood, and authenticity is important. On the other hand, he asserts that authenticity doesn't beat the imagination and that the "story still comes first." This statement indicates that the facts about Vietnam are less important than what white audiences want to think and the stories that they want to be told. The Auteur's identity as a white man makes American audiences trust him more to tell the story because they know that he will depict what they want to see.

The narrator quickly realizes that, though he was brought in to ensure accuracy in the film, the Auteur thinks himself an expert on Vietnam through his readings about the country. The Auteur becomes aggressive and offended when the narrator mentions how he "didn't get the details right." The Auteur mentions having read Joseph Buttinger, "the foremost historian on your little part of the world." The Auteur's belittling comment is meant to help the narrator understand his place relative to the Auteur. It's also self-congratulatory—the Auteur took the time to learn about a place most would deem insignificant and worthy of forgetting, particularly as the site of America's first loss.

The narrator's experiences as a clerk at the college and as a script consultant illustrate the Asian-American struggle with always being perceived as foreign. For the narrator, this sense of not belonging is heightened both because he's a refugee and a person of French and Vietnamese descent. His ability to speak perfect, American-accented English leads to his being misidentified as an American, though one that is less perceptibly "authentic" than a white American. Like Ms. Mori, he is spoken to only when white people want to know more about Asia, but he's disregarded when he fails to deliver the narratives that people want to hear, just as Ms. Mori is dismissed for not satisfying the stereotypical perception of Asian women. The result leaves both with the sense that they are required to represent "authenticity," though this expectation has less to do with who they are than with the preconceptions they can justify.

LOYALTY VS. DUPLICITY

The narrator in *The Sympathizer* is a Communist mole for the North Vietnamese who is also a captain in the South Vietnamese army, working directly for the General and his wife, Madame. For the narrator, North Vietnam is a motherland—that is, his birthplace and the place to which he remains politically committed. South Vietnam is a fatherland of opportunity where, with the help of Claude and the General, he fulfills his personal ambitions. The fact that he remains nameless in the novel enhances the sense that he has no clear sense of identity outside of these connections. However, the narrator's truest sense of loyalty is to himself. His relationships with the General and Claude, as well as with Man and Bon, are indicative of his ability to sympathize and see both sides at once. They are also indicative of his willingness to play both sides to secure his own interests. Nguyen demonstrates how loyalties often depend less on social bonds and political affiliations than they do upon personal interests.

The narrator's relationships to both Claude, a CIA agent and the narrator's mentor, and the General represent the narrator's commitment to Westernization. They share in common things that the narrator loves, which would be forbidden or condemned by his Communist cohorts. Claude secured the narrator a place at his alma mater, Occidental College, while the General, like the narrator, speaks "precise, formal English." Both men, too, serve as surrogate father figures to the narrator, creating opportunities for him and teaching him more about himself than his own father did.

Claude found the narrator in 1954 on a refugee barge, as the latter was making his way south from North Vietnam. Claude recognized the narrator's "talents"—that is, his good English skills. However, Claude may have also recognized the narrator's ability, like that of Ho Chi Minh, to see "both sides at once." Like the legendary leader, the narrator has a deep understanding of American history and culture and sees its potential to aid the Vietnamese people, just as Claude aided him in leaving the North and acquiring an education in the United States.

Similarly, the General is both an authority figure and someone who depends on the narrator's counsel. However, the narrator later realizes that class and racial differences still distance him from the General. In Saigon, the narrator lives with the General and his wife, Madame, at the family's villa and retains a close relationship with them when they all relocate to Los Angeles. His relationship with Madame and the General is spoiled when they discover his attraction to their daughter, Lan. Despite the narrator's loyalty to the family, they regard him as "a bastard," who isn't good enough for Lan. The narrator realizes that his loyalty to the General and Madame will never erase the perceived stain of his illegitimate birth. He feels betrayed by the General's dismissal, particularly after the narrator demonstrated enough devotion to be willing to kill the crapulent major and Sonny on the General's orders.

The narrator's other key bond is with his school friends, Man and Bon. Unlike his relationships with Claude and the General, which complement each other, the narrator's friendships with Man and Bon illustrate the schism within himself.

When the three boys are fourteen, they slice open their palms and make a blood oath, promising undying loyalty to each other. Bon, who is a committed South Vietnamese soldier, never learns that his best friends are Communists. While Man's betrayal is mitigated by distance—he remains in Vietnam—the narrator lives with Bon in Los Angeles. There, they carry out the General's killing orders. Meanwhile, the narrator maintains an epistolary relationship with Man. The narrator technically maintains his commitment to both men, but he can only do so by betraying both.

The narrator's blood oath with Man, who represents the Communist Viet Cong, and with Bon, who represents South Vietnam's muddled democracy, exemplifies the country's civil war. The narrator doesn't declare full loyalty either to Bon or Man because both men are a part of him. The narrator's blood is literally and figuratively mingled with both Man and Bon, with both North and South Vietnam.

Through his friendships with Man and Bon, the narrator expresses his divided loyalty to North Vietnam—his birthplace and the source of his political loyalties—and to South Vietnam, where he reaped opportunities and became known as more than the result of an unfortunate union. Though the narrator's positions as both a South Vietnamese Army captain and a Viet Cong spy are duplicitous, they're also indicative of his commitments both to Western civilization and to Communist ideology. He is loyal to both value systems because they both represent who he is.

MORAL AMBIVALENCE AND PURPOSE

In *The Sympathizer*, the nameless narrator's duplicity in his relationships fosters a sense of moral ambivalence. His commitments to both Communism and Western democracy, to both North and South Vietnam reinforce the notion that he belongs to everyone and no one. He is nameless, known only by his titles of "captain" and comrade, because his true identity exists in the space between these labels. On the other hand, his blood brother, Bon, understands himself clearly as a soldier, a husband, and a father—until he loses both his country and his family, thereby losing his sense of purpose. Nguyen explores both men's moral ambivalence through their agreement to kill the crapulent major, who they murder outside of his Monterey Park apartment complex on the Fourth of July on the General's order. For the narrator, this act is a chance to satisfy both sides of himself. For Bon, it's a matter of proving that he still has a reason to exist. The "assassination" is the sacrifice that both men make to gain a sense of moral order and to understand what purpose they serve.

After the deaths of his wife, Linh, and son, Duc, Bon confesses to having no sense of purpose. He has existed only to serve others—first his murdered father, then his wife and son, and now the General. Without anyone to serve, he enters a state of depression. The assignment to kill the crapulent major, whom the narrator accuses of being a spy, then makes him "happy" and restores his sense of purpose. For Bon, the immoral act of killing, which he repeatedly identifies as "assassination" to reinforce its political purpose, gives his life in California meaning. He reverses his sense of displacement by reinforcing his place as a soldier.

Bon figures that he can prove that he isn't a "nobody" either by killing someone else or killing himself. After failing to avenge his father's murder at the hands of Communists, the General's order to kill the crapulent major seems like a chance for Bon to redeem himself. By obeying the General, whose age and authority make him a kind of surrogate father, Bon can both prove his commitment to being a soldier and satisfy his need for paternal approval.

Bon's agreement to kill the crapulent major in particular isn't personal, however. He expresses no opinion of the major. He also makes the distinction between a murder, which is something that one commits against the innocent, and an assassination, which is the elimination of someone who no longer serves their purpose within a system or, worse, who has betrayed it. Bon is doing his duty as a soldier by carrying out the General's order to eliminate the major, who has supposedly betrayed the army to which he pledged loyalty.

In the narrator's view, the crapulent major has a right to live, but the narrator also has a right to kill him. The major is technically innocent of being a spy, but he's also a part of the faction with which the narrator is at war—that is, the South Vietnamese. The narrator's moral ambivalence about whether or not to kill the major is rooted in his own ambivalence about his roles as a spy and an officer.

This ambivalence about who has a right to live and who deserves to die comes up during a conversation with Claude, after dinner at Professor Hammer's house. Claude assuages the narrator's guilt by saying that the major probably has "some blood on his hands." He uses the Catholic concept of Original Sin to argue that everyone is "guilty on one level and innocent on another." This form of "absolution" justifies the major's assassination, while acknowledging that his character is no worse than that of anyone else.

For the narrator, Claude's analogy to Original Sin is "simply too unoriginal for someone like him"—that is, a man who was born to a priest "who spoke of it at every Mass" while masking his own sins. The narrator is an embodiment of Original Sin. At the same time, the concept means nothing to him because he's an atheist. Claude's moral explanation is unsatisfying because it conflicts with the narrator's personal belief system, which argues against the notion that moral character is predetermined. Nevertheless, the concept of Original Sin still reminds him of his misbegotten origins, which make him feel guilty for a situation that he didn't create.

As guilty as the narrator feels for killing a man as outwardly decent and innocent as the crapulent major, it's a sacrifice that he must make so that he can continue to serve both the Communists and the Western loyalists in the South Vietnamese Army. What complicates an otherwise efficient act is that the narrator knows that the major doesn't deserve to die. Neither an oath to the army nor religious justifications are enough to assuage his personal sense of having done something wrong. Through the narrator's ambivalence regarding this act, Nguyen suggests that morality and purpose must be self-determined, particularly in the case of someone who has never felt a sense of belonging. The narrator cannot follow in Bon's faithful obedience to the General because he has never identified completely with the South Vietnamese Army and he cannot agree to Claude's concept of Original Sin because he's an atheist Communist whose Eastern heritage complicates his Catholicism. The narrator chooses moral ambivalence due to his inability to take anyone's side in an argument.

SYMBOLS

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

THE TOMBSTONE AND CEMETERY

Harry, the head of production on *The Hamlet*, creates a cemetery for the film. The headstones bear the names of living people, taken from the Los Angeles phone book, but there is one tombstone that bears the name of the narrator's deceased mother. It is the grandest tombstone in the cemetery, made of adobe but designed to appear as stately marble. Though the narrator's father paid for his mother's burial and gave her an actual tombstone, the narrator retains a sense of guilt for not being present when she died. To compensate, the narrator offers her a grave, fit for "a mandarin." In the dreamland of cinema, he's able to imagine for her the life that he believes she should have had. The tombstone is a symbol of the narrator's wish to reconnect with his mother's memory, which he briefly forgot in order to immerse himself in American life during college. With this acknowledgment of her memory—he also places her photograph on the tombstone—he also seeks a stronger connection with his Vietnamese roots. The narrator's work on *The Hamlet* is to ensure the humane representation of his people, though he ends up feeling unsuccessful in this effort. The result is that he never assuages his sense of guilt about leaving his mother, or his guilt regarding his cooperation with Americans.

When Harry tells the narrator that the cemetery, which he loves, will be destroyed for the film, it's personally devastating. For the narrator, the artificial cemetery also signaled some acknowledgement of the Vietnamese who were killed during the war. In real life the Americans erected no monument to the South Vietnamese who fought alongside them, and they dumped the bodies of their enemies into unmarked graves, not unlike landfills. Even in the fantasy world of cinema, then, the Vietnamese victims of the war are given no lasting place of honor.

THE CLOCK

When the narrator goes to the apartment of Sonny, a friend from his college days, he sees a clock "on the wall above the table" that is a replica of the clock in the General and Madame's restaurant. Like their clock, Sonny's is also set to Saigon time. The clock symbolizes the refugees' equal commitment to their homeland. Despite their disparate politics—the General and Madame are conservatives and Sonny is a leftist—they all await the time when they can return home. The refugees' anticipation parallels with the admiral's comment that the remaining South Vietnamese soldiers who, in a reversal, have become guerrilla soldiers fighting against the Communist regime, will fight "for months, years, even decades if necessary." In God's eyes, he surmises, "this [is] no time at all." The admiral's comment, as well as the habit of setting clocks to Saigon time, reinforces the sense that time is relative. It's related to one's sense of place—temporally, the refugee community has never left Vietnam—and one's commitments. The admiral strongly suggests that the guerrillas will fight for the rest of their lives. This indicates that they will measure time again only after they seize back control of their country and resume their lives as they knew them before the Communist takeover.

THE PICKLED BABY

At the detention center where the narrator is being "re-educated," the Commandant repeatedly shows him a jar containing "a greenish monstrosity" invented by "an American Frankenstein." The result of the experiment is a "naked, pickled baby boy with one body but two heads, four eyes" and "two mouths." The pickled baby is a physical manifestation of how the narrator has internalized other people's perceptions of him. He has been characterized as "a freak" and a "bastard" due to his biracial identity, and he regards himself as "a man with two minds and two faces" who is destined to be misunderstood and mistrusted in a "small world with its small-minded people." Like the specimen, the narrator is regarded as grotesque. He is a product of the West's injurious influence in the East. He is also regarded as an undesirable in Vietnam, where people are obsessed with racial purity, and notes that he "doesn't look like anyone there." The pickled baby's faces point in different directions, looking both toward the East and the West.

The baby's two-facedness is also a reflection of Man's shift in identity from being the narrator's "blood brother" to becoming the Commissar who imprisons him, suggesting that duality can take many forms—friend and enemy, comrade and oppressor. By the end of the novel, the narrator has reconciled himself to his sense of twoness and begins to refer to himself as "we" instead of "I." He rejects the Commandant's notion that the only source of redemption for "a bastard" is to choose a side. With the Commissar's help, he realizes and embraces the understanding that nothingness, or the absence of any essential meaning, is the only thing that one can know for certain. It thus becomes easier for the narrator to define himself without the burden of social impositions. The form of self-reference that he chooses is one that contradicts society's demand that one person have a singular, cohesive identity.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Grove Press edition of *The Sympathizer* published in 2016.

Chapter 1 Quotes

> I am a spy, a sleeper, a spook, a man of two faces. Perhaps not surprisingly, I am also a man of two minds. I am not some misunderstood mutant from a comic book or a horror movie, although some have treated me as such. I am simply able to see any issue from both sides.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Commandant

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

These are the first lines in the novel. The narrator is writing his confession to the Commandant—the reader within the context of the novel—while the author uses this narrative device to introduce his protagonist to the reader. In the first sentence, the narrator's personal description goes from being concrete (he declares himself a spy) to increasingly vague. "Sleeper" is shorthand for a sleeper agent—that is, someone who is sent to an enemy country to act as a potential asset when needed. However, a sleeper is obviously also someone who's asleep. There is a contrast between how the narrator starts the novel—as a man who doesn't quite know why he's being imprisoned—and with the end of the novel, in which he awakens to certain truths and even achieves enlightenment. A "spook" means a ghost and is a slang word for spy, but it's also reminiscent of a racial slur (though usually directed at Black people). Finally, he's "a man of two faces." Here, the narrator embraces the notion that he physically represents two modes of being—Asian and white—but, he also encompasses "two minds" or opposing ideologies: Eastern and Western, spy and refugee, North Vietnamese and South Vietnamese, Communist and anti-Communist.

Nguyen strongly alludes to Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man, whose narrator distinguishes between his invisibility and that of an "ectoplasm" in a horror film. Similarly, the narrator is not at all grotesque, though some have used his biracial identity to treat him as such—like a "misunderstood mutant." In fact, he's just a human being who has learned to exist within duality. His use of the modifier "simply" is deceptive; for, many people would consider it difficult to espouse two opposing ideas at once.

> The month in question was April, the cruelest month. It was the month in which a war that had run on for a very long time would lose its limbs, as is the way of wars. It was a month that meant everything to all the people in our small part of the world and nothing to most people in the rest of the world. It was a month that was both an end of a war and the beginning of…well, "peace" is not the right word is it, my dear Commandant?

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Commandant

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

It is April 30, 1975 and Saigon has just fallen into the control of the Viet Cong, or the North Vietnamese Communist army. The first clause of the first sentence is a variation on the first line of T.S. Eliot's "The Wasteland": "April is the cruelest month…". The line from the first section of Eliot's poem, "The Burial of the Dead," addresses the aftermath of the First World War. April is "cruel" because it exists between the cold barrenness of winter and the warmth and fullness of summer. It is, thus, a period of ambivalence. Similarly, the South Vietnamese have lost to the North, but they still hope that the Americans will save them from total defeat. The war has "[lost] its limbs," meaning that the South Vietnamese people no longer have the physical resources to fight. Nguyen's description of the war as a limbless body illustrates their helplessness, particularly in the aftermath of America's abandonment of the war effort. Nguyen also applies another literary influence here, re-appropriating the first line of Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* ("It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity") to describe the importance of April 1975, despite its relative unimportance to the rest of the world.

It's significant that Nguyen has chosen the first lines of well-known literary works to help him describe Vietnam's new beginning. The narrator borrows language due to not having his own to describe what will happen in Vietnam. Though the narrator has witnessed his desired outcome, he cannot claim something as simple and conclusive as "peace," which is neither the right word nor the right beginning for a people who reject the new regime of Communism.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ By this degree, the three call girls were troupers, which could not be said of 70 or 80 percent of the prostitutes in the capital and outlying cities […] Most were poor, illiterate country girls with no means of making a living except to live as ticks on the fur of the nineteen-year-old American GI […] Now am I daring to accuse American strategic planners of deliberately eradicating peasant villages in order to smoke out the girls who would have little choice but to sexually service the same boys who bombed, shelled, strafed, torched, pillaged, or merely forcibly evacuated said villages? I am merely noting that the creation of native prostitutes to service foreign privates is an inevitable outcome of a war of occupation, one of those nasty little side effects of defending freedom that all the wives, sisters, girlfriends, mothers, pastors, and politicians in Smallville, USA, pretend to ignore behind waxed and buffed walls of teeth […] ready to treat any unmentionable afflictions with the penicillin of American goodness.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Mimi , Ti Ti, Phi Phi, Sarge

Related Themes:

Page Number: 37-38

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator is at the airport. While awaiting the plane that will take him out of Saigon and to the United States, he chats with a triumvirate of Saigon prostitutes who are also applying for refugee status. They were rescued by an American serviceman named Sarge and brought to the airport, supposedly as entertainment for on-duty servicemen. Sarge's actual intention was to get these women, and as many other prostitutes as he could, a seat on a plane out of the country.

Nguyen describes the place of the prostitutes within the military-industrial complex, which exploits and discards bodies for multiple purposes. These call girls are savvy enough to find ways of making an unjust system work for them, but prostitution is one of the inevitable consequences of a devastating war. The narrator uses the phrase "foreign privates" ironically, referring both to the private first-class soldiers whom the women service and the men's genitals. When the servicemen return home, often to small towns that pride themselves on wholesome values, they are greeted with smiles ("waxed and buffed walls of teeth") that feign unawareness of the servicemen's sexual promiscuity and possible war crimes. American civilians deny this so that they can reap the benefits of this war—that is, the comfort of believing that they are defeating Communism. The

narrator's mention of "waxed and buffed teeth" also refers to the "waxed and buffed" floors of supermarkets and department stores, where Americans enjoy the splendor of capitalism. They maintain a façade of innocence and cheer to avoid compromising their comforts.

Chapter 4 Quotes

But out of deference to our hosts we kept our feelings to ourselves, sitting close to one another on prickly sofas and scratchy carpets, our knees touching under crowded kitchen tables on which sat crenellated ashtrays measuring time's passage with the accumulation of ashes, chewing on dried squid and the cud of remembrance until our jaws ached, trading stories heard second- and thirdhand about our scattered countrymen. This was the way we learned of the clan turned into slave labor by a farmer in Modesto, and the naive girl who flew to Spokane to marry her GI sweetheart and was sold to a brothel, and the widower with nine children who went out into a Minnesotan winter and lay down in the snow on his back with mouth open until he was buried and frozen and the ex-Ranger who bought a gun and dispatched his wife and two children before killing himself in Cleveland [...] and the spoiled girl seduced by heroin who disappeared into the Baltimore streets [...]

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Man / The Commissar , The Parisian Aunt

Related Themes:

Page Number: 70-71

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator tells Man, through a letter to Man's Parisian aunt, about how the refugees have fared since landing in the United States. The stories are varied, and many of them are tragic, but they are also indicators of the refugee community's resilience. Despite hearing stories of failure and immense sorrow, the refugees remain in their new country, determined to organize lives out of chaos.

Out of a mixture of "deference," gratitude, and fear, the displaced people keep their feelings to themselves, masking their discomfort "on prickly sofas and scratchy carpets." They maintain some connection to their homeland through food, particularly "dried squid," which becomes "the cud of remembrance." Chewing becomes a contemplative activity. When they are unable to trade stories in the company of the Americans, who may become offended by what they don't understand, they can think to themselves about all they have left behind and about the lives that others are leading.

The stories of depression, exploitation, and drug addiction reveal the underbelly of the American Dream. Some people don't recognize the opportunity for prosperity in the nation's vastness. Instead, they become overwhelmed by it.

Chapter 8 Quotes

I had failed and the Auteur would make *The Hamlet* as he intended with my countrymen serving merely as raw material for an epic about white men saving good yellow people from bad yellow people. I pitied the French for their naiveté in believing they had to visit a country in order to exploit it. Hollywood was much more efficient, imagining the countries it wanted to exploit. I was maddened by my helplessness before the Auteur's imagination and machinations. His arrogance marked something new in the world, for this was the first war where the losers would write history instead of the victors, courtesy of the most efficient propaganda machine ever created [...] In this forthcoming Hollywood trompe l'oeil, all the Vietnamese of any side would come out poorly, herded into the roles of the poor, the innocent, the evil, or the corrupt. Our fate was not to be merely mute; we were to be struck dumb.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The General, Madame, The Auteur, Violet

Related Themes:

Page Number: 134

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator is having a conference with the Auteur and his assistant, Violet, at the director's home in the Hollywood Hills. Talks between them are devolving due to the Auteur's unwillingness to make the narrator's suggested adjustments to the script, which would result in humane and fair depictions of Vietnamese people. The Auteur balks at any request to make changes, supported by his assistant, who says that most of the audience members, presumably white, won't care anyway. The Auteur calls the narrator's ideas "cheap" and dismisses him from his home.

The narrator takes personal responsibility for the collapse of their talks, deeming himself a failure. However, his failure is in overestimating his ability to challenge Hollywood, despite his understanding of it as a producer of appealing fantasies. Hollywood is not only an extension of the military-industrial complex, legitimizing wars and always depicting Americans as good and just; it's also a believer in the colonial system under which the Vietnamese were subjugated due to their supposedly inferior status. The "good yellow people" are those which side with Western

interests. The narrator realizes that the Auteur has no interest in actually depicting Vietnamese people because what sells is an *idea* of Vietnamese people. If the characters are allowed to speak, the illusions of them as the helpless poor or as corrupt villains awaiting American correction is broken. Hollywood, due to its wealth and cultural power, is able to rewrite history in favor of the Americans. The savior hero who stars in the film exists to help the audience forget that their country lost the actual war.

Chapter 11 Quotes

It mattered not what story these audiences watched. The point was that it was the American story they watched and loved, up until the day that they themselves might be bombed by the planes they had seen in American movies [....] Perhaps the Movie itself was not terribly important, but what it represented, the genus of the American movie, was. An audience member might love or hate this Movie, or dismiss it as only a story, but those emotions were irrelevant. What mattered was that the audience member, having paid for the ticket, was willing to let American ideas and values seep into the vulnerable tissue of his brain and the absorbent soil of his heart.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Man / The Commissar , The Auteur

Related Themes:

Page Number: 172-173

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator is becoming dismayed with his work on the film. He feels that he's contributing to American propaganda—that is, until Man encourages him to retain faith. The narrator has a role, albeit small, in changing perceptions about Vietnamese people.

The narrator describes the eagerness with which the rest of the world watches American films, absorbing the nation's values through cinema. They would embrace and love those values until the day when they, too, are destroyed by them, as the South Vietnamese were. In this passage, the narrator is trying to determine his purpose in this film, which he knows will be key in forming public opinions about the Vietnam War. He imagines an audience member, in this instance a non-American spectator, who might watch the film. He contemplates how cinema plays a role in America's cultural imperialism—that is, its tendency to foster the belief that it is a powerful and superior nation whose task it is to rescue "weaker" nations from peril, particularly Communist threats. The Auteur's depictions of torture and rape are designed to appeal emotionally to this spectator, arousing empathy for those on the side of democracy and hatred for those who represent the Viet Cong.

Chapter 13 Quotes

After the war ended and he was freed, he thought he'd go back to his people, the way that he'd been told to all his life by white people, even though he was born here. So he went and found out that the people in Japan didn't think he was one of them, either. To them he's one of us, and to us he's one of them. Neither one thing nor another.

Related Characters: Ms. Sofia Mori (speaker), The Narrator, Abe Mori , Son Do ("Sonny")

Related Themes:

Page Number: 214

Explanation and Analysis

While looking at the family photo album on Sofia's coffee table, Sonny tells the story of her brother Abe. Sofia's family was forced into an internment camp during the Second World War. Sonny was then drafted to fight in the war. To protest the double injustice of being imprisoned as an enemy while also being asked to go fight on America's behalf, Abe becomes a conscientious objector and is imprisoned. Still angry with the United States, he returns to Japan, accepting the notion that he might feel more at home among people who look like him. However, his upbringing in the United States creates a cultural gulf between him and the Japanese.

Abe's story parallels that of the narrator, who spent his childhood feeling like an outcast among his people and who later becomes a prisoner in his own country when he returns to Vietnam. Abe's life, like the narrator's, is a struggle between "us" and "them," with the referents constantly changing because neither man can figure out to which group he belongs. Their inability to claim membership to any social unit results in their belonging to nothing at all. In the end, Abe chooses a side—that of Japan—while the narrator embraces his cultural duality by being neither Vietnamese nor French, neither Eastern nor Western, but something in-between that goes unrecognized in his contemporary world. This aspect of being in between worlds is what allows him to be trusted by both sides and to work as a double agent.

Chapter 14 Quotes

That very night, we snuck out of our dormitory and made our way to a tamarind grove, and under its boughs we cut our palms. We mingled our blood once more with boys we recognized as more kin to us than any real kin, and then gave one another our word.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Bon, Man / The Commissar , The Parisian Aunt

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 233

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator is sending Man a letter, through the Parisian aunt, to tell him that he will go back to Vietnam with Bon so that he can protect his other "blood brother." While writing the letter, he has a flashback to the night when he, Man, and Bon made their blood oath, back when they were all students at lycée. The narrator describes a secret ritual that seems almost romantic, given its setting under moonlight. The reader learns from this scene that the boys didn't merely attend school together but also lived together in a dormitory. This isolation from their respective families allowed for them to forge a close bond and to depend on each other for protection (Man and Bon saved the narrator from bullies) and friendship.

For the narrator, who has been denied by his father and who isn't completely understood by his mother, his brotherhood with Man and Bon is the only familial bond in which he finds both comfort and loyalty. It's significant, too, that the bond is between three boys. The number three, which shows up numerous times in the novel, is a symbol of completion. The friendship with Man and Bon, which divides the narrator's loyalties, is also representative of the conflict within himself. He is a Communist but also a lover of Western culture. He is a South Vietnamese captain, which further connects him to Bon due to their mutual membership in the army, but he's also a comrade among the North Vietnamese Communists and belongs to a cell that is led by Man.

Bang bang was the sound of memory's pistol firing into our heads, for we could not forget love, we could not forget war, we could not forget lovers, we could not forget enemies, we could not forget home, and we could not forget Saigon [...] men who had died or disappeared; the streets and homes blown away by bombshells; the streams where we swam naked and laughing; the secret grove where we spied on the nymphs who bathed and splashed with the innocence of the birds [...] the barking of a hungry dog in an abandoned village; the appetizing reek of the fresh durian one wept to eat; the sight and sound of orphans howling by the dead bodies of their mothers and fathers; the stickiness of one's shirt by afternoon the stickiness of one's lover by the end of lovemaking, the stickiness of our situations [...] the hills afire with sunset [...] the most important thing we could never forget was that we could never forget.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Lan ("Lana")

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 238-239

Explanation and Analysis

Lana is singing a version of the song "Bang Bang (My Baby Shot Me Down)," which was written by Cher and popularized by Nancy Sinatra. Lana complicates the song, which is about a romance that ends violently, by layering it with French and Vietnamese lyrics. It thus becomes a song about Vietnam's misguided relationships with Western powers. She includes the influences of those who have helped and hurt Vietnam—the Americans and the French—by using an American song and giving it the French lyric, "I will never forget you." The improvised lyric complements the narrator's thought about how his people will never forget the experience of the war. For the narrator, the firing of a gun is related to the firing of a synapse, which causes neurons to link together and form memories. The refrain of the song, "Bang, Bang," acts as a trigger that gets the narrator to remember everything that he wanted to forget about his life in Vietnam and forget everything that he now wishes to remember. His memories are sensorial—sights, smells, and tastes. He realizes that, for the refugee community in particular, these memories are all that they have. They can never forget that they can never forget because, without their memories and their connection to the past, they have no historical context.

Chapter 15 Quotes

❝ As a nonwhite person, the General, like myself, knew he must be patient with white people, who were easily scared by the nonwhite. Even with liberal white people, one could go only so far, and with average white people one could barely go anywhere. The General was deeply familiar with the nature, nuances, and internal differences of white people, as was every nonwhite person who had lived here a good number of years. We ate their food, we watched their movies, we observed their lives and psyche via television and in everyday contact, we learned their language, we absorbed their subtle cues, we laughed at their jokes, even when made at our expense, we humbly accepted their condescension, we eavesdropped on their conversations in supermarkets and the dentist's office, and we protected them by not speaking our own language in their presence, which unnerved them.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The General, The Congressman, Dr. Richard Hedd

Related Themes:

Page Number: 258

Explanation and Analysis

The General and the narrator have been invited to a dinner at a country club in Anaheim. After the Congressman announces that the purpose of the gathering between himself, the General, the narrator, Dr. Hedd, and several local businessmen is to generate support for the Vietnamese refugee community, the General starts a speech in which he pleads his case for the Americans not to give up on the war effort. Dr. Hedd interrupts to argue that there are more pressing concerns in the international arena. The General takes Dr. Hedd's interruption in stride, though the narrator knows that he's quietly offended. However, no longer in a position of power in a nation that is controlled by whites, he has to be careful about how he asserts himself.

When the narrator says that white people are "easily scared by the nonwhite," he isn't necessarily indicating fright in the conventional sense. Instead, it's the kind of fear that comes from a perceived threat to one's position of assumed authority. Educated "liberal" people like Dr. Hedd might allow for some assertion of character, but the average white citizen would feel far too threatened. The narrator reveals how the refugee community has learned about white Americans by studying them. Like other people of color, the Vietnamese-Americans learn to survive in a white-dominated country by learning how to anticipate white people's moods and needs. Part of this is avoiding their own language in mixed company to convince whites that they are assimilating into the dominant culture and therefore pose no threat to it.

Chapter 19 Quotes

❝ Your destiny is being a bastard, while your talent, as you say, is seeing from two sides. You would be better off if you only saw things from one side. The only cure for being a bastard is to take a side.

Related Characters: The Commandant (speaker), The Narrator

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 314

Explanation and Analysis

The Commandant is talking to the narrator about his ethnic origins, which he believes are a curse. To illustrate his point, the Commandant takes out a jar containing a pickled baby with two heads—the result of an American experiment gone bad. The specimen is meant to be an example of what happens when the Vietnamese people are "contaminated" by the West. The pickled baby represents how the Commandant imagines the narrator.

The Commandant addresses the narrator directly and speaks to him as though he knows him better than the narrator knows himself. First he speaks of the narrator's "destiny," but his use of this word contrasts with his encouragement that the narrator choose a side so that he can "cure" his condition of being a bastard. Thus, he argues that the narrator has no control over his fate, then reverses and instructs him on how the narrator can adjust his fate. The narrator's sense of duality is offensive to the Commandant, who believes that the only way for the narrator to redeem himself from being a bastard—an illegitimate person—is to commit to one culture and one ideology. The Commandant's fanaticism makes the narrator's ability to sympathize, or to see the legitimacy of both sides, offensive to him.

Chapter 20 Quotes

We're revolutionaries, my friend. Suffering made us. Suffering for the people is what we chose because we sympathized so much with their suffering [...] Only without the comfort of sleep will you fully understand the horrors of history. I tell you this as someone who has slept very little since what has happened to me. Believe me when I say that I know how you feel, and that this has to be done.

Related Characters: Man / The Commissar (speaker), The Narrator, The Communist Agent, The Baby-faced Guard

Related Themes:

Page Number: 337

Explanation and Analysis

Man is addressing the narrator, whom he has imprisoned and is now forcing to stay awake, with the assistance of the baby-faced guard, so that the narrator can come to terms with his crimes and uncover the answer to the question ("What is more precious than independence and freedom?") that will release him.

Though the narrator is now at odds with Man, both because he is the commissar who imprisons him, and also because the narrator's Communist ideology has been complicated by his affection for America, Man still sees himself as united with the narrator in a common purpose. Man wants to redirect the narrator's sympathy from his urge to see the reason within two political ideologies toward a focus on the suffering of the poor and downtrodden, whom the Communists believe they have liberated. Man emphasizes, too, that he sympathizes with the narrator. Sleep becomes a metaphor for the ability to tune out from the world and to experience peace. Man demands that the narrator stay awake so that he is forced to engage with the world's pain and suffering, including that which he has caused. The narrator can have no relief from this until he comes to terms with his culpability.

Somebody must have something done to him! Was I that somebody? No! That cannot be true, or so I wanted to tell him, but my tongue refused to obey me. I was only mistaken to be that somebody, because I was, I told him, or thought I did, a nobody. I am a lie, a keeper, a book. No! I am a fly, a creeper, a gook. No! I am—I am—I am—

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Man / The Commissar , The Baby-faced Guard

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 338

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator is beginning to hallucinate from a lack of sleep. He begins to think that he may be guilty for Man nearly burning to death, and that this could be the reason why Man is imprisoning him. The narrator isn't sure because he's no longer sure about what he is capable of. After all, he has already killed two people and entered the jungles of Southeast Asia as a guerrilla soldier, when he identifies neither as a killer nor as a soldier. It's far easier to regard himself as someone of no consequence at all—"a nobody." This is a negation of personal responsibility, which Man will not abide, because everyone who exists has an impact on others.

Unable to make sense of his role in the world, the narrator's speech devolves into nonsense. His rhyming is an attempt to hold on to some sense of facility with language. He is "a lie" because of his duplicitous work as both a spy and a captain. He is "a keeper" because he held the General's secrets and supplied them to Man. He is "a book" because his admiration for Graham Greene's *The Quiet American* is directly related to his own experience as a colonized subject. Conversely, he is "a fly" because of his perceived harmlessness, but also a creeper, due to the way in which he hunted and murdered Sonny and the crapulent major. Finally, he is "a gook," which is a slur that has been used by Americans against both Koreans and the Vietnamese during each country's civil war. Having run out of nouns, the narrator stammers, still unable to identify himself beyond his roles.

Chapter 21 Quotes

They were good students, just like me. They learned their lesson well, and so have I, so if you would please just turn off the lights [...] if you would remember that the two of us were once and perhaps still are the best of friends, if you could see that I have nothing left to confess [...] if I had become an accountant, if I had fallen in love with the right woman [...] if my father had gone to save souls in Algeria instead of here [...] if we had not fought a war against each other, if some of us had not called ourselves nationalists or communists or capitalists or realists [...] if history had never happened, neither as farce nor as tragedy, if the serpent of language had not bitten me, if I had never been born, if my mother was never cleft, if you needed no more revisions, and if I saw no more of these visions, please, could you please just let me sleep?

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Man / The Commissar , The Communist Agent

Related Themes:

Page Number: 353-354

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator is responding to a charge of guilt for having tolerated the Communist agent's rape and torture during a CIA interrogation. The "good students" to whom he refers are the three policemen who raped the agent. Once again, the number three shows up in the novel as a symbol of completion. It seems that the narrator sealed his fate as a traitor when he allowed for the agent to be abused so that he could protect himself. The narrator asks Man to turn off the lights, both so that he can sleep and so that he can avoid confronting his guilt for this crime and all of the others that he committed to affect the outcome of history.

He uses the word "if" repeatedly, using it to start every statement with which he hopes to exonerate himself. The narrator sees himself as someone who made the best choices he knew how to make in his circumstances. He allows for the possibility that he could have made other choices, such as leading a more conventional life as "an accountant" or a married man. However, this contemplation of other possibilities leads him to think that all of his crimes could have also been avoided had he never been born or if humanity could reach some consensus about its politics.

Chapter 23 Quotes

How could I forget that every truth meant at least two things, that slogans were empty suits draped on the corpse of an idea? The suits depended on how one wore them, and this suit was now worn out. I was mad but not insane, although I was not going to disabuse the commandant. He saw only one meaning in nothing—the negative, the absence, as in there's nothing there. The positive meaning eluded him, the paradoxical fact that nothing is, indeed, something. Our commandant was a man who didn't get the joke, and people who do not get the joke are dangerous people indeed. They are the ones who say nothing with great piousness, who ask everyone else to die for nothing, who revere nothing. Such a man could not tolerate someone who laughed at nothing.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Commandant

Related Themes:

Page Number: 371

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has finally achieved what he considers to be an enlightened state. He embraces the notion that life has no inherent meaning. He also embraces the complexity of life—"that every truth meant at least two things." Before, he believed that he was specially equipped to understand dual meanings due to his dual identities as both French and Vietnamese, as both a North Vietnamese Communist and a South Vietnamese anti-Communist. He realizes now that duality exists in every aspect of life. Slogans are "empty suits" because they lack human complexity and encourage people to believe in things that may no longer foster human progress. The narrator's sudden awareness of all that he couldn't see before makes him so giddy that he seems "mad," but he is too lucid to be insane. The narrator's embrace of nothingness as a legitimate state of being cannot be understood by the Commandant—a true-believer who is fixated on believing in something and will kill others to force them to believe in it, too. The narrator contends that the Commandant's obsessive fixation on Communist ideology is still nothing, but his desperate need to make others believe that it is something and, worse, the *only* thing, makes him dangerous.

> He was the commissar but he was also Man; he was my interrogator but also my only confidant; he was the fiend who had tortured me but also my friend. Some might say I was seeing things, but the true optical illusion was in seeing others and oneself as undivided and whole, as if being in focus was more real than being out of focus. We thought our reflection in the mirror was who we truly were, when how we saw ourselves and how others saw us was often not the same. Likewise, we often deceived overselves when we thought we saw ourselves most clearly.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Bon, Man / The Commissar

Related Themes:

Page Number: 374

Explanation and Analysis

Man is releasing the narrator and Bon from captivity. He will send them to Saigon, where they will take a boat down the Mekong River to a fishing trawler that will take them out of the country and onward to an unknown destination.

After acknowledging the duality within his own being, the narrator acknowledges it within Man as well, which he is now better able to recognize because he can see that truths are often comprised of two things at once. The narrator's ability to see Man as two things at once is not the result of an illusion of double-vision but the result of a sharper vision that allows the narrator to understand human complexity. Perfect self-knowledge, the narrator suggests, isn't really feasible because the self-image sometimes conflicts with how others see us. A perception of identity as "out of focus," that is, as somewhat mysterious or contradictory, is more authentic than one in which a person believes that they are fully realized.

> Hadn't the French and the Americans done exactly the same? Once revolutionaries themselves, they had become imperialists, colonizing and occupying our defiant little land, taking away our freedom in the name of saving us. Our revolution took considerably longer than theirs, and was considerably bloodier, but we made up for lost time. When it came to learning the worst habits of our French masters and their American replacements, we quickly proved ourselves the best. We, too, could abuse grand ideals! Having liberated ourselves in the name of independence and freedom—I was so tired of saying these words!—we then deprived our defeated brethren of the same.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 376

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator and Bon are departing from a country that seems to be making the same mistakes as the Western powers that interfered with them. The narrator notes how countries engage in cycles of revolution, in which they overthrow oppressive powers, only to reverse themselves and re-establish oppressive regimes. Vietnam was occupied by two major powers that had led their own revolutions. His rhetorical question is an attempt to help the reader understand that the Vietnamese were simply seeking the same freedom that their occupiers once demanded. By noting that the Vietnamese effort was a performance of the same act, he indirectly calls into question the Western tendency to see the Vietnamese call for freedom differently, possibly because it involves Asians instead of white people. The concept of freedom, in the Western mind, seems to have a racial dimension. For the Vietnamese, "independence and freedom" were merely slogans that convinced the people to support the Marxist solution to liberation. In the end, as the narrator realizes, none of this truly mattered to those who led the revolution.

> I was that man of two minds, me and myself. We had been through so much, me and myself. Everyone we met had wanted to drive us apart from each other, wanted us to choose either one thing or another, except the commissar. He showed us his hand and we showed him ours, the red scars as indelible as they were in our youth. Even after all we had been through, this was the only mark on our body.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Bon, Man / The Commissar

Related Themes:

Page Number: 376

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator is reflecting on his sense of identity and reverses himself from his introduction. At the beginning of the novel, he writes, "I am a man of two minds." Now, he writes the same thing, but in the simple past tense. He no longer identifies as someone of two minds, though, he still has a self-perception as being composed of two parts.

Instead of referring to himself in the first-person singular, "I," the narrator has become "we"—"me and myself." He regards his previous espousal of political ideologies and his prior occupations as distractions that drew him further away from his true identity as a composite of parts. He sees now that his perceived enemy, the commissar, is actually his friend, Man, who wanted all along for him to see himself as he truly is.

The red scar signifies the only relationship in the narrator's life that has ever had any meaning—that between him, Man, and Bon. Despite having lived through two explosions and a fire fight, the scar is the only mark on the narrator's body. The text suggests that the mark on the narrator's hand is similar to stigmata—the scars of Christ's crucifixion. Nguyen may not be trying to paint the narrator as a Christ figure, but he is someone who has suffered and undergone an awakening. Furthermore, it's his blood bond with Man and Bon that has strangely protected him other bodily harm.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

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

CHAPTER 1

The narrator, addressing the Commandant, describes himself as "a spy, a sleeper, a spook, a man of two faces." He begins his confession in April 1975, when the Vietnam War has ended. Though he is currently in a prison cell, at the time the narrator was living in a villa with the General and his wife, Madame. In March of 1975, the South Vietnamese Army's northern front collapses, and the narrator and the General are in disbelief. Secretly, the narrator takes pictures of the reports of defeats and war crimes and sends them to Man, his "handler." The news of troops shooting civilians in the back so that they can be first to escape on barges and boats makes the narrator feel sympathy for the poor victims, but it also pleases him to know that the South Vietnamese regime is collapsing.

The novel's first lines are strongly influenced by Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man *and Fyodor Dostoyevsky's* Notes from Underground. *Like the narrators in those novels, this narrator describes how others refuse to see him as he really is as long as he serves his social purpose. In this instance, the narrator serves a dual purpose as both a loyalist to the South Vietnamese and a Communist spy, plotting with those who have overtaken the south, thereby ending the civil war. His sympathy is humane, but it also allows for some emotional detachment from political upheavals. Note also the structure of the novel that is introduced here: in the narrative present the narrator is confessing to a "Commandant," telling his life story starting back at the fall of Saigon.*

The Americans have rejected the South Vietnamese's request for more money to buy "the ammunition, gas, and spare parts for the weapons, planes, and tanks" that they had once given for free. Madame suggests that the General and the narrator ask their friend, Claude, for a plane to help them escape. Claude says that the best he can do is arrange for "a black flight," a C-130 flying in secret. The plane can hold 92 paratroopers and their gear, but the General's extended family alone comprises 58 people, and Madame would never forgive him if he did not rescue all of her relatives.

The General struggles with the moral dilemma of leaving behind his people due to no longer having the resources to fight. He insists on having a plane large enough to carry Madame's extended family. This is his way, not only of pleasing his wife, but of assuaging his own guilt for leaving behind so many of his people while he seeks safety for himself and his family.

The General then asks Claude if his staff will be evacuated. Claude says that, officially, there will be no evacuations because the Americans aren't "pulling out anytime soon." The General, who seldom raises his voice, now furiously responds. He wonders why his staff can't be evacuated when planes have been leaving all day and all night, and when babies and orphans have been evacuated. Claude explains how Saigon would erupt into riots if an evacuation were declared and that people might turn on the few Americans who remain. Many of those people worked for Americans. Some of them believed that, if the Communists won, they would be forced into prison or death by strangulation. The virgins, they thought, would be forced to marry the Communist "barbarians." The CIA propagated these rumors.

The General wants to save as many people as he can single-handedly. However, he's losing patience with Claude and other American colleagues who say one thing and do another. It seems irrelevant to the General that children might be considered a greater priority than the men on his staff. Claude wants to remain quiet about the rescue planes because he worries that the South Vietnamese people may feel as though they have been betrayed by the Americans. They may also worry about their livelihoods if they are abandoned by their employers.

Claude reminds the General that he's lucky to get a plane. Other generals are only getting seats for immediate family. They finish their whiskeys and Claude says goodbye. Later that day, the president of South Vietnam resigns. The narrator works on the list of evacuees, while the General attends meetings at the Joint General Staff compound to work out how to hold Saigon but also to prepare to abandon it. Striking names off of the list, the narrator feels like an executioner.

The infrastructure of South Vietnam is collapsing. Both the General and the narrator are left with the difficult task of determining who among the staff is worthy enough to live. The narrator feels like an executioner because he knows that those who are left behind will likely be killed by the North Vietnamese Army.

The narrator continues working on the list of evacuees, while those fighting in the Battle of Xuan Loc are defeated and Phnom Penh falls to the Khmer Rouge. A few nights later, the former South Vietnamese president flees for Taiwan with "a hefty share" of Vietnam's gold. Claude calls the next morning to say that the plane he assigned to the General will be leaving in two days. That evening, the narrator finishes his list. A number of the senior officers with the most knowledge and know-how in the work of the Special Branch will be left behind. The narrator reserves one seat and three more on the plane for Bon, his wife, and his child, who is also the narrator's godson.

It's becoming increasingly clear that all of former French Indochina is being overtaken by Communism. The Vietnamese will later have a confrontation with the Communist Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. However, the former South Vietnamese president's actions demonstrate that the former regime was not exactly beneficial to the Vietnamese people either. The decision to leave behind the officers in the Special Branch is part of the General's plan, or hope, to seize Vietnam back from Communist rule.

Along with Man, Bon is one of the narrator's "blood brothers." In their school days, they swore undying loyalty to each other by slicing their palms open and mingling their blood in ritual handshakes. The narrator asks the General for the favor of taking Bon and his family with them. The General agrees, particularly because of Bon's work as a paratrooper. The General believes that if the South Vietnamese Army were composed only of Airborne men like Bon, they would have won the war. The General goes on to commiserate with the narrator about how the Americans sold them the war with the promise of saving them from Communism. There is nowhere else for the General and the others to go but America.

Though the narrator is betraying Bon with his Communist sympathies, he tries to save his life by helping him get out of Vietnam, knowing that the North Vietnamese will probably kill him if he stays. The General complies, believing that Bon and the other Airborne men demonstrated exceptional courage in the war. The General also comes to terms with the fact that he entered the war on the false hope that the Americans would guarantee that they would win.

On their last morning in Vietnam, the narrator drives the General to his office at the National Police compound. The narrator's office is down the hall from the General's. He summons five officers to meet with him, one by one. One of them is the "crapulent" major. As the narrator finishes his meetings, he hears distant booms, which rattle the windows. He sees fire and smoke coming from the east—enemy fire has set the Long Binh ammunition depot aflame. The narrator pulls a bottle of Jim Beam out of his desk drawer and drinks from it. He imagines his mother telling him not to drink so much. He finishes the whiskey, and then drives the General home through a storm.

The narrator and the General disagree about the crapulent major (crapulent means drunken and excessive, and the narrator uses this word many times to describe the major), which will become more apparent later in the novel. The narrator chooses the major due to his good work, but also because he likes him as a person. The major's obesity, a consequence of his overindulgence in food, is something that the General can't abide. He has no problem, however, with the narrator's overindulgence in alcohol, which he probably associates with masculine toughness.

After he finishes packing, the narrator borrows a car to get Bon. The military police wave him through the checkpoints when they see the General's stars on the vehicle. The narrator is driving across the river, where the refugees' shanties have been obliterated by "pyromaniacal soldiers and clean-cut arsonists who had found their true calling as bombardiers," or corporals. Bon and Man wait at a beer garden. When the narrator arrives, Bon pours him a glass of beer as soon as he sits down. Bon lifts his glass to toast their future meeting in the Philippines, though they will actually be going to Guam.

The obliteration of the refugees' shanties is evidence of the ruthlessness with which Vietnamese soldiers in the war treated each other, forgetting both ethnic loyalty and human sympathy in favor of political allegiance. The narrator's meeting with Bon and Man in the beer garden—a site of bonding—is complicated by Bon's unawareness of his friends' political sympathies and his equal unawareness of the narrator's spy work.

When the narrator, Bon, and Man leave the beer garden, they stop to smoke a cigarette in an alley, where they encounter three drunken marines. Though it's only 6:00 PM, the marines are inebriated, and their fatigues are stained with beer. One bumps into the narrator and mistakes him for a policeman before Man corrects him, saying that the narrator is a captain and that the lieutenant should remember to salute a superior. The third marine dismisses Man's demand for respect, reminding him that the president and the generals have disappeared. There's nowhere to go, they say, and they're certain that they'll soon die. When the first marine calls the narrator a bastard, the narrator draws his revolver and places it between the marine's eyes. He tells him that he won't shoot because the marine is drunk. Everyone stops when they hear an explosion in the distance. The marine lieutenants leave in a jeep and fire their weapons skyward in defiance, until their magazines are empty.

The three drunken marines are foils for the narrator, Bon, and Man. The marines, however, have abandoned all hope for any political salvation. Their drunkenness is an anarchic reaction. The country has fallen into the hands of their declared enemy and the war is over, but they remain obligated to stay in uniform and to refer to their superiors by their titles. When the marine calls the narrator a "bastard," it's not merely an attack on his biracial identity, which they may perceive as reminders of French colonialism and America's betrayal—it's also an acknowledgement of how the narrator has also been betrayed and abandoned by the duplicitous South Vietnamese government.

CHAPTER 2

Back at the detention center, the baby-faced guard who checks in on the narrator often calls him "bastard." The name hurts the narrator, who expected better from the Commandant's men. Incidentally, one of the things that initially drew the narrator to the General was the fact that the elder officer never brought up his "muddled heritage." All he was interested in was the narrator's efficiency at his job and his willingness to do things that "may not be so good." One of those things was securing the evacuation of those who were chosen to flee Vietnam, using $10,000 to bribe officials for visas, passports, and seats on evacuation planes.

The time frame briefly shifts back to the narrative present again, connected by the word "bastard." Later, the narrator will be betrayed by the General, who will use his biracial identity as a reason to condemn the narrator's relationship with the General's daughter, Lana. The narrator finds that both the North and the South Vietnamese—a divided people—condemn the narrator for what they perceive as his racial division. People from both sides come to believe that his identity makes him inherently unworthy of full social membership.

Everyone selected for departure, including Bon and his family, meet outside of the General's villa to board two blue buses. The General's final duty is to say goodbye to his staff, some of whom ask to come along, though Madame refuses. Instead, she gives each staff member "an envelope of dollars" with "its thickness appropriate to his or her rank." The General, Madame, Bon and his family, and the narrator board one of the buses. The narrator waves goodbye to the staff as the buses make their way to the airport.

Madame gives her staff members money as a consolation, though the cash will be useless when the new regime takes over. Instead of staying behind with their staff in a demonstration of loyalty, the General and Madame use their money and social prestige to save themselves. It is practical, but also proof of the classism that the Communists sought to eradicate.

In a letter, the narrator tells Man about the General's evacuation plan. Man responds by writing that the narrator's next mission is to go to the U.S. and act as a spy. Once settled there, he'll send letters to Man's Parisian aunt, reporting on what he learns. He says that the narrator will do more good in America than in Vietnam. The narrator is excited to go to the U.S. He confesses that he feels out of place in Vietnam, which is different from his awareness of not belonging to America.

The narrator is of French and Vietnamese descent but seems to feel most at home in the United States. He doesn't belong to America, though he knows a great deal about its culture and attended school there. In the U.S., the narrator at least has the benefit of creating his identity without the burden of history.

When the convoy of refugees, led by the General, reaches the airport, they see "a squad of sullen military [cops] and their young lieutenant." The lieutenant approaches the General's car, leans down by the driver's window, and exchanges a few words with him. The lieutenant glances in the narrator's direction, where he leans out the door of the bus. The week before, the narrator had visited the lieutenant's tin-roofed shack, which he shared with his large family, to bribe him with five thousand dollars to allow the General and the others in the convoy to escape. Half was paid at the lieutenant's home; the other half would be paid at the airport. When the narrator's bus rolls by, the lieutenant snatches the money from the narrator's outstretched hands.

The young lieutenant is a poor man with a large family. Though his sense of honor disagrees with accepting the bribe, he also needs the money to take care of himself and his family. The narrator admires the lieutenant's moral righteousness, but his cynicism also convinces him that he can get the lieutenant to put aside those values in exchange for cash. The desperation of life in Vietnam, which was difficult even before the fall of Saigon, forces people to choose between their morality and their survival.

The evacuees line up, though queueing is "unnatural" to them. When the marines check them for weapons, the narrator and Bon hand over their firearms. Next, entry papers are handed out by a young embassy bureaucrat. The narrator bought their documents from the Ministry of the Interior. The narrator takes his place in bleacher seats, along with the other evacuees who await planes, next to Bon and his family. Bon points to a scar in the palm of the hand that is now holding a cigarette and asks the narrator if he remembers the blood oath. The narrator holds up the palm of his right hand with its matching scar and listens to rocket fire in the distance.

The handing over of their firearms is symbolic. It indicates the men's transition from soldiers to civilians. Seated in the bleacher seats at the airport, they seem now like spectators of the collapse of their country. No longer in the military and finding themselves refugees, their only connection is that which they have to each other and to Man. However, this "blood link" is complicated by the narrator's secret support of the North Vietnamese, whose rocket fire is in the distance.

CHAPTER 3

While waiting for the planes, the narrator talks to a trio of call girls named Mimi, Phi Phi, and Ti Ti. His status as a bachelor makes this permissible, and their company makes the time go by quickly. The narrator can't sleep, so he takes a walk around the compound. He passes by the swimming pool, an American-only area that the "whites of other countries"—Indonesians, Iranians, Hungarians, and Poles in the International Committee of Control and Supervision (ICCS)—were allowed to use. Now, the evacuees are using the pool as a urinal, due to the bathrooms having been overrun with waste.

Both the prostitutes and the segregated swimming pool are examples of American hypocrisy. The nation, which promised the Vietnamese freedom, also perpetuated forms of oppression. The call girls, who were poor, have used the American presence to their advantage. Nguyen portrays them as women who have learned the lessons of Western capitalism. By urinating in the pool, the refugees exact a form of revenge for their exclusion.

At 4:00 AM, the narrator boards a "fetid and hot" bus that will take them to the parked C-130 Hercules plane, which looks like a garbage truck with wings attached. Everyone is prepared to say goodbye to Vietnam until an explosion occurs. The General tumbles into the narrator and, as a result of the impact, the narrator falls into the bulkhead, then onto screaming bodies. He fears being burned to death or chopped up by a propeller. Another explosion on the runway heightens the panic. The loadmaster lowers the ramp and refugees surge toward the opening. The narrator covers his head with his rucksack to avoid being trampled. Another rocket explodes on the runway a few meters behind the passengers. The plane's starboard engines are on fire. The narrator is on his hands and knees when Bon seizes his elbow, dragging him with one hand, while holding Linh with the other. Linh carries Duc, who's screaming.

The refugees' near-death experience at the airport threatens them with the possibility of there being no escape but death from Vietnam. Bon's exhibition of his scar from his blood oath seems to foreshadow this event, which appears to be the nation's demand that its people remain loyal, either by staying and fighting or by dying on its soil. Bon's loyalty to both the narrator and to his family is evident when he seizes the hands of both to rescue them. The narrator is both Bon's blood brother and his comrade-in-arms. Though Bon is leaving Vietnam for his family's safety, he has not abandoned his loyalties as a soldier.

Bon thinks that soldiers in the South Vietnamese Army are retaliating for not getting a seat out on a plane. The narrator insists that they're being attacked by the North Vietnamese. Then, the plane's gas tanks blow up. The fireball illuminates a large stretch of the airfield. Another C-130 lands with a screech on a distant runway. The plane turns in the direction of the refugees and they cheer, hopeful of being rescued. The narrator pokes his head over the divider and sees hundreds of military staff, soldiers, and military cops going toward the plane. The evacuees run toward the plane. The General runs ahead of the narrator, and Bon and his family run behind the narrator.

Bon suspects that his former comrades are exacting revenge against authorities, like the General, who are leaving them behind to fend for themselves against the Communists—an effort that will probably result in their deaths. The new plane, originally intended for American military staff, is overtaken by the refugees. This act suggests that the refugees feel that they have a greater right to take their places on the plane, given that it was the Americans who helped to cause the collapse of their nation.

The General sets foot on the ramp. The narrator pauses to let Linh and Duc pass. When he turns, he sees that they're no longer behind him. The loadmaster shouts for the narrator to get on the plane and tells him that his friends are gone. Twenty meters away, Bon is kneeling and clutching Linh to his chest. A circle of blood expands on her white blouse. The narrator tosses his rucksack toward the loadmaster and runs toward Bon and his family. He slides for the last two meters, losing the skin off of his left hand and elbow. When he reaches Bon, he sees that between him and Linh is Duc's mangled body—both Duc and Linh are dead. The General and the loadmaster yell that it's time to go. The narrator pulls at Bon's sleeve to get him to come along. The narrator then punches him in the jaw so that he'll stop bellowing in pain and loosen his grip from his wife and son.

Duc and Linh have been killed. This leaves Bon with no sense of purpose. Having given up his weapon, he's no longer a soldier. Having lost his family, he's no longer a husband or a father. His only remaining identifiable connection is to the narrator. The circle of blood that expands on Linh's chest comes from her being pierced in the heart. The wound is also symbolic of Bon's heartbreak, and the bond that existed between Bon, Linh, Duc, and the narrator just moments ago, but which has now been broken.

The narrator throws Linh over his shoulder. He then throws her at the General when he reaches the ramp, and the General catches her. Bon is running alongside the narrator, holding Duc. The narrator shoves Bon toward the ramp and the loadmaster seizes him by the collar. The narrator leaps for the ramp with his arms extended and lands on one side of his face. As the plane moves down the runway, the General lifts the narrator to his knees and drags him into the hold, while the ramp rises behind him. As the airplane ascends, the terrible noise of the engines blends with the sounds of Bon pounding his head against the ramp, howling.

The narrator takes Linh and Duc along with them so that their bodies will be given a proper burial. The images of the ramp closing and the General lifting the narrator to his knees are more reminiscent of a mothership taking the narrator home than a cargo plane taking them to a new land. The sound of the engine signals their anticipation to leave Vietnam, while the sound of Bon's pounding is a reminder of futility and frustration in the face of so much meaningless violence.

CHAPTER 4

The plane lands in Guam, where a green ambulance arrives to take the bodies of Duc and Linh. The refugees are taken to Camp Asan and, thanks to the General, the narrator and Bon are given barracks, while the other refugees stay in tents. Bon lays on his bunk in a catatonic state. The narrator watches on a television as helicopters land on Saigon's roofs, evacuating refugees. The next day, Communist tanks crash through the gates of the presidential palace and Communist troops raise the flag of the National Liberation Front from the palace roof.

The General's status gives Bon and the narrator privileges that the other refugees can't enjoy. The narrator watches dueling images on television, which reflect his own recent experiences. He is content with having helped Bon to escape from Vietnam, but he's also happy to see that his comrades, led by his other blood brother, Man, are taking over in Vietnam.

After dinner, the narrator and the General go outside their barracks. When the General greets the civilians, they meet him with "sullen silence." An enraged elderly woman mocks him and hits him with her slipper, angry that the General is safe while her husband is not. Other women, young and old, come to hit the General with things in revenge for their brothers, fathers, and husbands being left behind. The General is horrified. The women tear the stars off of his collar, ripping his sleeves and half his buttons. He bleeds from the scratches on his cheek and neck. He stands at the sink and wipes his face clean of everything, except shame. When the narrator starts to speak, the General tells him to shut up, but he never takes his eyes off of his own face in the mirror. He tells the narrator that they will never again speak of the incident.

The women view the General as a traitor to his country. It's significant that he's attacked by women, who have had to leave behind the men in their lives to keep the rest of their families safe. They find it unjust that he led their husbands to fight and, possibly, face their deaths, while he reaps the privilege of safety and security on American soil. The women tear off his uniform, as though he's no longer fit to wear it, due to his betrayal. The General forbids the narrator to speak because nothing that the latter can say will assuage the General's feeling of personal guilt. Instead, he chooses denial of the incident.

The next day, they bury Linh and Duc. Bon wears a white scarf of mourning around his head, a rag ripped from his bedsheet. After they lower Duc's small coffin on top of his mother's, Bon throws himself into their open grave, howling. The narrator climbs in to calm him down. After he helps Bon out, they pour dirt onto the coffins, while the General, Madame, and the priest watch silently.

In Asia, white is the color of mourning and grief. Bon's insistence on wearing the white scarf at the funeral of his wife and son is not only a show of respect but a sign that he holds onto his cultural traditions as his only connection to his home and his moral purpose.

Over the next few days, the refugees weep and wait. They are then picked up and taken to Camp Pendleton near San Diego, California via an airliner. Awaiting them is another refugee camp but with higher-grade amenities—a sign of "the upward mobility of the American Dream." At Camp Pendleton, everyone lives in barracks. It's the summer of 1975, and it is from here that the narrator writes the first of his letters to Man's aunt in Paris. He composes his letters as though he's writing to Man directly. He talks about Bon's inner torment and his recent losses of Linh and Duc. Bon might have starved to death, he says, if the narrator didn't drag him from his bunk and down to the mess hall.

Though Guam is an American territory, it symbolizes a kind of Purgatory for the refugees, who are caught between Asia and America. Camp Pendleton not only has better services than the camp at Guam, it's also on the American mainland. The refugees feel that they've truly arrived at their new home. Bon, however, doesn't want to live anymore. With neither his country nor his family to give him context and meaning, he rejects life by refusing to eat.

Along with thousands of others at the camp, the General washes in showers without stalls and lives with strangers. Sheets strung up on clotheslines divide the barracks into family quarters. The General complains to the narrator about people having sex day and night, in front of their children and his own. The General recalls his eldest child asking him what a prostitute is after seeing a woman selling herself by the latrines. Just then, across the lane, a spat breaks out between a married couple. Their name-calling progresses into a brawl. The General sighs in exasperation, calling them animals. He hands the narrator a newspaper clipping, showing a picture of a lieutenant colonel who committed suicide at the memorial by shooting himself in the head. The General calls him a hero.

The refugees merely continue the lives that they led in Vietnam. The prostitutes, having no other means of earning a living, continue to sell sex. Sex, it seems, is a way for the refugees to affirm their lives—to remind themselves that they're still alive. The General's inability to see this is part of his class snobbery. He is a leader of his people, but he's disconnected from them and even looks down on them. He admires the lieutenant colonel for exhibiting the courage to remain in the country, which the General believes he himself didn't have.

The General and the narrator toast with tea to the lieutenant colonel's memory. The General then says that he suspects that there are sympathizers, or spies in their ranks. The narrator's palms suddenly feel damp, as he tells the General that it's possible; sleeper agents are devious and smart. The General stares into the narrator's eyes, asking him which of their men could be the spy. To sidetrack the General, he names an unlikely candidate: the crapulent major. The General doesn't agree with the narrator's supposed instinct. The narrator returns to his barracks and reports the conversation to the Parisian aunt, leaving out the part about his nervousness.

The narrator chooses to point the finger at an innocent, harmless man instead of admitting to the General that he is the spy. The narrator likely fears some violent retribution for his betrayal, but he also probably fears disappointing and upsetting the General. Worse, he knows that Bon would find out and that the news would result in the dissolution of their relationship. He sacrifices the major instead.

Shortly after arriving in San Diego, the narrator contacts his former professor, Avery Wright Hammer, seeking his help in leaving the camp. Professor Wright agrees to be the narrator's sponsor and gets him a clerical job at Occidental College, working for the Department of Oriental Studies. He also takes up a collection on the narrator's behalf, asking former teachers for money to fund the refugee ex-student. The sum helps him get situated in Los Angeles, providing enough money to put a security deposit on an apartment and to buy a '64 Ford.

The narrator uses his American connection, as well as American guilt over the loss of the war, to help him gain a foothold in the country. He can only find work in the U.S. that reinforces some aspect of his ethnic identity, indicating that the country will not allow him to reinvent himself as simply an American.

Once he's settled in Los Angeles, the narrator canvasses local churches, looking for a sponsor for Bon. Finally, the leader of Everlasting Church of Prophets, Reverend Ramon, agrees to be Bon's sponsor, after the narrator gives him a modest cash donation. By September, Bon and the narrator are reunited in an apartment that they are sharing. With the last of the money from Professor Hammer, the narrator buys a radio and a television.

The narrator appeals to local churches, knowing that they will be most likely to provide refugee relief. He buys a radio and a television so that he can maintain a link both to what is happening in his home country and with news and cultural life in his new home.

The General and Madame also end up in Los Angeles, sponsored by the sister-in-law of an American colonel who was once the General's adviser. They move into a bungalow in a nice but "slightly less tony part of Los Angeles" near Hollywood. The General is in a bad mood and is unemployed. He drinks a lot, and his alcoholism and fury remind the narrator of Richard Nixon. Madame maintains the household and takes care of the children while her husband rages. She endures his behavior for a year until, one day at the beginning of April, the narrator receives an invitation to the opening of their liquor store on Hollywood Boulevard.

The General and Madame downscale their lives but still live in great privilege compared to the other refugees—their only real complaint is that their neighborhood isn't "tony" (stylish) enough. The General's bad mood and alcoholism are likely the results of his lingering guilt over leaving his country behind in favor of ensuring the safety of his family. The narrator's comparison of him to Nixon evokes the General's similar attitudes of paranoia and his resentment over losing power.

The narrator's new job is "to serve as the first line of defense against students" who want to talk to the secretary of the department or the Department Chair. He becomes a minor celebrity on campus after a feature runs in the school newspaper about his being the sole Vietnamese student in the history of Occidental College and, now, a refugee. The sophomore who interviews him asks about his army record and if he's ever killed anyone. The narrator says that he hasn't. The campus, like many others, got swept up in antiwar fervor but has since returned to "its peaceful and quiet nature." The narrator is paid minimum wage to answer the phones, type professorial manuscripts, file documents, and fetch books. He also helps the secretary, Ms. Sofia Mori.

The narrator moves from one structural hierarchy—that is, the military—to another, which is academia. In this instance, too, his work is rather menial; he serves to ensure that others' needs are met and he is a go-between. Though the college, like the rest of the country, has abandoned the unrest of the protests, it remains interested in those who have killed in the context of war. There seems to be something both repulsive and honorable about someone who is willing to kill, not for personal reasons, but on behalf of the state or an ideal.

Initially, Sofia seems to dislike the narrator and is skeptical of him when he reports to the school newspaper that he's never killed anyone, but they soon begin an intimate relationship. The narrator also spends a great deal of time with the Department Chair, who enjoys talking to the narrator about Vietnamese culture and language, though he mistakenly calls him an "Amerasian" and gives the narrator a homework assignment for which he's asked to define "Oriental" and "Occidental" qualities. The Department Chair claims that his "students of Oriental ancestry find this beneficial."

The narrator's struggle to be understood by both Sofia and the Department Chair, an Asian woman and a white man, coincides with his sense of belonging neither in the East nor in the West. Sofia mistakenly thinks that every officer in Vietnam had a combat role and the Department Chair mistakenly thinks that every biracial Asian is also American, which reflects his own insularity.


Initially, the narrator thinks that the Department Chair is playing a trick; it's April Fool's Day. However, the academic is serious. The narrator goes home and makes a chart that he constructs using a series of stereotypes about Eastern and Western people. When the narrator shares the exercise with the professor the next day, the latter is pleased and notes how he and "all Orientals" are good students. The narrator feels "a small surge of pride," wanting approval, like all good students, even from fools.

The narrator plays into another of the Department Chair's stereotypes by obediently completing the demeaning assignment. The narrator's "small surge of pride" comes not only from wanting to be a good student, but also from wanting to fit in at the university through gaining others' approval.

The Department Chair notes how "Oriental" qualities are "diametrically [opposed]" to "Occidental" ones and that this is caused by "severe problems of identity suffered by Americans of Oriental ancestry." The professor thinks that the narrator's embodiment of the Orient and the Occident demonstrates "the possibility that out of two can come one." He says that, if the narrator can bring together his "divided allegiances," he can become "the ideal translator between two sides." The narrator offers the example of "yin and yang" and the professor immediately agrees with the comparison. The narrator asks if it would make any difference to the professor that he's actually *Eurasian*. The professor says that it makes no difference at all.

Though the Department Chair is supposedly a learned scholar, he subscribes to stereotypes that are reductive of the cultures and peoples that he studies. The reader is reminded of this through the title of the department—Oriental Studies—which reinforces myths of the East as a mysterious and sensual world that exists apart from the Christian West. The professor also reinforces the notion that the narrator is "divided" because he is biracial, implying that people are more unalike than alike—and also that the narrator is more of a concept than he is a real human being.

The night, the narrator reads a letter from the Parisian aunt. Man tells him that the rebuilding of Vietnam is progressing slowly but surely and that Man's superiors are pleased with the narrator's reporting. The narrator writes back, describing how no matter where the Vietnamese go, they find each other. They have their own politicians, police officers, bankers, and salespeople. They continue to make their cuisine, despite being largely dependent on Chinese markets. He writes to his "dear Aunt" about how much they've missed their fish sauce, "denigrated by foreigners for its supposedly horrendous reek." He writes about the varied fates of the exiled, from the widower with nine children "who went out into a Minnesotan winter and lay down in the snow…until he was buried and frozen" to "the clan turned into slave labor by a farmer in Modesto."

The narrator's letter describes the resilience of the refugee community, which seeks to hold on to reminders of their homeland, particularly through their traditional cuisine. They succeed in constructing their own communities, but the narrative that the narrator offers to Man also reveals how some fall through the social fabric that they've constructed. The widower exemplifies the depression of those who never overcome their homesickness, and the family that becomes a source of slave labor exemplifies the underbelly of the American Dream, in which people are routinely exploited.

CHAPTER 5

The General hires Bon as a clerk in his liquor store, though Bon continues to work part-time for Reverend Ramon. Meanwhile, the narrator has his first date with Sofia at a tiki bar in Silver Lake. She smokes and drinks "like a movie starlet from a screwball comedy." She says that she disliked the narrator during their first meeting, believing that he was a sellout. She complains about the Department Chair, who accuses her of having forgotten her Japanese heritage. She resents being told such things when Irish Americans, for example, are never asked if they speak Gaelic. She insists that her culture exists where she was born—in the United States. The narrator confesses that he thinks he's falling in love with her. She insists that, if they get involved, their relationship will be casual.

Sofia, like the narrator, doesn't feel that she fits in to American life, though she is American. Because she's of Asian heritage, she's perpetually regarded as a foreigner. She, unlike her white counterparts, is not given the privilege of self-invention, and instead is defined completely by her origins. Unlike the narrator, she's willing to challenge the racism around her instead of complying with it in exchange for small benefits. Sofia is a foil for the narrator because she isn't obedient and strives toward individualism and authenticity.

Under Sofia's tutelage, the narrator learns that "true revolution also [involves] sexual liberation." The only thing that could make the narrator happier is if Bon were to get a companion. Shy and discreet about sex due to his Catholic upbringing, he abstains from everything but masturbation. On the other hand, the narrator has made peace with the idea of going to hell. The narrator committed his first "unnatural act" at thirteen when he masturbated into a squid that his mother was preparing for dinner. After ejaculating into it, he feels guilty. They had only six squid; his mother would notice the missing one. He rinses away the evidence, then cuts shallow scars into it. His mother returns to their hut. She stuffs the squid with ground pork, bean thread noodle, diced mushroom, and chopped ginger, then fries them and serves them with ginger-lime dipping sauce. Obediently, he eats and tastes his own salty flavor.

The scene with the squid provides some comic relief, but it also upends stereotypes about Asian male sexuality. Bon isn't shy and discreet about sex because he's Vietnamese, but because he was raised Catholic. It is Western influence that gives him pause about sex. The narrator expressed natural curiosity about sex as an adolescent boy and engaged in experimentation with an object similar to what he thought a vagina would feel like. He doesn't feel guilt for his sexuality but for the fact that his personal indulgence could cost his hard-working mother a meal. He eats the squid as a form of penance.

By the time he comes out of this daydream, the narrator arrives at the General's liquor store on the unfashionable eastern end of Hollywood Boulevard. Bon tells him that Claude is in the storeroom in the back with the General. When the narrator enters, Claude rises from his vinyl chair and they embrace. Other than having gained a few pounds, he looks no different to the narrator.

Claude is the narrator's mentor and, like Bon and Man, someone whom he has known since childhood who remains a constant presence in his life. Claude serves a role similar to that of an adoptive father, due to having discovered the narrator when he was a nine-year-old refugee.


Claude talks about his escape from Vietnam on the ambassador's helicopter. He talks about leaving behind his girlfriend, Kim, who never met him at his villa at dawn after promising to show up there with her family. To make his own escape, Claude fought his way through crowds at the embassy, demanding to be let through because he's an American. He got to the wall in front of the embassy, where Marines reached down, grabbed his hand, and pulled him up. He recalls never having felt so ashamed or prouder to be an American. The General pours both Claude and the narrator another double scotch. The narrator makes a toast, congratulating Claude for knowing what it feels like "to be one of us."

For Claude, despite his extensive work in Vietnam, he doesn't feel the General's guilt about leaving the country behind. His status as a CIA agent and an American distance him from the sense of desperation that the hopeful evacuees were feeling. When the General congratulates Claude for knowing what it feels like "to be one of us," he's alluding to Claude's first experience of being trapped in circumstances beyond his control.

The General tells Claude that they have a problem—a spy in their ranks. The General and Claude look at the narrator, as if for confirmation. He names the crapulent major. Claude says that he doesn't know him. The General remarks that he's not a man to be known, an unremarkable officer. He says that it was the narrator's choice to bring the major with them. Claude asks why the General suspects him. The General says that one reason is that the major is Chinese, and the other is that the General's contacts in Saigon say that the major's family is doing very well. The final reason is that he's fat, and the General dislikes fat men.

The General believes the narrator's accusation, not because he thinks that the major is capable of acting as a double agent but because his dislike for the major makes him want to believe that he doesn't belong within the General's ranks. Despite the major's loyalty to the General's army, the General is eager to expel the officer for his perceived failure to fit the General's image of a South Vietnamese soldier.

Claude insists that the crapulent major isn't a spy just because he's Chinese. The General insists that he's not a racist but finds it very suspect that the major's family is doing so well in Saigon when the Communists know all of the South Vietnamese Army's officers and their families. Claude notes that this is just circumstantial evidence. To the narrator's chagrin, he's now thrown blame onto an innocent man. However, if the General has contacts in Saigon, that means that some kind of resistance exists. The General seems to feel like himself again—"a perennial plotter." He insists that he's just biding his time and that the war isn't over.

The General denies his prejudice, though he uses the major's ethnicity as a basis for his mistrust. China is a Communist nation, which makes the General think that the major would more likely be aligned with them. It's also possible that he's jealous of the possibility that the major is able to provide for his family in South Vietnam, while the General is unable to do the same. Though these are just rumors, they are enough to trigger the General's guilt.

To assert his loyalty to the General, the narrator, along with Bon, will kill the crapulent major. When the narrator leaves the storeroom, he sees that the store is empty, except for Bon, who watches a baseball game on a tiny TV by the cash register. The narrator has cashed his tax refund from the IRS—not a large sum but symbolically significant. He uses it to buy enough booze to keep him and Bon steeped in amnesia until the following week. As Bon bags the bottles, the narrator talks about the possibility of the crapulent major being a spy, which Bon finds implausible.

The narrator agrees to kill the crapulent major to prove his loyalty to the General, while also managing to eliminate one of his political enemies. The narrator is able to satisfy both of his allegiances with one act. However, his need to drink to forget about what he's doing reveals his sense of guilt. Like the General, Bon doesn't believe in the major's guilt, but he accepts it because they need a scapegoat.

Still, Bon shows the narrator a sawed-off, double-barreled shotgun on a rack beneath the cash register. When the narrator asks how Bon got it, he says that it's easier to get a gun in America than it is to vote or drive. Ironically, the crapulent major secured the connection with the Chinese gangs in Chinatown who got Bon access to firearms. The narrator notes that it would be too messy with a shotgun. Bon assures him that they won't be using the shotgun. He opens a cigar box resting on a shelf beneath the counter. Inside, there's a .38 Special, a revolver with a snub nose, identical to the one that the narrator carried as a service pistol. The narrator feels trapped by circumstances once again. His only consolation is the expression on Bon's face. He looks happy for the first time in a year.

The narrator and Bon learn that, in some ways, their new country is as accepting of violence as their old country was. The major has helped Bon to acquire the gun that will be used to kill him, using the Chinese connections that the General regards as partial proof of the major's disloyalty. In the Vietnamese community, which has become even more tightly-knit in the U.S., the major is now regarded as an outsider. Bon is happy to kill him because doing so causes him to feel more connected to the country that he's left behind, and gives him a sense of purpose that he hasn't felt since his family died.

CHAPTER 6

At the grand opening of the liquor store, the General shakes hands with well-wishers, chatting and smiling non-stop. Thirty old colleagues, followers, soldiers, and friends are also in attendance. The narrator hasn't seen these men since they were in the refugee camps on Guam. He mingles with "these vanquished soldiers" and reports their gossip to the Parisian aunt. They all have humble jobs now—managing a pizza parlor, working as janitors, short-order cooks, mechanics, and delivery people. Their children, "afflicted" by the West, talk back to them, and their wives have been forced to work.

The General's reunion with his former soldiers is bittersweet because they have all been demoted in social status. Moving to the U.S. has required them to start over in a country that knows nothing of their military reputations and doesn't care. Worse, they feel that the new country requires a compromise of traditional values. The next generation, raised in the U.S., seems poised to abandon those values altogether.

The narrator commiserates with the crapulent major about how unhappy he is in Los Angeles. When the narrator suggests moving, the major balks. He doesn't know what he'd do for food; the best Chinese restaurants are in his neighborhood. The narrator asks if the major can show him where the good Chinese food is. The major delightedly agrees. The narrator feels guilty for accusing such a harmless man. The narrator makes his way back to the General, who's standing by Madame. He's being interviewed by a man that the narrator doesn't recognize at first. It's Son Do, or Sonny, as he's nicknamed.

As in other instances in the novel, food becomes a way to connect with people and culture. The crapulent major's enthusiasm for life, expressed through his love for food and drink, causes the narrator to feel guilty about causing the man's inevitable death. This sense of tragedy is contrasted with the General's success in opening his store—a symbol of his success in the U.S.

The narrator last saw Sonny in 1969, during the narrator's final year in the U.S. They shake hands. Madame tells the narrator that Sonny is interviewing them for his newspaper. Sonny offers the narrator his business card. While offering Sonny a bottle of Chardonnay, the General recalls how journalists in Vietnam were given "the gift of free room and board, albeit in jail, for speaking a little too much truth to power." The narrator takes a picture of Sonny, with the General and Madame flanking him.

The General's comment foreshadows his change of heart regarding Sonny and the General's perception of Sonny's Vietnamese-language newspaper. He's in favor of Sonny's work when it serves the General's business interests, but Sonny quickly falls out of favor with him when the newspaper doesn't support the continuation of the war.

The crapulent major currently works as a gas station attendant in Monterey Park, while his wife sews in a sweatshop. When they're together, she nags him about being in California, where they are poorer than they were before. However, he has good news: his wife got pregnant with twins while they were at the refugee camp. He's happy that they're American citizens. Their American names are Spinach and Broccoli, in honor of Popeye and a woman on television who always reminded people to eat their broccoli. The names are assurances that the twins will be strong and healthy so that they can survive in America. The major mentions that he needs to go on a diet. He works at the gas station from ten in the morning and leaves at eight. He works seven days per week and can walk to work from his house. He finds the job easy and likes it. He offers to give the narrator some free gas in exchange for helping him escape Vietnam.

The crapulent major is not only a decent man but, unlike the other refugees in the narrator's company, he seems to appreciate the bounty that the U.S. can offer him and his family. He is willing to work hard to make a good life for himself and his family in his new country. He has faith, too, in America's promises. The major also exhibits a willingness to change his life, due to his wish to lose weight. The major's embrace of change contrasts with Bon and the General's fixation on a war that is over. The narrator is still going to kill the major to protect himself, though, no matter the major's noble character.

The narrator goes home and watches Bon clean and oil the .38 Special. They watch Dr. Richard Hedd being interviewed on television about Cambodia. The narrator asks, what if the major isn't a spy? If they kill the wrong man, it's murder. Bon sips his beer and says that the General knows things they don't. Also, it isn't a killing; it's a wartime assassination. Sometimes, innocent people get killed in wars. Bon says that it's only murder if you know they're innocent. Even then, it's a tragedy, not a crime.

The narrator attempts to engage Bon on the issue to test his moral conscience. He learns that Bon's faith in himself as a soldier, capable of carrying out orders, gives him no qualms about killing the major. Even if the major is innocent, Bon thinks that his murder is justified in the context of a war, in which a perceived threat is enough to justify killing.

The narrator asks Bon if he was happy when the General charged him with this task. Bon picks up the .38, which looks natural in his hand. He insists that a man needs purpose. Before he fell in love with Linh, he wanted revenge for his father's murder at the hands of Communists. Then, Linh became more important and he didn't get revenge. He didn't get over his feeling of betraying his father until Duc was born. His sense of wonder over his son made Bon think that his father must have felt the same way about him. His life seemed insignificant in relation to Duc's. With his son gone, Bon feels no sense of purpose. He feels like a nobody, and the only way not to be a nobody is either to kill himself or someone else. Bon asks if the narrator understands.

No longer a son or a husband or a father, Bon's only sense of purpose comes from being a soldier. Moreover, this is the only area of his life that has been consistent. His life as a husband and father didn't last and he failed to keep his promise to avenge his father. It's possible that he feels that he must keep his oath as a soldier or else his life will lack meaning altogether. Without a sense of purpose, Bon sees no point in continuing to live.

The narrator understands, and he's stunned; it's the longest speech he's ever heard from Bon—the only man the narrator has ever met who is equally moved by both love and the prospect of killing. The narrator wants to persuade the General that the crapulent major isn't a spy, but he knows it's too late. The only thing left for the narrator to do is to create a plausible story about how the major's death is neither his fault nor the General's. It would be a typical American tragedy, starring "a hapless refugee."

The narrator is also responsible for perpetuating stories that contribute to the positive image of the General, while secretly telling Man stories about how the refugees are faring in the U.S. Many people rely on the narrator's accounts of events, but his conflicting allegiances make him a possibly unreliable storyteller.

The next Saturday night, the narrator goes to dinner at the home of Professor Hammer and his boyfriend, Stan. Over dinner, they talk about bebop, the nineteenth-century novel, the Dodgers, and America's upcoming bicentennial. Professor Hammer recalls the narrator's senior thesis on Graham Greene's novel *The Quiet American* and thinks it's the best undergraduate thesis he's ever read. The narrator smiles demurely and says thanks. Claude snorts, saying that he never cared for the book. He finds the Vietnamese girl in it implausible. The character is quiet, servile, and meek, while the Vietnamese women in his experience are anything but.

The meeting with the professor reminds the narrator of the relatively easy-going life that he had as a student. With Professor Hammer, he's able to indulge in his love for Western culture. The narrator's interest in the Greene novel, which is about the fall of French colonialism in Vietnam and the beginning of American involvement in the region, is an indication of how keen he has been in understanding his political enemies.

The narrator and Claude leave Professor Hammer's house near midnight and smoke farewell cigarettes on the sidewalk. The narrator discusses his feelings of guilt about the impending murder of the crapulent major. Claude insists that the major probably has some blood on his hands. Everyone is innocent on one level and guilty on another. That's the nature of Original Sin.

In Claude's estimation, if the major isn't guilty of being a Communist spy, he's probably guilty of something else, given his line of work. Claude isn't justifying the major's death, but he's not declaring the narrator wrong for killing him to redeem his country.

The next evening, the narrator scouts the crapulent major. He parks his car half a block from the gas station and waits until 8:00 PM, when the major will emerge and begin his walk home. The narrator follows the major for six Sundays. On the Saturday before their fateful encounter with him, Bon and the narrator drive to Chinatown. After lunch, they browse the shops, where "all manner of Orientalia" is sold. They buy UCLA sweatshirts and caps. That evening, after dark, the narrator and Bon go out once more, each with a screwdriver. They tour the neighborhood until they reach an apartment complex with a carport like the one at the major's residence. Bon removes the front license plate from a car, while the narrator busies himself with the one at the rear. They then go home. Bon falls asleep immediately that night, but the narrator can't.

The narrator and Bon scout the major as if they were conducting a mission to hunt and kill a foreign enemy. Ironically, they go to Chinatown to buy UCLA regalia, hoping that the disguises will help them blend in to the neighborhood as students. In the killing of the major and, later, during Sonny's murder, clothing will play an important role. No longer assigned a uniform, the narrator and Bon create their own, usually using clothes that they believe will be helpful in making them look more American. The narrator has trouble sleeping, feeling a guilt that Bon clearly doesn't experience.

The visit to Chinatown reminds the narrator of a past incident in Cholon, involving the arrest of a Communist suspect, a tax collector. The crapulent major's men entered the tax collector's shop and pushed past his wife to reach the storeroom, where there was a lever that opened a secret door. Inside, there were gamblers shooting craps and playing cards. On seeing the policemen charge into the room, the gamblers dispersed. The narrator was surprised to see the tax collector, after having tipped Man off about the raid. The tax collector spent a week in the interrogation center, being beaten. The man's wife brought a bribe equivalent to a year's salary to ensure her husband's release. The major gave the narrator his share, and the narrator donated the money to the revolution, handing it to Man at the basilica. The point of writing this part of the confession to the Commandant is to prove Claude's point that the crapulent major, too, was sinful. The Vietnamese regard extortion as an average offense, however.

The narrator tells himself this story about the major as though he's trying to find some justification for the decent man's eventual murder. He thinks of how the tax collector also had a wife who had to endure her husband's suffering until she came up with enough money to buy his freedom from the major, who imprisoned him. Moreover, the tax collector was one of the narrator's comrades. By killing the major, he reasons that he would be getting revenge for the tax collector. The narrator overlooks his own role in allowing the tax collector to be imprisoned and beaten to avoid compromising himself. At the same time, he also sees himself as an operator within an intrinsically corrupt mechanism.

The next evening, the narrator and Bon park down the street from the gas station at 7:30 PM, wearing the UCLA sweatshirts and caps. The narrator's car has the stolen license plates affixed to it. Fireworks explode in the distance. Bon is tense while they wait for the crapulent major. At eight, the major leaves the gas station. They start the car and drive to his apartment complex. They wait eight minutes for the major's arrival. Bon takes the gun out of the glove compartment and opens the cylinder to check the bullets. He clicks the cylinder back into place and lays the gun on a red velour pillow on his lap. He puts on a pair of latex gloves and removes his sneakers. The narrator gets out of the car and goes to the other end of the carport.

The fireworks explode in the distance because it's Independence Day. The sound of the firecrackers foreshadows the sounds of bullets firing. Independence Day has significance in relation to Bon's belief that he is killing the major to help free his country from the Communists. It also has significance in relation to the narrator's belief that he's killing the major to help maintain Communist rule and to avenge his wronged comrades.

Bon walks in his socked feet to his position, between the two cars nearest to the path. He kneels down and keeps his head beneath the windows. The narrator holds a plastic bag with a yellow happy face and the words THANK YOU! on them. There are firecrackers and oranges inside, which he bought in Chinatown. He imagines his mother asking him if he's sure about what he's doing. The narrator thinks to himself that it's too late to turn back. As the crapulent major approaches, the narrator greets him and lifts the bag, offering it as a Fourth of July present. The major is puzzled, wondering if Americans give gifts on the Fourth of July. He looks into the bag. Bon walks up behind him. Instead of pulling the trigger, Bon greets the major. When the major turns around, Bon shoots him in the head. The bullet makes a third eye. The narrator picks up the bag, which is dotted with blood.

The plastic bag with the yellow happy face seems like part of the ruse to disarm the major. The symbol, which signifies affability and generosity, reinforces the notion that the narrator, whom the major has never had any reason to perceive as a threat, is there on a friendly visit. Also, in Chinese culture, oranges symbolize wealth and good luck and are commonly shared on Chinese New Year. Fireworks are also displayed on Chinese New Year, as they are on the Fourth of July in America. The "third eye" is a symbol of wisdom in Eastern culture. In this instance, though, it's a manifestation of the narrator's guilt.

At home, the narrator takes off his shoes, also dotted with blood. He wipes them and then calls the General. He tells him that "it's done." The General says, "Good," and the narrator hangs up. The narrator goes back into the living room with two glasses and a bottle of rye. In the living room, Bon empties the contents of the crapulent major's wallet. Inside, there's a color photo of the major's twins at a few weeks of age. When the narrator hands Bon a glass of rye, he sees the old blood oath scar on his hand. Bon toasts to the major. They then eat three of the oranges from the shopping bag and go to bed. When the narrator closes his eyes, he shudders at what he sees: "the crapulent major's third eye, weeping because of what it could see about [him]."

The number three shows up in numerous ways in this scene: the narrator and Bon eat three oranges—symbols of good fortune—and the narrator dreams of the major's "third eye." The number signifies the completion of a story with a beginning, middle, and end. The oranges are an ironic metaphor because the major was a victim of ill-fortune, whereas the fruit usually symbolizes good luck. The narrator feels great guilt for what he has done, like his immorality has been truly seen by the major's "third eye."

CHAPTER 7

The narrator confesses to the Commandant that the crapulent major's death troubles him. Worse, no longer in Saigon, he can't engage in his weekly meetings with Man at the basilica and discuss his feelings. So, when the narrator receives an invitation to a wedding at a Chinese restaurant in Westminster, Orange County, he's eager to go and take his mind off of things. He takes Sofia Mori as his guest. The bride's father is a legendary marine colonel who fought off the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) during the Battle of Hue. The groom's father is the vice president of the Saigon branch of Bank of America. The narrator gets an invitation because he had met with the man several times in Saigon when he was the General's aide. The narrator's social status, however, is indicated by how far away he sits from the stage where the bride and groom will marry—that is, very far away, near the restrooms. He spots Sonny "at a table several rings closer to the center of power."

The narrator's visits to Man served as a form of confession. No longer a Catholic, he confesses instead to Man, his blood brother and also his fellow Communist comrade. The narrator seeks to redeem himself for the major's death while writing his confession. Before his capture, he coped with his guilty conscience by looking for distractions. A wedding is a perfect distraction because it signifies the union of two people in love and the future promise of children, both of which are the opposite of death.

The narrator thinks that he sees the severed head of the crapulent major serving as the table's centerpiece. To distract himself, he drinks and explains the customs of his people to Sofia. He then takes her to the dance floor. From there, he sees Lana, who is one of the two female singers taking turns at the microphone with the wedding singer. The narrator hasn't seen her since she was a schoolgirl, and she bears no relation to the girl he remembers. The other female singer is an "angel of tradition," wearing a chartreuse *ao dai* and long, straight hair, singing ballads about "lovelorn women" longing for "distant soldier lovers" and Saigon. Lana, on the other hand, wears a black leather miniskirt and a gold silk halter top. She sings the blues and rock numbers that bands in Vietnam mastered to entertain American troops, such as "Proud Mary" and "Twist and Shout."

The narrator believes that he sees the ghost of the major. This is one of several instances in the novel in which the narrator will envision the ghosts of those whom he has killed, manifestations of his guilty conscience. In Vietnamese literature, ghosts commonly figure as reminders of the fact that history is always present. Meanwhile, Lana represents a break with traditional femininity. The other singer serves as her foil, though the other woman also represents the General and Madame's expectations for what Lana should become—demure and modest.

The narrator looks toward the General and Madame's table. Madame, who usually enjoys doing the twist, remains seated with her husband. They both look as though they've been sucking on sour fruit. Meanwhile, Lana rotates her hips, riveting the attention of the men in the crowd. The narrator and Ms. Mori dance. When the song is over, the bank vice president takes the stage and introduces the Congressman. The politician delivers a rousing speech about how the refugees represent the promise of the American Dream. The crowd cheers and applauds. The groom's father signals for the band to begin playing the music to the Vietnamese national anthem. Everyone sings with zeal, including the narrator. Only "the stoic Chinese waiters" remain silent, using the moment to rest from their work.

The General and Madame are ashamed and embarrassed by their daughter, but they refrain from saying or doing anything, given that she was hired as the wedding entertainment. The Congressman's speech is met with cheers because it's a legitimization of the refugees' presence in the U.S. by someone in a position of authority. Though they represent the American Dream, the groom's father chooses to hear the Vietnamese national anthem, which represents the retention of their own culture and traditions, despite living on new soil.

The narrator turns around to find Sonny talking to Sofia. He writes down her quips and they talk about how impressed Asians are when a white person knows a few words of one of their languages, while Asians have to speak perfect English to avoid being made fun of and are still regarded as foreigners. The narrator mentions how, if Asians speak perfect English, it makes it easier for Americans to trust them. Sonny asks him what he thinks of the Congressman. The narrator says that the politician is the best thing that could've happened to the community. He regards his own statement as "the best kind of truth," for it means "at least two things."

Sofia's comments are in response to the Congressman's speech, in which he says a few words in Vietnamese. She resents the double-standard in which Asians have to prove the legitimacy of their American identity. The narrator's comment suggests that the Congressman is good for the community because he'll aid with the integration of the South Vietnamese, but his conservative politics fail to appeal to the current American climate, which is good for the Communists.

The next weekend, the narrator chauffeurs the General and Madame from Hollywood to Huntington Beach, where the Congressman lives. He has invited them to lunch. During the hour-long drive, they talk mostly about the Congressman. When the narrator asks about Lana, Madame's face darkens "with barely repressed fury." She declares her daughter "insane" and says that she looks like "a slut." She wonders what decent man would marry "that." She asks if the narrator would marry her, and he confesses that he wouldn't. Privately, he is thinking that marriage wasn't the first thing on his mind when he saw her onstage, performing at the wedding. Madame decries the corruption in the United States. They were able to contain it at home in bars, nightclubs, and on bases, but in their new country, it's everywhere.

Madame's fury arises from her sense that her daughter disregards all of the expectations for traditional femininity that she raised Lana to follow. She worries that Lana's sexually suggestive behavior onstage will ruin her chances of marriage, assuming that her daughter wants to marry. Madame's traditional, conservative view of femininity differs from Lana, who has embraced Western modes of identity, which allow her more personal freedom. Madame views such freedom as personal corruption. The division between them is also generational.

At lunch, the conversation turns back to Lana. Rita, the Congressman's wife, sympathizes. She has strict rules for her own children. The Congressman mentions that one of his legislative priorities is regulating music and movies to better control what their children read, listen to, and watch. He's friendly with some Hollywood people, and one of them has given him a script about the Vietnam War. The Congressman has agreed to give the filmmaker notes about what he gets right and wrong in the story, which is about the CIA's Phoenix Program. The Congressman recalls that the General is an expert on the program, though the General says that he left before it began. The Congressman recommends the narrator, instead, as a consultant. The film is called *The Hamlet*.

Rita and the Congressman agree with the General and Madame's embrace of traditional, conservative values, despite being out of step with the more liberal climate of 1970s California. However, the Congressman's knowledge about the war is useful, though his perspective is biased against the Communists. The Phoenix Program was a CIA-sponsored initiative to target Communist operatives in villages throughout Vietnam. Their American advisers frequently carried out torture and assassinations.

CHAPTER 8

The first line in the script for *The Hamlet* is, "We own the day, but CHARLIE owns the night." These are the words that Sergeant Jay Bellamy first hears from his new commanding officer, Captain Will Shamus. In the film, Shamus is a World War II veteran who served in Normandy. His mission is to save the innocent mountain people who live in a peaceful hamlet near the border of Laos. What's threatening them is a particularly ruthless group of Viet Cong guerillas, nicknamed "King Cong." King Cong has infiltrated the hamlet with subversives and sympathizers. Sergeant Bellamy dropped out of Harvard and ran away from his St. Louis home, where he grew up the son of a millionaire.

The Hamlet *is a parody of* Apocalypse Now, *which was a revision of Joseph Conrad's* Heart of Darkness. *One of the critiques of the film is that it failed to depict the Vietnamese people as fully-realized human beings, instead presenting them as grotesque enemies. Nguyen addresses this aspect of grotesqueness by nicknaming the group of Viet Cong "King Cong," which is a re-appropriation of the title of the 1933 film* King Kong. *The latter has often been analyzed as a depiction of Americans' racist fears.*

The screenplay is mailed to the narrator by the director's personal assistant, Violet. Violet is brusque when she calls to ask for the narrator's mailing address, never bothering to say hello or goodbye. She's equally ill-mannered when the narrator visits the Auteur's Hollywood Hills home. The narrator wonders if "her abruptness" is part of her personality or because of his race. Making their way to the Auteur's office, they walk along bamboo floors, avoiding "the dusky maid vacuuming a Turkish rug." By the time the narrator sits before the Auteur, he remains in a state of paranoia about Violet, wondering if she really is racist and regards the narrator as "foreign."

The narrator's obsessive paranoia over Violet probably has a gendered aspect. The narrator has never before expressed any concern regarding a man's approval, indicating that he's particularly concerned about being rejected by white women. His concern over Violet is a manifestation of his internalized racism, which is focused on her but fails even to identify the other woman in the Auteur's home, except by her color.

The narrator is a fan of the Auteur's work, but he's "flummoxed" by having read a screenplay in which not a single Vietnamese person has "an intelligible word to say." The Auteur tells the narrator that he's pleased to meet him and "loved" his notes. He says that there aren't any Vietnamese in Hollywood. He acknowledges that authenticity is important but insists that it doesn't beat the imagination.

The Auteur tries to disarm the narrator by flattering him, hoping that this will cause the narrator to drop the issue over representation. He then goes on to excuse his depiction due to his lack of interactions with Vietnamese people. In the end, however, he insists that nothing more than the story matters.

The narrator notes that the Auteur didn't get the details about the Vietnamese right in the script. The Auteur notes how he has read the foremost historians and authors on the narrator's "little part of the world." The Auteur's aggressiveness flusters the narrator, who tells the Auteur that he "didn't even get the screams right." The Auteur finds this absurd, believing that screams are "universal." The narrator explains that different people produce different sounds, depending on circumstances. He thinks of his first assignment as a lieutenant, when he couldn't figure out how to save an elder of the Bru minority, a Montagnard who lived in an actual hamlet not far from the setting of the Auteur's story, from his captain, who was wrapping a strand of barbed wire around the old man's throat. The narrator then writes out an onomatopoeic scream on the script to illustrate what he means.

By "the details," the narrator is indicating that the Auteur has failed to represent the subtleties of humanity. However, he's being generous, because the Auteur already revealed that he hasn't bothered to depict Vietnamese people at all and has no Vietnamese characters in the film. The Auteur defends his work by belittling the narrator's country, suggesting that the Vietnamese should be honored even to have a movie produced about them. The narrator uses the point about screams as a metaphor to explain that there are as many subtle differences between Vietnamese people as there are between anyone else.

After the narrator leaves the Auteur's home in the hills, he goes to the General's house, thirty blocks away and down the hills. He tells the General and Madame about his experience with the Auteur. Both are angry about the Auteur's dismissive attitude. The narrator talks about the more unpleasant part of his meeting, when Violet mentioned that Vietnamese people aren't going to buy tickets to the movie, so their feelings about it don't really matter. The narrator was outraged. He insisted that the story would be more compelling if the characters said something, even in their own language, and if one of the men had a love interest. The Auteur grimaced at the suggestions and reminded the narrator that he's never made a movie. Maybe after he's made one, the Auteur said, he'll listen to a couple of the narrator's "cheap ideas." The Auteur then kicked the narrator out of his house.

The General and Madame are angry for the same reason as the narrator: the Auteur doesn't respect their people. Violet utters a blunt truth, though it rightfully outrages the narrator to know that the film's producers have no interest in depicting Vietnamese people humanely. It is a truth, however, because many white Americans actually feel this way, at least subconsciously. Moreover, if they can regard the Vietnamese as barely human or villainous, the country's actions in Vietnam seem more just and the audience can reaffirm its sense of moral righteousness.

Back at the General's house, Madame asks the narrator why the Auteur was so rude. The narrator figures that the director was just looking for a yes man. Moreover, he's an artist; they always have thin skins. The narrator recalls how the Auteur said that no one would give a shit about his not making a distinction between mountain peoples, remaining unconvinced by the narrator's comparison to the importance of distinguishing between Native American tribes. The narrator realizes that he had been naïve. The Auteur would make whatever movie he wanted to make, and what he wanted to make was a film in which the Vietnamese would merely serve as "raw material" in "an epic about white men saving good yellow people from bad yellow people."

The narrator uses the example of how Westerns have distinguished between Native American tribes, though this example is somewhat ironic. Hollywood Westerns have notoriously misrepresented Native Americans, often even using white actors in red face paint. Like the directors of those old Westerns who thought that their depictions of indigenous people wouldn't matter to the imagined white audience, the Auteur insists on making a similar kind of film. The only depiction that matters is that of the white hero.

The General pulls a newspaper from a stack on the kitchen countertop and asks the narrator if he's seen it. The General is disturbed by Sonny's article on the crapulent major's funeral and his coverage of the wedding that the narrator attended. On the major's death, Sonny writes that the police call it "a robbery-homicide." He also mentions that the major, an officer of the secret police, must've had enemies who wanted to see him dead. In regard to the wedding, Sonny uses the speeches to argue that talk of the war should cease because the war is over.

The General is upset with Sonny because of the newspaper's potential to sway the Vietnamese community away from efforts to take the country back from the Communists. Furthermore, Sonny questions the narrator's story, which was designed to protect everyone's reputation.

The narrator surmises that Sonny's doing his job, though he may be a bit "naïve" in how he's going about it. The General thinks that Sonny is interpreting things instead of reporting facts. When the narrator mentions that Sonny isn't exactly wrong about the major, Madame becomes offended and questions his loyalty. She says that "the best newspaper policy" is one in which reporters are beaten. The narrator decides to pretend that he, too, is against freedom of the press.

At first, the narrator tries to equivocate by emphasizing the importance of Sonny's work, while he is also careful to avoid offending the General and Madame. When this proves not to work, he decides to pretend to side with the General and Madame, whose extreme positions on issues require total devotion.

The General insists that the war isn't dead, and that Claude and the Congressman are among many allies. The General has a list of officers who want to fight. The narrator suggests forming a "vanguard" that will work in secret. The General decides to turn Sonny's newspaper into a front organization, along with starting a youth group, a women's group, and an intellectuals' group. The Congressman, he says, is working on contacts to clear the way for them to send men to Thailand, which will be a staging area. The General insists that they have no choice but to fight and to resist the evil that is Communism, which is why it's dangerous to talk about the war being over. Their people mustn't grow complacent. The newspapers will play a role in never letting them forget their resentment.

The General dedicates everything in his life, including the earnings from his businesses, to funding a futile war effort. Unlike the crapulent major, he's unable to leave the past behind. It's likely that he still feels guilty for leaving men to fight while he fled to safety in the U.S. To redeem his reputation and legacy, he imagines staging a return to his homeland in which he will seize the country back from the Viet Cong. He views himself not as a man who is starting a new life, but as a man in exile.

CHAPTER 9

Violet calls the narrator a week after their meeting, though he doesn't wish to speak to her. She says that the Auteur has reconsidered his advice and respects the narrator for standing up to him. She says that they need a consultant who'll get things right "when it comes to Vietnamese matters." Though they've researched the history, weapons, customs, and costumes, the narrator will provide the human touch. She mentions that there are refugees from Vietnam in the Philippines who'll be working as extras and that they'll need someone to work with them.

The Auteur calls the narrator back because he'll need someone to translate to his extras. This will become more apparent later in the novel. Violet is vague in explaining what she means about "the human touch," given the Auteur's previous aversion to the narrator's attempts to depict the Vietnamese characters with humanity. Thus, this seems like a ruse to get the narrator to return.

The Auteur offers the narrator four months of paid work in the Philippines and six months of pay if the shoot goes over schedule or if the local rebels become "too overconfident." The narrator tells the Parisian aunt about his decision to accept the Auteur's offer, a job that will be a chance to "[undermine] the enemy's propaganda." He maintains an upbeat tone about Los Angeles in his letters, afraid of censors reading refugee mail and "looking for dejected, angry refugees who could not or would not dream the American Dream."

The narrator is still overconfident about his ability to have a major impact on the movie. Otherwise, he may be intentionally exaggerating his role to the Parisian aunt to make his work sound more promising than it is. He may want his comrades to believe that he's making a difference in the U.S. At the same time, he's paranoid about being watched from within the country and possibly sent home.

The narrator also tells the Parisian aunt about his agreement to help the General create a nonprofit charitable organization called the Benevolent Fraternity of Former Soldiers of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. In one reality, the organization exists to serve the needs of the thousands of South Vietnamese veterans without resources. In another reality, it's a front that allows the General to receive funds for the movement to fight the Communists.

The General uses his respectable status among the refugee community to get funds from them. He justifies his duplicity with his belief that, if he gets enough money to raise a proper army, the veterans would no longer need to worry because they and the other refugees could go back home.

The narrator and the General visit the Congressman's district office at a strip mall in Huntington Beach to talk about the new organization. The General hopes to get Congressional support, but the Congressman assures him that that won't happen. The narrator suggests support in the form of "unofficial money" that goes to the organization. In return, the Congressman will get votes from their community. The General says that no one would argue against support for South Vietnamese veterans who fought alongside American soldiers during the war. The narrator thinks of how many organizations have been set up as fronts for the CIA. The Congressman unofficially pledges his support, hoping that the organization doesn't engage in anything illegal "when it comes to its patriotic activities."

The Congressman knows that the General won't get financial backing for another operation in Vietnam due to America's aversion to re-entering the country where they experienced a devastating loss. The U.S. entered a period of war weariness in the mid- to late-1970s and experienced a diminishing of its overwhelming confidence. The Congressman is convinced, however, to trade financial support for votes from the refugee community to ensure that he doesn't lose his seat in Congress. He's willing to support an organization that he knows is fraudulent to stay in office.

Three months later, the narrator goes to the Philippines. For his flight, he has a copy of *Fodor's Southeast Asia*. He's not surprised to read that Vietnam is described as "the most devastated land." He's insulted to read the description of his neighbors, Cambodians, as "easy-going, sensuous, friendly, and emotional." One could also say that about the Vietnamese, or people in most lands with "spa-like atmospheric conditions."

The depiction of Vietnam in the travel book chooses to define the country according to what occurred during the war. The narrator finds the descriptions of the people to be generic and designed in a way to satisfy Western stereotypes about the East. The description enhances the fantasy of Eastern sensuality and innocence.

The narrator takes a day trip to a refugee camp at Bataan, where he recruits a hundred Vietnamese extras. They're too hungry to turn away the wages that the narrator offers: a dollar per day. It brings the narrator's spirits down when no one haggles for a better wage and when one of the extras, "a lawyer of aristocratic appearance," tells him that before the Communists won, it was foreigners who victimized, terrorized, and humiliated them. Now, it's their own people. She supposes that's an improvement. The narrator trembles at hearing her words.

The lack of haggling, which is a traditional practice, suggests the desperation of the people in the aftermath of the war. The narrator trembles at hearing the lawyer's words because it's an indication that the Communist takeover didn't result in the improvement of living standards or the liberation that the Communists promised.

For the past few days, the narrator has been feeling better about his past sins. He believes that he has put the crapulent major's death behind him. Before he left Los Angeles, Sofia cooked him a farewell dinner, and he began to think that he loves her. However, he also has feelings for Lana. During dinner, Ms. Mori reminds him of their commitment to free love. After they have sex, she tells him that he can do something wonderful with *The Hamlet*. He can "help shape how Asians look in the movies." The narrator, though, feels like nothing more than a collaborator, helping to exploit his fellow countrymen and refugees.

The narrator's feelings of regret are mixed with his romantic feelings for two women. He believes that, with Sofia's affection and faith in him, as well as the prospect of working on the film, he can redeem himself by doing something that would be beneficial to their entire Vietnamese community, regardless of their political allegiances. The film gives him a sense of moral purpose that he doesn't otherwise have.

The narrator visits the cemetery that Harry built in Luzon as an additional film set and thinks of his mother's grave. He remembers having seen her for the last time before departing for Occidental College. He then received a letter from his father in his junior year, telling him that she was dead at thirty-four from tuberculosis. The narrator asks to have the biggest tomb in the cemetery for his own use. He pastes a reproduction of his mother's black-and-white picture, which he carries in his wallet, onto the tombstone. On the face of the tombstone, he paints her name and dates in red. The tombstone and the tomb are made from adobe, not marble, but no one will be able to tell on film. The narrator figures that, in cinema at least, his mother will have a resting place fit for an aristocrat—a "fitting grave for a woman who was never more than an extra to anyone but me."

The narrator makes up for not being present during his mother's burial by giving her a symbolic burial in the cemetery that is part of one of the film sets. Though his mother received a proper burial, including a tombstone which his father purchased, the narrator's resentment of his father seems to make him wish that he had been the one to bury his mother instead. His inability to do this in real life, both due to lacking the funds and not being physically present, lead him to hold this mock memorial. By characterizing his mother as an "extra," he means that, as a poor servant, she was the kind of person whom others didn't notice, and was always in the background.

CHAPTER 10

The narrator's notes to the Auteur allow for some change in how the Vietnamese will be represented in the film. The Auteur accepts the notes about how people will scream and includes three Vietnamese characters with speaking parts—an older brother, a younger sister, and a little brother whose parents have been killed by "King Cong," or the Viet Cong. The older brother, Binh, hates King Cong and loves his American rescuers, whom he serves as a translator. He will eventually be killed by King Cong. His sister, Mai, will fall in love with the idealistic Sergeant Jay Bellamy. She will then be kidnapped and raped by King Cong, which becomes the justification for the Green Berets destroying King Cong. The little boy will be "crowned" with a Yankees cap in the final scene and airlifted out of his homeland. Sergeant Bellamy will take him back to his wealthy family in St. Louis, where he will be given a golden retriever with his nickname—Danny Boy.

By depicting the Viet Cong as a ruthless guerrilla army with no other apparent desire than killing people, the Auteur encourages the fantasy that the actual Viet Cong was without a purpose or meaningful political ideology. By naming them King Cong, he can also perpetuate their fearsome image. Though the narrator gets his wish of having Vietnamese characters with speaking parts, all of them exist to admire the white people in the film, particularly the wealthy Jay Bellamy, a character who stands to gain the audience's admiration for his willingness to reject his life of privilege in favor of defending his country against a Communist enemy.

Violet tells the narrator that no Vietnamese actors were cast because those who auditioned were amateurs, and the professionals overacted. The narrator hears this as her telling him that the Vietnamese can't represent themselves, so they'll be represented by other Asians. The narrator reports on the cast to his Parisian aunt. He includes "glazed Polaroids" of himself with them and another that he took "with the reluctant Auteur." He also sends Polaroids of the refugee camp and its inhabitants, as well as newspaper clippings that the General gave him before he left for the Philippines. They are stories about refugees fleeing Vietnam in "leaky little boats" to sail to Hong Kong, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. Some of the boats sank when confronted by storms and pirates.

The narrator doesn't believe that Violet and the Auteur couldn't find Vietnamese actors. He suspects that they cast whoever they wanted in the roles, believing that it wouldn't matter, as long as the actors were Asian. Still, the narrator reports on his work to Man with a positive outlook. The narrator is attempting to control multiple narratives: he wants to depict the Vietnamese more humanely; he wants to depict the Viet Cong more fairly; and he wants to show his Communist handlers how the situation in Vietnam is being depicted in the U.S.

Most of the film extras play civilians who may also be Viet Cong, and who will probably be killed for being Viet Cong or for being suspected of being Viet Cong. Most of the extras are already familiar with this role, having experienced it in real life. The next category of extras is the soldiers in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. All of the men want this role, even though these characters are also regarded as possible enemies who'll likely be killed. There are many veterans from the South Vietnamese Army among the extras, so the narrator has no problem casting for this role.

The casting of the extras reveals the real-life ambiguity about who the Americans regarded as friends and foes in Vietnam. Due to their supposed inability to tell Vietnamese people apart, the Americans suspected even South Vietnamese of being Viet Cong. Every Vietnamese person was presumed guilty and had to prove themselves innocent.

The most difficult category for the narrator to cast is for that of the National Liberation Front guerilla, or the Viet Cong. No one wants this role. Money ends up solving the problem. After some strong persuasion from the narrator, Violet doubles the salary for these extras. What they find repugnant about the role is that they'll simulate the torture of Binh and the rape of Mai. The narrator's relationship with the Auteur unravels when he asks the director if the rape is necessary. The director insists that the scene will give movie audiences the shock they need. Moreover, rape is something that happens in war and he has an obligation to show that, even though a "sellout" like the narrator would disagree.

None of the veterans wants to play the role of their former enemy. The extras' repugnance at depicting Mai's rape mirrors the narrator's own—it's too close to their lived reality. The Auteur's insistence on having the rape scene in the film seems to have less to do with understanding what the Viet Cong actually did with people whom they captured than it does with his wish to depict his own rape fantasy onscreen.

The narrator is stunned by the Auteur's "unprovoked attack." When the narrator denies being a sellout, the Auteur snorts and says that that's exactly what one of the narrator's people would call someone who would help a white man like him. Or, maybe, "loser" is a better term, he offers. The narrator agrees that he's a loser for believing the promises that America made to him and his people. The Auteur says that the narrator's opinions don't matter. The narrator responds by inviting the Auteur to perform fellatio on him, which leads to the director threatening to gouge out the narrator's eyes with a spoon and then force-feed them to him.

The narrator winces at the Auteur's accusation, particularly because he continues to think that he's doing something that will be beneficial to his people and that will help Americans regard the Vietnamese with more humanity. The Auteur's violent reaction to the narrator's insult results from his feeling that his masculinity has been attacked, particularly by someone whom the Auteur regards as inferior to him socially. The Auteur also casually throws around threats of gruesome violence. They are surely hyperbole to him, but the narrator has actually experienced extreme violence like this in reality.

The Auteur and the narrator are no longer on speaking terms. He explains Binh's torture scene to the extras without looking at the narrator who will translate to them. The Auteur says that they've just ambushed a patrol and Binh is the sole survivor. The extras are to see Binh as a "backstabber with yellow skin but a white soul." They're to make him confess his "reactionary sins." He'll then pay for them. He concludes by telling the extras to "have fun," be themselves, and "just act natural." The extras are confused by this because torture has nothing to do with "acting natural." When the Auteur asks what's wrong, the tall sergeant says that everything's fine.

The Auteur wants to depict the way in which the Vietnamese turned against each other, and how the Viet Cong committed cruel acts against their own people. The torture scene, which the Auteur expects the extras to depict as "natural," reinforces the notion of the Viet Cong as cruel savages with no sense of loyalty to anyone or anything but Communism.

At this point in the script, Binh, nicknamed "Benny," has been caught in a probe led by the A-Team's only black soldier, Sergeant Pete Attucks, whose name comes from his ancestor, Crispus Attucks. The sergeant steps into a booby trap—a bear claw made of bamboo spikes—and loses his left foot. The Viet Cong captures him and Binh. They castrate Attucks and stuff his genitals into his mouth. According to Claude, this was something that some Native American tribes did to "trespassing white settlers." Claude finds it ironic that the Viet Cong had a similar practice, regarding it as proof of shared humanity.

The sole black character exists to be killed, with the implication that he dies for his country, despite not being treated as an equal in his country. The decision to castrate Attucks and stuff his genitals in his mouth is more reminiscent of what white spectators would do to their black male victims after a lynching.

During his torture scene, James Yoon grimaces, grunts, cries, bawls real tears, yells, shrieks, wriggles, twists, thrashes, heaves, and climaxes when he vomits his breakfast of chorizo and eggs. At the end of the scene, the set is silent. Everyone is stunned by the performance. The Auteur towels him off and says, "That was amazing, Jimmy, absolutely amazing." Then, he asks him to do it again, just to be sure.

Yoon is using the scene to show off his acting prowess and to win an Oscar nomination. If he succeeds, he'll manage to expand the visibility of Asian people in film, but he'll be doing this in the context of a film that still reinforces many stereotypes and reasserts the white savior myth.

In the end, the Auteur asks for six takes. At noon, he asks Yoon if he wants to break for lunch. The actor shudders and says that he'll stay where he is. He wants to feel like he's really being tortured. While everyone else goes to the shady canteen, the narrator sits by Yoon and offers to shelter him with a parasol, but Yoon refuses. He insists that people like Binh went through much worse; the narrator agrees. While training for the secret police, the narrator learned from Claude that brute force only gets an interrogator bad answers. Yoon asks for some water and the narrator gets it for him. The narrator is relieved to hear the Auteur's voice, calling out for the completion of the scene "so Jimmy can get back to the pool."

Though the narrator has actual experience with torturing people, he is assisting in a scene that offers a depiction of torture that may bear no relation to reality. He probably refrains from offering any suggestions due to the fact that he and the Auteur are no longer on speaking terms. Moreover, the Auteur is clearly uninterested in any suggestion that would disrupt his vision for the film.

By the final take two hours later, Yoon is teary with pain and his face is bathed in actual sweat, mucus, vomit, and tears. The narrator looks at him and thinks of the communist agent. For the next scene, the Auteur requires several takes. It's the last one in the movie for Yoon. Unable to get their victim to confess, the Viet Cong beat his brains out with a spade. Binh drowns under a faucet of two gallons of his own blood. For the brains, Harry has concocted "homemade cerebro-matter" made of oatmeal and agar, which he daubs on the earth around Yoon's head. The cinematographer closes in to capture the look in Binh's eyes, "some saintly mix of ecstatic pain and painful ecstasy." The character never utters a word in response to his punishment, at least not "an intelligible one."

For the narrator, the fantasy of cinema conflates with the reality of torture that he has witnessed. In cinema, torture can be idealized by depicting Yoon as a kind of saint for what he's willing to endure to defend his relationship with the Americans. This illusion of saintliness tries to find nobility in such suffering, though the narrator knows better. The last line is an ironic twist on the narrator's previous complaint to the Auteur about the Vietnamese characters not having speaking parts. The Auteur has gone from barely depicting the Vietnamese to deifying them—but either way, they are still not treated as full, complex human beings.

CHAPTER 11

The longer the narrator works on the movie, the more convinced he is that he isn't a technical consultant on an artistic project but an infiltrator into a propagandistic work. The Auteur will regard his work as art, but that's foolish. Movies are "America's way of softening up the rest of the world" until the day when they, too, are bombed by the planes they see in the movies. Man understands Hollywood's propagandistic function. The narrator writes to him, concerned about the relevance of his work on the film, and Man responds with his most detailed message yet. He tells the narrator to remember Chairman Mao Zedong's message at Yan'an about art and literature being crucial to revolution. This is Man's way of telling the narrator that his mission with the movie is important because of what the film represents: the world's willingness to absorb American ideas.

The narrator is disheartened by his work on the film. He feels that he's contributing to the propagation of American ideas and ideals that are antithetical to his political purpose, and which also perpetuate reductive images of Vietnamese people. The narrator's spirits are lifted by Man's encouraging response, which contextualizes his work on the film with other efforts to use art and literature to foster revolution. If the narrator can incorporate some of his ideas in a film that will be eagerly watched around the world, then he has succeeded.

The climax of the film is a firefight at King Cong's lair, resulting in its "vaporization by the U.S. Air Force." Magnificent sets are destroyed and enormous supplies of canned smoke are released. Large quantities of detonation cord and explosives are used, sending all the local birds and beasts away in fear, while the crew walks around with cotton in their ears. Destroying the hamlet where King Cong hides isn't enough, of course, to satisfy an American audience; all the extras are killed off, too. The script calls for the deaths of several hundred Viet Cong and Laotians, though there are only a hundred extras. To solve the problem, most of them die more than once. Some die four or five times.

The Auteur satisfies the American audience's thirst for blood, which went unsatisfied due to the nation's loss of the war. To do this, he turns murder and destruction into a triumphant spectacle. The audience's indifference to the presence of Asians in the film is underscored by the fact that the same extras are used in several death scenes, with the implication that no one will notice or care. This plays into the stereotype that Westerners cannot tell Asians apart.

The Auteur insists that, long after the Vietnam War is forgotten, this work of art "will not just be about the war but it will be the war." The narrator finds this statement absurd. There's some truth to it, but, in the Auteur's egomaniacal imagination, it's only *his* art that he imagines will survive the memory of the four or six million dead "who composed the real meaning of the war." The narrator feels despondent about his work on the film. He altered the script in some places, but he did nothing to change the direction of the film. He sees himself as nothing more than a garment worker in a factory owned by wealthy white people, doing no more than making sure the stitching is right.

The Auteur is alluding to the belief that art survives long after an event has passed, and that it's art that helps to create and maintain our memories of history. The narrator knows that this is true but, due to his personal animus against the Auteur, he resents that it will be the director's film, which still demeans Vietnamese people, that will be remembered. The narrator feels powerless in a system over which he can have no real influence.

The technology used to obliterate the narrator's people comes from the military-industrial complex of which Hollywood is a part. The Auteur decides to improvise with "the plentiful quantities of leftover gasoline and explosives." The special effects people get instructions to "rig the cemetery for destruction." The cemetery is spared in the original script but, in the final scene, the Auteur wants to illustrate "the true depravity" of both sides in the war. In this scene, a squad of suicidal guerillas find shelter among the tombs, where Captain Shamus calls for a white phosphorus strike. The narrator tells Harry about how much he loves the cemetery. Harry tells him that, since the special effects guys have already prepared it for destruction, he'll only have thirty minutes to take a picture of it before it's destroyed.

Hollywood was complicit in justifying the Vietnam War and in contributing to the fantasy that it was no more than a war against Communist peasants that the Americans could easily win. The Auteur's special effects reinforce the false belief that superior fire power, if properly used, could suffice in winning a war. He believes, however, that he's offering a balanced view in depicting the Americans' willingness to destroy a cemetery in revenge, but it's unlikely that the audience will see this action as unjust in relation to previous scenes of murder, rape, and torture at the hands of the Viet Cong.

Though it's only a fake cemetery with a fake tombstone that the narrator dedicated to his mother, it still hurts him to know that it'll be destroyed. He pays his last respects to his mother and the cemetery. With his camera around his neck, he passes the names on the headstones, which Harry copied from the Los Angeles phonebook. Among the names of those who are actually living, that of the narrator's mother is the only one that belongs. He kneels down at the tombstone that he reserved for her to say goodbye. He hears "the disembodied voice of the crapulent major, chuckling." A giant clap of noise suddenly deafens the narrator. He then feels a slap in the face so strong that it lifts him from his knees and hurls him "through a blister of light."

It hurts the narrator to know that the cemetery will be destroyed because he's become attached to it as his mother's resting place—the burial place that he wishes he had been able to give her. Instead of feeling closer to his mother as he kneels at her makeshift tombstone, his conscience overtakes him, and he hears the laugh of the crapulent major mocking him. It is the major's ghost that follows the narrator and which seems to anticipate the explosion in revenge for the major's killing.

The narrator awakens in a bed that is "shielded by a white curtain." He has first-degree burns, smoke inhalation, bruises, and a concussion. The doctor tells him that he's in relatively good shape—really, he should be dead, given the force of the explosion. The four extras who played the Viet Cong torturers visit him in the hospital. They come with a fruit basket and a bottle of Johnnie Walker. One of the "torturers," the tall sergeant, says that the gifts aren't from them but from the Auteur.

The narrator has his first near-death experience. This is significant (and darkly comic) because he experienced an actual attack at the airport in Saigon and escaped unscathed, but is now nearly killed on a movie set during a pretend attack. The line between reality and illusion grows blurry.

The tall sergeant says that there's a rumor that the incident wasn't an accident. He and the other extras think that the Auteur did it in retaliation for the narrator insulting him. They say that they wouldn't "put anything past the Americans." The narrator tells them that they're being paranoid, but he privately thinks that there's some truth to it. The short extra thanks the narrator for his work during the shoot, particularly getting them extra pay and talking back to the director. They toast in the narrator's honor.

Though the narrator felt like his work on the film was futile, it turns out that he was a big help to the extras. Not only did he satisfy their need for income, he also used his relatively greater power to stand up to the Auteur on their behalf, saying the things that they couldn't due to their lack of English language skills.

After the extras leave, the narrator looks around the all-white hospital room and thinks about the only other all-white room he's ever been in: the room at the National Interrogation Center back in Saigon. He and Claude tortured their prisoner there with an endless loop of music that he wouldn't be able to stand: Country music. They found "Hey, Good Lookin'" by Hank Williams and blared the song into the prisoner's room. They stopped only when the narrator was questioning him. Claude assigned the narrator as the chief interrogator. His assignment for his graduation exam was to break the prisoner.

The white room sends the narrator into a flashback. Though he is now the vulnerable one, he thinks of an instance in which it was his job to make someone else vulnerable—one of his own countrymen. He tortures him with country music because it seems particularly symbolic of White America and its racism. The narrator's job is to instill in the prisoner that he is being held by a much greater power, and one with contempt for him.

The narrator entered the Watchman's cell, trying to figure out how to be both his enemy and his friend. The narrator told him that he was charged with subversion, conspiracy, and murder, but emphasized that he was innocent until proven guilty. The Watchman laughed. He found the expression stupid, especially in relation to how Americans regard the Vietnamese—as guilty until proven innocent. He told the narrator that, if he didn't understand that his "masters" already believed that the Watchman was guilty, then he wasn't as smart as he thought. He then called the narrator "a bastard" and blamed this for his defectiveness.

The Watchman thinks that the narrator is foolish to believe in American values and thinks that he's only capable of believing due to his biracial identity. To remind the narrator of his place within the American system, he refers to the narrator's superiors as his "masters" to disabuse him of any idea that the white people in charge view the narrator as an equal, despite his being half white. The narrator's purpose, in his view, is that of a lackey.

The narrator set out to prove to the Watchman that he was as smart as he thought he was, which meant smarter than the Watchman. The narrator sat at his desk and wrote the Watchman's confession for him. He then handed it to him the next morning. The Watchman read it and found out that the narrator would spread the rumor that he was a homosexual, using this as the reason why he left his family. The narrator promised to print this confession in the newspaper, along with intimate photographs of him and his "lover," which he would obtain with the help of hypnosis and drugs. The narrator said that, after the story was published, the Watchman's revolutionary comrades would condemn him, and it would be equally impossible for him to return to his family. He would become a man who had sacrificed everything for nothing.

In this instance, as in many others, the narrator is concerned with what others think about him. He is intent not only on proving that he's smarter that others, but also in proving that he's someone who's capable of understanding two cultures, which is why the CIA is using his services. He uses his understanding of Viet Cong culture, particularly its homophobia, to bait the Watchman into signing the confession. The Watchman would rather admit to political guilt and lose his comrades than be perceived as a homosexual, which would lead to his being outcast by everyone.

Claude praised the narrator's work. The narrator felt like a good student, happy for Claude's praise, which he earned from knowing what his teacher wanted. The Watchman was a bad student. He knew the Americans' teachings but rejected them outright. The narrator was a better student for learning to be "sympathetic to the thinking of Americans." One morning, a week after the Watchman read his confession, the narrator got a call at the officers' quarters from the guard in the surveillance room. He went to the National Interrogation Center and found that Claude was already there.

The narrator is proud to be a good student, not only due to his need for his mentor's approval but also because it seems to prove that he has a higher capacity for understanding. He thinks that the Watchman has less of a capacity to understand the other side due to his political fanaticism. The author is averse, it seems, to extremist views because they lead people to abandon sympathy, which is key in understanding an enemy.

Inside of his cell, the Watchman was curled up on his white bed, facing the white wall. He was wearing white shorts and a white T-shirt. When the narrator and Claude rolled him over, they saw that his face was purple and his eyes bulged. Deep in his mouth, at the back of his throat, was a white lump. For his good behavior in the past week, they gave him what he wanted for breakfast. He asked for hardboiled eggs. He ate the first two but swallowed the third whole, including the shell. Claude assured the narrator that it wasn't his fault, but all the narrator could think of was how he wasn't a bastard—unless, somehow, he was.

The scene is reminiscent of the inaction of the title character in Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener." By facing the white wall, the Watchman has chosen the void of death and nothingness over making a choice between two morally distasteful options. The predominance of the color white in this scene, including the hardboiled eggs that he swallows, reinforces it as a color of death and mourning in Asian cultures.

CHAPTER 12

When the narrator leaves the hospital, he learns that he's no longer needed on the film set. An airplane ticket has been reserved for his immediate departure from the Philippines. When he arrives in Los Angeles, Bon is waiting for him at the airport. Back at their apartment, the narrator has another letter from his Parisian aunt. He reads it when Bon goes to sleep, then he writes his response. He tells her that *The Hamlet* is complete. More importantly, the South Vietnamese movement has established a revenue source: Madame is opening a restaurant.

It seems that, having failed to kill him, the Auteur has arranged for the narrator to be banished instead. The narrator excludes the story about the explosion on the set, continuing a narrative in which his participation on the film has been successful. He focuses, however, on the news about Madame's restaurant because this will have a direct impact on the General's ability to fund his guerrilla army.

Though it may be a hole-in-the-wall, the General notes that Madame's restaurant will be the first Vietnamese restaurant in the city. He says that refugees all over the city are "starving for a taste of home." The narrator looks around and, indeed, every table and booth is occupied, though it's only 11:30 AM. The General says that it's an open secret that the restaurant is funding the revolution. Madame is in charge of making uniforms. She's also in charge of the women's auxiliary forces and the making of flags. He says that the narrator missed the Tet celebration she organized in Orange County. They've also assembled the first companies of volunteers from a group of veterans who train every weekend. The next step will be to send a reconnaissance team to Thailand. They'll link up with their forward field base and make their way into Vietnam. Claude says that the time is nearly right for an invasion.

Though the General is using the restaurant to fund his futile operation in Vietnam, he's also putting down roots in California that will help to establish the Vietnamese community in the Los Angeles area. The popularity of the restaurant is due to the refugee community's desire to maintain a link to their culture through food. Madame plays a traditional but instrumental role in the operations by managing the women's sector and sewing flags. The narrator's support of these efforts is not altogether false. Though the General is his enemy, the narrator would still support any effort to aid in the uplift of their community.

The narrator pours himself a cup of tea. He asks if Bon is a part of this invasion team. The General says that he is. Bon is a good worker, but he's also the best for this kind of work. The only route overland from Thailand involves hiking through Laos or Cambodia, through disease-ridden jungles with man-eating tigers. The narrator says that, if Bon is going, he should, too. The General is delighted by his offer but insists that the narrator is more useful in California, helping the General with planning and logistics, as well as fund-raising and diplomacy. He's notified the Congressman that the community is gathering funds to send a team to aid the refugees in Thailand.

The narrator asks if Bon is part of the team because he wants to know if he should volunteer so that he can help to ensure that Bon doesn't die in battle. The narrator doesn't want to participate in the General's guerrilla war, but he will feign interest so that he can keep his blood oath to Bon. Though the narrator is technically politically disloyal because he plays both sides, his loyalty to his friends is largely uncorrupted.

The General says that it's the right time for a beer and offers one to the narrator, who notices their clock and says to Madame, who fetches the beer, that it's set to the wrong time. She says that it isn't; it's set to Saigon time. The narrator realizes that it makes sense for the clock to be set to Saigon time. They're displaced people, living between time zones. After lunch, the narrator debriefs the General and Madame about the explosion in the Philippines. The story arouses their resentment. The only thing that the narrator doesn't mention to them is that he was compensated for his near-death experience.

The clock is an indication of the fact that, though the General and Madame are not physically in Vietnam, their loyalties and hearts still remain there. However, they are fixated on returning to the Vietnam that they knew before the Communist takeover, instead of accepting the reality of change. They are thus also fixed in the past. The narrator doesn't mention his compensation because he doesn't want to feel obligated to contribute to their cause.

The morning after the extras' hospital visit, Violet and a tall, thin white man in a powder-blue suit went to check on the narrator. When they asked how he felt, he whispered "all white," though he could speak perfectly fine. Violet eyed him suspiciously. She said that the Auteur would've come, but he was meeting with President Marcos that day. The mention of the director infuriated the narrator. When the man in the suit asked what happened, the narrator told him that there were many explosions. The man, who was a representative for the film studio, handed the narrator a report saying that it was all an accident. He also offered a check for five thousand dollars. The narrator said that the money wasn't enough because he had his family to think about. Really, he knew better than to settle on the first offer. The narrator then asked for twenty thousand instead.

The narrator's subtle response is a comment about his experience working on The Hamlet. *Violet looks at him suspiciously because she knows that the narrator was unhappy on the set of the film and that he doesn't trust her due to what he perceives as her racism. Suspecting that the Auteur tried to kill him, he seeks enough compensation to satisfy him, though it won't make up for the fact that he nearly died. He wants the studio to pay for thinking that it could kill him with impunity, just as the American military believed they could kill innocent Vietnamese people with impunity.*

The narrator claimed to have lost a portion of his memory to legitimize his demand. The rep said that the narrator might find that hard to prove. The narrator persisted and he and the rep settled on ten thousand dollars. The narrator, in return, signed the documents, releasing the studio from any future obligations. They traded farewell pleasantries. Then, Violet paused at the door and said, "You know we couldn't have done this movie without you." The narrator wanted to believe her.

The narrator lies to justify asking for so much money, but the representative refuses to oblige. Their compromise, however, satisfies the narrator's need to feel that his life wasn't dispensable. Violet's comment underscores the point, though it does so ironically because it's rather clear that she never had respect for the narrator.

When the narrator returned to California, he cashed the check and left half in his bank account. The other half is in an envelope in his pocket at the time that he's chatting with the General and Madame. He drives to Monterey Park later that afternoon. There, he has an appointment with the crapulent major's widow. He plans to give her the money. The narrator doesn't believe in God, but he believes in ghosts. The crapulent major's ghost has appeared to him and he fears seeing it again when the doorknob turns on the door to his former apartment.

The narrator plans to give the major's widow the money as a kind of offering. He believes that the crapulent major's ghost has been haunting him, not only for his betrayal and his lies, but also because the narrator has failed to do penance for telling the lie that got the major killed. Therefore, the major's ghost lingers, forcing the narrator to remember his dishonesty and his guilt.

The crapulent major's widow opens the door and exclaims about how good it is to see the narrator. On the coffee table in the living room, she has prepared tea and French ladyfingers. She says that she misses her husband very much. The narrator squeaks across the plastic couch to place a hand on her shoulder. On the side table, he sees a picture of the young crapulent major, in full cadet uniform and not yet fat. The narrator offers the widow the envelope. She resists at first, but the narrator implores her to think of her children. She takes the money. The children are asleep in the bedroom. The narrator looks at the twins, Spinach and Broccoli, and says that they're beautiful, though he doesn't really believe this. He doesn't particularly like children and doesn't wish to have any himself.

The narrator tries to sympathize with the widow's loss of her husband and the twins' loss of their father, but the narrator finds it more difficult to sympathize with personal loss than with political loss. Having never had a close familial bond of his own, he has a hard time knowing how to respond. Therefore, he says and does the things that he thinks are appropriate in the situation without really understanding why he's saying or doing them. He's acting out of a sense of moral obligation, not true sympathy.

The only advantage that the narrator thinks he has over the twins is having had a father who taught him about guilt. The question around Original Sin is important to the narrator because it's related to his birth and his father's identity. One day, after Sunday school, he and the other children watched his father's imported French bulldog "thrust away at a whining female companion in the shade of a eucalyptus tree." One of his classmates proclaimed the act natural. Turning to the narrator, he said that the narrator was what happened when a dog mated with a cat. The narrator punched the boy in the nose, shocking him, and continued to punch him. More blood gushed from his nose. No one intervened to help the boy, "the comedian." When he finished his fight, the narrator stood up and saw "fear, if not respect" in the eyes of the "little monsters" who surrounded him. He went home and cried when he saw his mother. He confessed everything.

While watching the sleeping twins, the narrator has a flashback to his childhood. The twins will never know their father, which the narrator considers preferable to his own situation—having known his father and being denied by him. Worse, his classmates viewed him as a freak of nature due to his biracial identity, which made him odd in a largely homogeneous society that also resented any reminders of its colonizer. The narrator nicknames his taunter the comedian, not only because the boy tries to make a joke at the narrator's expense, but also because he inadvertently points out the "joke" of the narrator's birth: a supposedly celibate man had a child.

The narrator's mother assured him that he wasn't unnatural and clutched him to her bosom. When he looked up at her, he saw that she, too, was weeping. She asked him if he wanted to know who his father was. He nodded yes, then she said his name. She talked about the narrator's father—the priest—and how he taught her how to read, how he was always kind to her when she was his maid. He told her stories about France and his childhood. She knew that he was very lonely, due to being "the only one of his kind in [their] village." She talked about how she was lonely, too, and that this united them. The narrator broke away from her and covered his ears. His mother insisted that his birth was part of God's Great Plan. She saw the narrator as one of the meek who shall inherit the earth.

The narrator's mother rationalizes her molestation at the hands of the priest in a monologue that is both troubling and sympathetic. The priest took advantage of a poor, uneducated child. On the other hand, she notes how they had loneliness in common and found companionship in each other. To avoid blaming the priest for his denial of his son and his unwillingness to help them, she chooses to view the narrator's birth within the context of religion and predestination, comforting herself with the possibility that her suffering is for a greater purpose.

The narrator wonders, if she could see him now in the crapulent major's old apartment, if his mother would still consider him one of the meek. After the visit to the widow, the narrator drives to a liquor store nearby. He buys a copy of *Playboy*, a carton of Marlboro cigarettes, and a bottle of Stolichnaya vodka. In the parking lot, he spots a pay phone and thinks of calling Sofia. Instead, he drives across Los Angeles to see her. He parks down the street from her apartment and takes his treasures from the liquor store with him, except for the *Playboy*. When Sofia opens the door, he sees that her hair is no longer permed but straight. She looks younger than he remembers. They embrace and she invites him in. Her black cat, which usually keeps its distance from the narrator by sitting on the futon, is now sitting on Sonny's lap. Sonny is sitting on the futon. He extends his hand, saying that it's good to see the narrator again, and that he and Sofia talk about him often.

The narrator suspects that his mother would disapprove of his work as a double agent—that is, if she, with her lack of education and understanding about the world, would have understood the roles that the narrator plays. The complexity of his life of intrigue is the opposite of meekness. He goes to Sofia's home after meeting with the widow because he thinks that she will comfort him. Sofia is the only woman, other than his mother, with whom the narrator has formed a close bond. Sofia's straightened hair is the first sign of a personal change within her. The cat's comfort with Sonny is a sign that the narrator's old friend has been spending a lot of time with his former girlfriend.

CHAPTER 13

The narrator isn't surprised that Sonny and Sofia are now a couple. He was in the Philippines for seven months and never called. Also, Sofia is neither dedicated to monogamy nor to men. Sonny gestures at the paper bag on the narrator's lap and asks what's in it. Sofia has gone to get another wine glass to join the pair already on the table. The narrator takes out the carton of cigarettes and the vodka, which he offers Sonny. Sonny asks about the narrator's trip to the Philippines. Sofia, too, wants to hear about it. As he speaks, the narrator senses that they're only marginally interested. He doesn't tell them about his near-death experience. He sees a photo album lying open and asks about the people in the photos. Sofia says that they're of her family. Strangely, this surprises him. He knows that Sofia has a family, but she never talked about them or showed him photos.

The narrator isn't surprised by Sofia's change of heart, but he's disappointed and feels betrayed that she chose Sonny, a man with whom the narrator was never able to win an argument. This is another instance, it seems, in which his former college chum has gotten the best of him. He doesn't tell them about his near-death experience because he senses that Sofia is less interested in his life than she once was due to the fact that she no longer loves him, if she ever did. He realizes, too, when he sees the photo album, that he knows little about her. The distance that already existed between them made it easier to grow farther apart.

Sonny leans over the photo album and points out her relatives by name, including Abe, presumably her brother, who refused to fight during World War II. He was sent to prison for abstaining. Sonny mentions the injustice of the family being put in an internment camp then demanding that Abe fight for America. Sofia says that Abe left for Japan. He decided to go back to his people, just like white people told him to. Then, he found out that he didn't quite belong there either. Sonny says that maybe he and Sofia can go to Japan one day, so that he can meet Abe.

Abe's sense of belonging neither to Japan or to the U.S. mirrors the narrator's own cultural duality. Abe suffered from being an American who was viewed as suspect in his own country and suspect in his ancestors' country. The narrator loves parts of American culture and values, but he also knows that these tenets are the country's justification for the devastation that they've caused in his homeland.

The narrator drinks his vodka and decides to change the subject of conversation. He recalls the speeches about revolution that Sonny made back in their college days. The narrator asks why Sonny doesn't go back to fight for Vietnam, given the things he said in his speeches. The narrator asks if Sonny is still in California because he's in love with Sofia or because he's afraid. Sonny feels ashamed. Sofia looks at Sonny with understanding and looks at the narrator with regret. The narrator continues to prod Sonny until Sofia declares that Sonny's home is in Los Angeles now. She puts her hand on Sonny's, and the narrator feels hurt by the gesture. Sonny admits that it's impossible to live among foreign people and not be changed by them. He doesn't agree with the narrator's politics but respects him for going back home to fight.

The narrator is trying to make Sonny feel like a phony for talking about revolution while never participating in any effort to improve Vietnam. The narrator's baiting of Sonny has less to do with politics than with wanting revenge against Sonny for taking Sofia away from him. This tactic backfires when Sofia expresses sympathy for Sonny's cultural ambivalence. She never recognized the same feeling within the narrator, mistaking his ease with white people as less of a survival tactic than an obsequious desire to fit in. She understands Sonny in a way that she never understood the narrator.

The narrator can't believe that he's finally won an argument with Sonny, something he never did in their college days. Sofia looks into Sonny's eyes and assures him that everything is all right. The narrator refills all of their glasses with vodka, but he's the only one to drink. The narrator wants to say, "I love you, Ms. Mori," but instead he says, "It's never too late to pick a fight, is it, Ms. Mori?" They acknowledge that he's right. However, the narrator knows from the "hungry intensity" with which she looks at Sonny that it's all over between him and Sofia.

Having lost Sofia to Sonny, the narrator tries to satisfy himself with having finally won an argument against his old friend, but the argument over political purpose seems trivial. What he really wants is to express his love to Ms. Mori and have it returned, but it's too late. Just as he left his mother and deprived himself of giving her a proper goodbye, he leaves Sofia without clearly expressing his feelings.

The narrator reports in his next letter to the Parisian aunt that the General is carrying out training and maneuvers for his nascent army in the hills east of Los Angeles, near an Indian reservation. On a napkin at his restaurant, the General sketches out his army, composed of a headquarters platoon, three rifle platoons, and a heavy weapons platoon. The narrator takes the napkin and sends it to the aunt. The General also writes down the names of the platoon commanders and officers and explains their histories. The next phase of the army's work will be physical training, drilling, maneuvers, and turning them into a fighting unit. The narrator pledges his support.

The General is preparing to send volunteers in his guerrilla army back to Vietnam. His military sketches on a napkin seem rather comic and are symbolic of how flimsy the General's effort actually is, given how few people will join the army and how they will no longer have any support from a major military power like the U.S. Nevertheless, the narrator informs Man about this so that the Communists will be prepared for the attempt at an invasion.

The narrator finds himself back in uniform again and in the field. However, he's not there as a foot soldier but as a documentarian who photographs the soldiers. The narrator sends the Parisian aunt photos of the men in uniform, along with others showing the soldiers exercising and engaging in maneuvers. The men may have looked foolish but, he warns Man, revolutions begin this way, with men willing to fight, no matter what the odds are, and volunteering to give up everything because they have nothing. Some of them, like Bon, are "certifiably insane" and have volunteered for the reconnaissance mission to Thailand. Like Bon, they have lost their families and feel that they have nothing to live for in California.

The narrator's role as a documentarian is ideal, both because he has never been a combat soldier and because it gives him an excuse to take photos which he can then share with Man. Though the army seems toothless, he doesn't want Man to underestimate the powers of fanaticism and desperation. Like Bon, some of these men have become obsessed with the mission, due to a failure to integrate into life in California and an obsessive grief for all that they've lost back home.

Before embarking on a ten-mile hike, the narrator and Bon smoke a cigarette. The narrator talks about the soldiers who confess to having no intention of coming back, meaning that they know that they're volunteering for a suicide mission. Bon quips that life is a suicide mission. The narrator tells him that he's crazy. Bon says that he feels betrayed by the American government, which has also left him feeling emasculated. At least those who are still back in Vietnam (he includes Man, still not knowing his old friend's true allegiances) have kept their manhood. Furthermore, Bon knows that most of the soldiers won't really go to fight; they'll hide behind their wives and children as reasons not to go.

Bon's quip is a way of saying that everyone must die for something. Though the narrator has pledged an allegiance to the North Vietnamese, he has not yet expressed a wish to die for his Communist values or for any other values. This leads one to wonder about the depth of his commitment to anything. Bon may seem crazy, but he is willing to die for the honor of his country, which he feels was dishonored by the U.S. Arguably, this gives his life more value than that of the narrator because it's more purposeful.

Rumors have already spread about the General's new army. During the narrator's visit to Sofia's place, Sonny mentions reports about the secret army. The narrator claims not to have heard about it, but Sonny doesn't believe him; he's the General's right-hand man. The narrator reasons that this would be all the more reason not to tell a Communist like Sonny. Sonny is cagy about being a Communist, though the narrator knows this as a game that subversives generally play. He leaves Sofia's place and goes to sleep shortly after arriving back at his apartment. That night, he awakens from a dream, "drenched and gasping," believing that his bed is littered with amputated ears.

The narrator doesn't really believe that Sonny is a Communist but, to maintain his cover as a South Vietnamese captain, he must pretend that he does. Sonny has left-wing sympathies, but he's too invested in life in America to genuinely espouse Communism. The narrator's dream about the amputated ears is a memory from the war. It was common for American soldiers to cut off the ears of Viet Cong soldiers and keep them as souvenirs.

CHAPTER 14

The narrator wonders if his questioning of Sonny's courage pushed Sonny to write the following headline in his newspaper: "Move On, War Over." The narrator's provocation had "an unintentional, but desirable, effect." The narrator photographs the article with a mini-camera. He's also been photographing the General's files, to which he has access as his aide-de-camp. Further, he's photographed statements of bank accounts where the General has saved modest funds for the Movement, "raised in small donations from the refugee community, Madame's restaurant, and a handful of respectable charitable organizations that [have] donated to the Fraternity for the relief of sad refugees and sadder veterans."

The "effect" is that Sonny feels the need to prove his authenticity as a political activist by making a bold statement. His statement will raise the ire of the General and other fanatical members of the refugee community. The narrator is less concerned by this, however, than he is impressed by his ability to get under Sonny's skin by winning an argument and calling his moral integrity into question. If the narrator can't succeed in winning back Sofia, at least he can succeed in arousing guilt in Sonny.

The narrator sends all of this information to his Parisian aunt via a courier. In his latest message, he gives the details of Bon's itinerary. The narrator also says that he's going to Vietnam. He claims that this is so that he can better report on the enemy, but it's really so that he can save Bon's life. The narrator is sipping from a bottle of Scotch that the General gave him when the General enters the store room at the liquor store. Instead of paying the narrator, he keeps him well-supplied with alcohol. The General throws a handful of crumpled dollars on his desk, irritated by his lot in life, and the narrator pours him a double of scotch. The General leans forward and taps Sonny's newspaper, asking if the narrator has read it.

The narrator is disobeying Man's order to remain in the U.S., but he's doing it so that he can keep his blood oath to Bon, which he expects Man to understand. The General's choice to pay the narrator in alcohol does the work of allowing the General to keep more funds to himself and his cause, while it also helps to keep the narrator desensitized to his guilt and his moral ambivalence. The alcohol also helps the General to forget his resentment over being reduced to a life as a shopkeeper.

The General isn't sure if Sonny is a journalist or a Communist sent by the North Vietnamese to spy on the refugees. He notes how the narrator knew Sonny in college and asks if he expressed these sympathies back then. The narrator says that he did. The General asks why the narrator didn't tell him. He says that the narrator's problem is that he's too sympathetic. The General concludes by saying that something "may need to be done" about Sonny. The narrator agrees.

Sonny's article inspires the General's paranoia about spies. The narrator's knowledge about Sonny's politics doesn't inspire the General's suspicion, as it should, but rather pity for the narrator's sympathies. To prove that he's capable of taking a side, however, the narrator agrees with the possibility of killing Sonny.

The narrator sees an ad in Sonny's newspaper announcing that Lana will be part of a revue called *Fantasia*. Bon goes with him to the show, which is held at the Roosevelt Hotel on Hollywood Boulevard. They sit at a table at the back of the hotel's "cozy lounge," sip cognac, and listen to "a winsome singer in a bolero jacket" singing the popular Vietnamese singer Pham Duy's song "City of Sadness."

Fantasia *is a 1940 Disney film that is a celebration of classical music. The refugee community re-appropriates the premise of the show by using popular Vietnamese music instead of classical (European) favorites. This is another way in which the community applies Western culture to their own.*

The Poet is the show's emcee. He introduces Lana to the stage by referring to her as "our very own Vietnamese fantasy." She steps onstage wearing a red velvet bustier, a leopard-print miniskirt, black lace gloves, and thigh-high leather boots with stiletto heels. She sings "I'd Want You to Love Me," a song the narrator has only heard sung by men, given that it's "the theme song of the bachelors and unhappily married males" of his generation. She moves on to "Bang Bang (My Baby Shot Me Down)." However, she layers the English lyrics with others in French and Vietnamese, turning it into a song about lovers, enemies, and war. The song sends the narrator into a daydream of his homeland.

Lana's onstage persona blends Western and Eastern influences. She adopts the assertive sexual image of American pop stars while singing Vietnamese ballads. She re-appropriates a ballad that has traditionally been sung by men to address sexual dissatisfaction among women. She also complicates the Nancy Sinatra song about love gone wrong by using it as a metaphor for the misguided American-Vietnamese relationship.

When Lana finishes the song, the audience claps, whistles, and stomps. The narrator sits silently, stunned by her performance. She returns to the table reserved for performers. The narrator goes to speak to her. He compliments her by saying that he never knew she could sing like that. He leans in to offer her a cigarette and asks what her parents think of her career. She says that they deem it a waste of time to sing and dance. She supposes that the narrator agrees, given that he agrees with everything her father says. The narrator says that he agrees with some of the things the General says but doesn't *disagree* with anything.

The narrator uses Lana's outstanding performance as an excuse to go talk to her. His offering of a cigarette is a romantic gesture that he's learned from old movies. He wants to express his interest in Lana while remaining in the General's good graces. His comment indicates how he equivocates without being dishonest: he is clear to affirm the ideas that he likes but never expresses his negative opinions.

Lana says that her parents fear that singing will ruin her for marriage. They want her to marry someone "very respectable and very rich." She looks at the narrator, addressing him as Captain, and says that he's neither of those things, which makes him interesting. He offers her another cigarette. Their eyes meet as she takes one. He then stands and invites her to the bar. The narrator invites Bon to join them. When she asks Bon about his wife and child, tears stream down his cheeks. He tells her that Linh and Duc are dead. Lana embraces him while the narrator focuses on her with his lust, determined to have her.

The narrator appeals to Lana because she knows that her parents would never approve of him, not only because he isn't rich but also because he is biracial—an opinion that the narrator will later hear himself from the General. Lana sympathizes with Bon's loss. Instead of identifying with his friend in this moment, the narrator's lust for Lana intensifies. He craves her sexually, but he also wants the comfort that his mother and Sofia once provided.

CHAPTER 15

The narrator pursues Lana by writing her letters in the perfect cursive taught to him by overbearing nuns, composing her sonnets, villanelles, and couplets. At her apartment, he takes her guitar and serenades her with Vietnamese songs. When the narrator talks to Bon about it at the liquor store, he asks the narrator what he's going to do when the General finds out. The narrator doesn't think that anyone will tell him, and he and Lana have no intention to marry. While they talk, the narrator and Bon watch a pair of clumsy teenage shoplifters. Bon reaches for the baseball bat beneath the cash register.

The narrator uses his education to appeal to Lana. He chooses to woo her in verse both because it's romantic and because, as a singer, she would be more likely to appreciate the lyrical approach to romance. Bon, always obedient and worried about what his superiors will think, worries about how the General will respond. The narrator, too, wants to avoid upsetting the General.

The General arrives at the store at his usual time and, when he does, he and the narrator leave. He knows that the General is preoccupied with thinking about Sonny, whose article about "the alleged operations of the Fraternity and the Movement" has become well-known in the refugee community. There are rumors that the General has no money to fund the Movement. Others say that it's merely a racket and that the money comes from drug dealing, prostitution, and a payoff from the U.S. government to keep quiet about his failure to help his people after the fall of Saigon.

The General is worried because his reputation is being sullied in Sonny's newspaper. The Fraternity has developed the reputation of being a fraudulent scheme, which makes the General seem morally questionable and which revives his shame about leaving his people behind. The article revives questions about the General's loyalty to his community.

The narrator drives the General to a country club in Anaheim where the Congressman has invited them. On first sight, it doesn't look like much. The golfing green is brown and dry and the main building is a cheap-looking steakhouse. After parking the car, the narrator follows the General inside the restaurant. The maître d' leads them to a private room on the second floor where the Congressman is holding court at a large round table. He rises to greet the General and the narrator. There are six others at the table, including Dr. Richard Hedd. There are seats reserved for the narrator and the General on either side of Dr. Hedd, and the narrator wastes no time in asking the scholar to autograph his copy of Hedd's book.

Though the country club is unimpressive, the narrator has the wonderful opportunity of meeting his idol. When the narrator enters the room, it feels like he is entering a rarefied world, available only to men of privilege and usually available only to white men. He knows that he's being granted entry due to his connection to the General. If the men in that room knew of his true allegiances, they would regard him as the enemy to their values that he is. Conversely, he is also someone who thoroughly understands the Western mind.

Dr. Hedd hands the book back to the narrator and regards the younger man intently. Dr. Hedd says to the group that he bets that the narrator is the only one who's read his book in its entirety. When the topic of conversation turns to the Japanese, including their trade success in the United States as well as their causing a million Vietnamese deaths from famine during their occupation, the mood turns grave. The narrator says that the famine was a long time ago and that the refugees are more focused on becoming Americans. He says that they believe in the American values of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

In the 1970s, Americans began to perceive the Japanese as a potential economic threat, a feeling that would intensify in the 1980s. The talk about the Japanese is also a way for the Americans to distract attention away from their sins during the Vietnam War. The narrator, unlike the General, wants to focus on the present and wants the men in the room to regard the refugees as fellow Americans, not as historical victims.


Dr. Hedd asks the narrator if he's happy. The narrator says that he's not unhappy, then he turns the question over to Dr. Hedd. He says that there's no good answer to that question. He elaborates by saying that American-style happiness is "a zero-sum game." People, when measuring their happiness, measure it against someone else's. The pursuit of happiness is guaranteed for all Americans, but "unhappiness is guaranteed for many." For the narrator, the unspeakable has been spoken. A refugee like him couldn't afford to question the American ideology, but Dr. Hedd is an English immigrant, whose heritage and accent triggers an inferiority complex in many Americans.

As in his conversations with the General, the narrator equivocates with Dr. Hedd, thereby avoiding the question. He's afraid to say that he's unhappy because that would make him seem ungrateful. However, Dr. Hedd's criticism of the American concept of happiness is apt: this happiness is often defined by things such as money and a feeling of freedom, which frequently depends on other people being poor or living in conditions that are unfree.


The General intervenes and says that "happiness is not guaranteed," but "freedom is." The Congressman raises his glass to the comment. The General knows how to read a crowd. The narrator has already reported to Man, through the Parisian aunt, about his fund-raising success in getting money from a handful of organizations to which he's been introduced through Claude, as well as his own contacts among Americans who've visited Vietnam or done tours of duty there. The small sums, which are worth much more in Thailand, are being used to meet basic necessities, such as food and clothing, while Thai security forces provide guns and ammunition. Congress pays the security forces for the weaponry.

The General responds with a platitude that is guaranteed to satisfy the crowd. He knows that the men at the table are more likely to respond to slogans than they are to complex discussions about freedom. Similarly, their Communist enemies also respond well to slogans. The narrator is able to keep Man well-informed of the General's army's impending arrival in Vietnam. He also lets him know that America is still complicit in trying to undermine the new Communist regime.


Over a baked Alaska, the Congressman states his reason for calling the assembly. The General has come to talk about the plight of the Vietnamese soldier. During the General's speech, which is really a call to rally the support of South Vietnam's old allies, Dr. Hedd interrupts him. The General, a man not accustomed to being interrupted, merely smiles. Dr. Hedd insists that there are more pressing threats—Palestine, the Red Brigade terrorists in Italy, and the Soviets, for example. The General knows to be patient with white people. He decides to use something that Dr. Hedd has written to disagree with him on his own point. The General frames the Cold War as a conflict between the Occident and the Orient, for "the Soviets are really Asiatics who have never learned Western ways." He agrees with confronting the Soviets, which is why the South Vietnamese are fighting the Soviets' "servants" in their country.

The General is less annoyed by the fact that Dr. Hedd doesn't take his plight seriously than he is in being disrespected. The General is a man who is accustomed to commanding attention. This small slight is yet another of many indications that his status has been demoted since arriving in the U.S. Instead of arguing forcefully with Dr. Hedd, which he knows would be pointless given the scholar's superior abilities in English, he cleverly uses Dr. Hedd's own words to confirm the importance of rooting out Communism wherever it finds a place to settle. The tactic satisfies Dr. Hedd's ego while also allowing the General to make his point.

An assistant district attorney chimes in and says that he still doesn't understand how America lost the war. A personal injury lawyer says it was because they were "too cautious." The Americans feared harming their reputation, not realizing that any damage caused to it wouldn't last. He says that, if they had overlooked this insecurity, they "could have exerted overwhelming force," showing that they deserved to win. Dr. Hedd offers to speak "the unpalatable truth" about why America lost. He says that the generals chose to fight a war of attrition instead of a war of obliteration, like their predecessors who fought the Japanese. He goes on to say that "the only kind of war that the Oriental understands and respects" is total destruction. Asians, Dr. Hedd argues, don't put the same value on life as Westerners.

The white men at the table all offer opinions about why America lost the war, but all of their ideas affirm military power. Their assumption is that they lost due to not asserting enough of that power. In other words, they believe that they could have won if they had done the same thing but more violently. Dr. Hedd, like the Department Chair at Occidental College, speaks generically of all Asian people as "Orientals" and makes sweeping generalizations about their moral characters. The men don't realize that these short-sighted attitudes have more to do with their loss of the war than military might.

When the Congressman asks the narrator what he thinks, he says that he disagrees with Dr. Hedd. Life is valuable to Asians, but it's *invaluable* to Westerners. Dr. Hedd raises his glass and praises the narrator's words. The Congressman then says that now is a good time to introduce the men to the country club. They leave the dining room with their cocktails, and enter the wood-paneled room that the narrator had originally been expecting. Inside are attractive young women in slinky dresses "arranged on leather sofas." The narrator's companion is "an enormous inflated blonde" with enameled white teeth and "hard and shiny" Nordic blue eyes. She has a Southern accent and says that she's from Georgia. She tells the narrator that he speaks "real good English for an Oriental." The General has a red-headed companion. The men lift glasses of champagne, and Dr. Hedd asks if he can quote the narrator in his next book. "Nothing could make me happier," the narrator says, though he's in fact rather unhappy.

The evening ends in a manner that seems like something out of a dream—Dr. Hedd expresses more admiration for the narrator's words than his own, the men enter a room that resembles the country club of the narrator's fantasy, and they spend the rest of the evening in the company of prostitutes. The narrator is unhappy, however, because this experience is incompatible with his ideology. If Sonny is a hypocrite for speaking of revolution without fighting one, the narrator is worse for decrying the excesses of capitalism while also enjoying them. His assessment that life in Asia has a "value," or cost, is practically accurate as well, in the context of all of the bribes that were paid so that he and the General could enter the wood-paneled room.

CHAPTER 16

Just past midnight, the narrator and the General arrive at the General's house. The General says that, though he appreciates the narrator's courage in offering to go back to Vietnam, he'll need him in Los Angeles—that is, unless the narrator can prove that he's capable of "doing what needs to be done." If he does, then he can return to Vietnam. The narrator doesn't know what to do. Meanwhile, he's received a letter from the Parisian aunt in which Man has written that he is not to return; they need the narrator in America. The narrator burns the letter, like the others, in a wastebasket. In burning it, he feels that he's sending it to hell or making an offering to a deity who'll keep him and Bon safe.

The General subtly implies that the narrator can go to Vietnam if he can prove his courage by killing Sonny. For the narrator, this is a moral quandary because he doesn't want to kill Sonny, who may no longer be his friend due to his relationship with Sofia, but still doesn't deserve to die for his unfavorable editorials. On the other hand, he cannot allow Bon to go back to Vietnam on his own, knowing that his blood brother will likely be captured and killed by the Communists.

While playing pool at a billiards hall the following night, the narrator tells Bon about the General's offer. Bon calls him an idiot for wanting to go back. He also speaks of what the General would not and talks to the narrator directly about what it will be like to kill Sonny. He thinks that Sonny's getting what he deserves for having a big mouth. Bon says, again, that this isn't murder but "assassination." For Bon, the task is simply to kill Viet Cong. However, the problem with killing Viet Cong is that there are always more. Moreover, Sonny isn't Viet Cong.

Bon thinks that the narrator is foolish for wanting to fight in a war in which he isn't needed. He knows nothing about killing and has to be guided in understanding what it would be like to shoot someone. Bon makes the distinction between murder and assassination because he doesn't believe that Sonny is innocent. The General's suspicions, as well as his Communist sympathies, make Sonny suspect.

The narrator goes to Lana for solace. He arrives at her apartment with a bottle of wine. He looks out her window and points to one of the grand homes on a hill, one of which belongs to the Auteur. He confesses to her about having wanted to kill the director. She shrugs and says that everyone fantasizes about killing people. The narrator also says that he's fantasized about killing his father. He tells Lana that his father was a priest. Her shocked reaction reminds the narrator that she's innocent. She asks if he's forgiven his father. The narrator says that sometimes he thinks he has; but, he hasn't really, especially when he thinks about his mother. When Lana puts her hand on his knee, the narrator announces that he should go.

The narrator's father and the Auteur are the only two men whom the narrator has expressed any wish to kill, though he's killed others whom didn't want to. Aside from being white, both men have in common a tendency to deny the narrator's legitimacy and have tried to control the narrative around his origins. By killing them both, he could tell his own story. Both men represent different forms of cultural colonization.

The narrator spends an hour driving from Lana's apartment to Sonny's. He breathes deeply to control his nervousness. He parks his car around the corner from Sonny's apartment. He takes off his blue polo shirt and slips on a white T-shirt. He then takes off his brown loafers and khakis and puts on a pair of blue jeans and canvas shoes. Finally, he puts on a reversible windbreaker and a fedora. Leaving the car, he carries with him a free tote bag that he got for subscribing to *Time* magazine. Inside is a backpack containing the clothes he's just taken off, along with a baseball cap, a blond wig, a pair of tinted glasses, and a black Walther P22 with a silencer. Bon bought the gun with a packet of cash from the General.

As with the previous "assassination," clothes play an important role in the narrator's assumption of the guise of an assassin. The fedora is an odd touch, as though the narrator is mimicking the look of a killer from a 1940s film noir. The things inside of his backpack, particularly the blond wig, seem even more absurd. The costumes indicate his discomfort with committing murder and his need to convince himself that it's someone else performing these acts.

The narrator checks his watch. It's a little past 9:00 PM. He rings the intercom. He announces himself and Sonny buzzes him in. He takes the stairs to the second-floor apartment and peeks into the hallway to make sure no one's around. Sonny opens the door a second after the narrator knocks. The apartment smells like fried fish, steamed white rice, and cigarette smoke. The narrator clutches the tote bag. Sonny thinks the narrator is there because of Sofia. The narrator notices, "on the wall above the table," the same clock as in the General and Madame's restaurant, also set to Saigon time.

Time is important in this scene. The narrator wants to be precise about time so that he can come up with a sensible alibi if he's ever questioned about Sonny's murder. He clutches his tote bag as though to remind himself of why he's at the apartment, of the promise he made to the General and, more importantly, his promise to Bon. Sonny's possession of the same clock as the General is a sign that he never abandoned his concern for Vietnam.

Sonny is sorry that he and the narrator have never had a proper talk about Sofia. The narrator claims fault for never having written to her. When Sonny gets up to get him a drink, the narrator puts his hand on the gun in the tote bag. The narrator feels glued to the seat. Nodding at the stereo, Sonny asks if the narrator has just heard the announcer say that the Vietnamese have invaded Cambodia. The narrator thinks that the border clash with the Khmer Rouge will be a stroke of good luck for the General. Everyone will be too distracted by it to pay attention to the Laotian border, where the refugee army intends to re-enter Vietnam.

The news on the radio about the invasion of Cambodia, which caused the start of the year-long Cambodian-Vietnamese War, places the date of Sonny's murder on December 25, 1978. This is the second instance in which a political murder has been carried out in the novel on an important American holiday. Once again, the narrator is holding a bag, as though he's come bearing a gift.

Sonny sips his bourbon and says that he promises not to talk anymore about politics, though he finds it hard to talk about anything else. This is why he loves Sofia; she can tolerate his obsession. He tells the narrator that they never planned anything; they just started talking at the wedding and didn't stop. The narrator looks down at the nearly empty glass that he cups in his hand and sees his red scar through the bottom. Sonny says that Sofia described to him what it meant for her to be an American. She talked about having to claim the country. If one doesn't claim America, she said, one ends up in an internment camp or on a reservation or a plantation. The country never gives itself to someone like her, and she has nowhere else to go. If she has children, they'll be American, too. At the sound of her words, Sonny says, he found himself overwhelmed by desire and wanted to have a child with her.

The narrator lets Sonny talk. This may be so that Sonny can exorcise some of his guilt about Sofia, or the narrator may be letting him talk because these are the last words that Sonny will ever say. In either case, the talk is a kind of confession and Sonny seeks to absolve himself for his perceived betrayal. He confesses that he needs Sofia because she understands the political importance of citizenship. Non-white people are not granted their status as Americans; they must fight for that status. The narrator listens but is focused on his scar, which reminds him of the only thing to which he is truly bound—his oath to Bon.

Sonny says that he knows that he probably won't have a child with Sofia, but he wants to think of someone other than himself. Before, he only wanted to change the world; now, he wants to change himself, too. When he met Sofia, he became interested in how she saw him. The narrator says that he has something to confess. He insists that he's not there because of Sofia. He says that he's a Communist, but Sonny doesn't believe him. The narrator goes on to say that he's been an agent for the opposition for years. Sonny says that he thinks the narrator is tricking him, wanting him to expose himself as a Communist, too, so that the narrator can kill him.

Sonny, like the crapulent major, is entering a new phase of his life and is trying to create a fruitful present out of a painful past. The narrator doesn't merely kill these men, he also kills the hope of their finding moral meaning out of war and displacement. It remains unclear whether or not Sonny really is a Communist. What is clear is that he doesn't trust the narrator and worries about standing accused in a community that's hostile to Communism.

The narrator insists that he's trying to help Sonny, who believes that the General has sent the narrator. Sonny also thinks that the narrator is still jealous over Sofia. Though Sonny is only five feet away, the narrator hits the radio when he pulls out his gun and shoots. The narrator shoots again and this bullet hits Sonny in the hand. Sonny leaps up and runs for the door. The next bullet hits him between the shoulder blade and the spine. The narrator jumps over the coffee table before Sonny can get to the door and shoots him again behind the ear and a final time in the skull. Sonny falls face-first to the floor, breaking his nose. The narrator changes his clothes and wipes his fingerprints off of the bourbon glass. When he bends down to touch Sonny's eye, as Bon once instructed to ensure that someone is dead, the body shudders. The narrator shoots Sonny again, in the temple.

It's unclear how the narrator is trying to help Sonny. He has come to kill Sonny so that he can prove himself worthy of fighting in Vietnam alongside Bon. Perhaps if Sonny were to expose himself as a Communist, too, the narrator could have arranged with Man for his protection. When Sonny fails to pick up on the narrator's cue, it seems that the narrator has no choice but to kill him, due to having already exposed himself as a double-agent and needing to carry out the General's order. His clumsiness in shooting Sonny is another indication of his ineptitude at performing such violent tasks.

CHAPTER 17

The next morning, Bon soothes the narrator with a bottle of scotch. Drinking turns out to be the best cure. The narrator thought that he would feel better after a night with Lana. He went back to her after leaving Sonny's apartment, but even "an unforgettable evening with her" didn't help him forget. The next day, he and Bon are set to leave for Thailand. In a message to his Parisian aunt for Man, he acknowledges that he's disobeying Man's order to remain in the U.S., but he's returning to save Bon's life. On the plane out of the country, the narrator feels that he's sharing space with the crapulent major's ghost on one side of him and Sonny's on the other. He thinks about all of the things he'll miss about America. Bon, on the other hand, is relieved to go.

Both Bon and the narrator have been using alcohol as a palliative for their consciences, with the assistance of the General. Initially, the narrator thought that sex would help him, but it's likely that intimacy with Lana merely reminded him of the loss that Sofia will now suffer. The narrator's feeling of sitting beside ghosts on the plane is the result of his guilt. He is leaving America behind, but not the sins that he committed there. The presences of Sonny and the major parallel with Man and Bon, who have also guided the narrator's conscience.

Bon tells the narrator that they're going back to the land where everyone looks like them. The narrator points out that he doesn't look like anyone in Vietnam. Bon grows irritated with him and says that his problem is that he lets everyone know what he's thinking. The narrator agrees to keep quiet. After a sleepless twenty-four hour trip, including a plane change in Tokyo, they arrive in Bangkok. Bon and the narrator have brought little with them. They gave the keys to their apartment to Reverend Ramon and told him to sell everything. Claude and the admiral in charge of the base camp will handle their needs. It's Claude, too, who greets them at the airport.

Bon is irritated with the narrator for not sharing in his happiness about returning to the only place that Bon considers home. He doesn't like being reminded of the narrator's racial identity, which complicates his relationship with Vietnam. Bon's relationship to Vietnam is uncomplicated, and his life didn't fall apart until he made the decision to leave his country.

Claude ushers the narrator and Bon into a van. He tells them that he'll keep them awake to help them get over their jet lag. Claude, the narrator, and Bon arrive at an establishment with a huge, bright, yellow vertical sign that says "Golden Cock." Bon abstains and the narrator decides to stay with him while Claude goes inside. When the narrator asks where Bon wants to go, he points over the narrator's shoulder to a movie poster advertising *The Hamlet*.

Claude takes Bon and the narrator to a brothel. Bon remains disinterested in sex because he is still in mourning for his wife. Bon is someone who cannot perform actions that lack meaning or that seem unethical to him. To distract himself, less from sex than from his sadness and loneliness, he suggests seeing a movie.

They go to see the movie and the narrator notices that the audience is enjoying themselves. The narrator watches the only scene that he hasn't seen filmed—Mai's rape scene. The audience remains silent while the character screams "Mama!" repeatedly. As the credits begin rolling, the narrator feels shame for having been associated with the movie but pride in the extras' great work. He waits for his name to appear in the credits, but he never sees it. His "grudging acknowledgement" of the Auteur is replaced by "boiling murderous rage."

Unable to kill the narrator, the Auteur pretends that he was never a part of the movie at all. The audience's enjoyment is a bit sadistic, given that they are watching a violent war film in which American characters are murdering people who look like themselves. This is reminiscent of the narrator's rightful assumption that the world is eager to absorb American ideas, including the fantasy of the white American hero.

The narrator asks Bon what he thinks of the movie. Bon says that it was the narrator's job to ensure that Vietnamese people came off well, but they didn't even come off as human. As they get into a taxi, the narrator insists that, if it weren't for him, no Asians would've had any roles at all; they would've been "target practice." Bon says that the narrator tried to play the white people's game and lost because they run the game. He insists that when you've got nothing, you can only change things from the outside. They don't speak anymore for the duration of their ride. When they get to the hotel, they fall asleep almost right away.

The narrator views the movie as a compromise. The Asian characters are not fully realized, and they exist only to be rescued by white people, but the Auteur's original script had no Asian characters at all. Bon, however, sees the narrator as a fool who never had a chance working within the Hollywood system. Their inability to agree results in tense silence.

Before falling asleep, the narrator thinks back to his and Bon's departure from Los Angeles. The General and Madame saw everyone off at the airport. The General presented his four volunteers, including Bon and the narrator, with bottles of whisky, and he took photos with them. He pulled the narrator aside to have a word with him. The General talked about how he and Madame regarded the narrator as an adopted son, but there were rumors that the narrator tried to seduce Lana, and the General was disgusted. The narrator lived in their house and treated Lana as a younger sister. The General admitted that the narrator's relationship with Lana was part of the reason why he was letting him go to Vietnam. He concluded by saying that he'd never approve of his daughter being with a "bastard." The General "stuffed" the narrator's mouth with the one word that could silence him.

The General's disapproval of the narrator's relationship with Lana was to be expected because he isn't the husband that he envisioned for his daughter, for the reasons that Lana expressed to him already at the Roosevelt Hotel. What offends the narrator is that the General regards him with the same loathing as everyone else in their country, despite the immense sacrifices that the narrator has made on the General's behalf. The General demonstrates great disloyalty, while also reminding the narrator of his snobbery in bringing up the narrator's racial heritage. This incident also results in the narrator's expulsion from the General's circle.


The next morning, back in Thailand, Bon and the narrator awake before sunrise. Claude drives them to the camp near the Laotian border. There, the narrator sees the last men standing for the armed forces of the Republic of Vietnam. They bear little resemblance to the clean-shaven, disciplined men in the General's posters. They look like peasants fighting in the bush. Their eyes are as "dull as coal." They look more like Viet Cong. One of the guerillas leads them to a hut to meet the admiral, who looks no different from his soldiers. Like Ho Chi Minh, he calls himself "uncle."

There is a kind of reversal here in which the former South Vietnamese Army, once clean-cut, now bears closer resemblance to their former enemies. The dullness in their eyes signifies their hopelessness and lack of belief in the war that they seek to resume fighting. Worse, the veterans seem to have no clear plan or ideology of their own, resulting in their mimicking their former enemies.

The admiral talks about how, after the Americans had abandoned the South Vietnamese, he appealed to his Thai friends. The Thai would fight Communism because it was pressing up against their border with Cambodia. He realized that he didn't need to be saved by Americans. He and his men could fight for decades, if necessary. In God's eyes, he concludes, this is "no time at all." Bon asks if he really thinks that they can get their country back. The admiral says that they have their faith, and God is on their side. If they die on the mission, those they save will be grateful to them. Bon confesses that he has no faith in anything; he just wants to kill Communists. The admiral says that this desire will suffice.

The admiral is relying on local alliances to help fight the next war. Relying on the Catholic faith taught to him by the French, he takes a view similar to the narrator's mother: the meek shall inherit the Earth. The fight for liberty is timeless, in the admiral's view. It is a fight both to rectify the past and to take back the future of Vietnam. Bon clearly doesn't have the same lofty view, however. For him, it is simply a matter of fulfilling a task, which is to kill the enemy he has loathed for his entire life.

CHAPTER 18

Bon and the narrator spend two weeks getting used to the weather and their new comrades—three bearded, long-haired marine lieutenants, the same ones they ran into in an alley in Saigon. The narrator remembers the affectless lieutenant on whom he had once drawn a pistol. They go out on a reconnaissance mission led by a kidnapped Lao farmer and a Hmong scout who serves as his translator. Instead of helmets and bulletproof vests, they're given a laminated, wallet-sized picture of the Virgin Mary to wear over their hearts. Before departing, they spend days "discussing tactics, preparing rations, and studying the map" of their route through southern Laos. They also listen to Radio Free Vietnam, which airs the admiral's speeches, along with James Taylor and Donna Summer songs. When the narrator says goodbye to Claude, his mentor reminds him to keep his head down and to leave the fighting to the pros.

The three marine lieutenants again act as foils for the narrator, Man, and Bon. The affectless lieutenant is a direct foil for the narrator, who prides himself on his competence. The picture of the Virgin Mary in the place of bulletproof vests is an indication not only of the army's sparse resources but also the admiral's religious fanaticism. He seems to believe that, like Joan of Arc and her army, his guerrilla fighters are on the side of God and will therefore triumph. The soldiers remain connected to American culture through the radio, which also connects them to the Western-inspired values for which they believe they are fighting.

A few hours into their march, the soldiers arrive at a pool of water, where their grizzled captain calls for a rest. The pool, which has a dead bird floating on its surface, is a bomb crater caused by the Americans. It's a sign that they've entered Laos. They rest on the peak of a hill. They spread their ponchos and cover themselves with "hooded capes of netting into which [they wove] palm fronds." The narrator has barely fallen asleep when the machine gunner tells him that it's his turn for sentry duty.

The dead bird in the pool of water is a sign of impending doom, as the crater is also a reminder of the failed American effort in Vietnam. The dead bird could be a symbol of the fate that awaits the guerrillas for pursuing what will be a fruitless effort.

The second night is no different from the first. The narrator looks up at the stars through the branches. He feels like he's inside of a snow globe being shaken and watched by Sonny and the crapulent major. The narrator wishes that he told the General that he had already had sex with Lana, just to prove that nothing was forbidden to him, not even what belonged to or came from the General. The affectless lieutenant gets up to pee. Bon asks if the narrator is okay and he nods. The lieutenant returns. As he begins to speak, there's a flash of light and a deafening sound that shakes the earth and loosens the soil.

The narrator's feeling of being inside of a snow globe comes from the sense of existing in a world over which he believes he has little control. His thoughts about Lana have nothing to do with any tenderness that he may have felt for her—really, there was only lust—but with how she symbolizes the Vietnamese upper-class to which the narrator will never belong.

Someone turns on a flashlight and they see that the affectless lieutenant's leg is missing. Another person puts a hand over his mouth to muffle his screams. After some thrashing, he becomes still and dies. Though he's dead, the narrator can still hear him screaming. The grizzled captain tells them that they have to move so that they're far away by morning. The captain slings the lieutenant's body over his shoulder and the narrator carries his leg, which is only slightly heavier than his AK-47.

The lieutenant is the first casualty of this guerrilla war. He, like Sonny and the crapulent major, continues to live in the narrator's conscience. This is because he feels indirectly responsible for the lieutenant's death, just as he's directly responsible for the others. He has assisted the General in conducting this ill-fated war.

The soldiers end their forward march after two hours. They lower the affectless lieutenant's body into a grave. As the narrator kneels by the grave, he sees Sonny's ghost squatting beside him and the crapulent major's head sticking out of the grave. By late evening, after a short march, they reach the banks of the Mekong River. It would take four trips to transport all of them across. When it's Bon and the narrator's turn to cross, the narrator can feel the ghosts of Sonny and the crapulent major following them into the raft.

They ensure that the lieutenant gets a proper burial and, when he does, his ghost stops haunting the narrator. The journey across the river will take them into Vietnam, and the crossing is a point of no return in their decision to fight.

One of the marines takes one step off of the raft when a rocket-propelled grenade strikes him. The marine goes flying into the shallow water, where he lies, not quite dead and screaming. Bon pulls the narrator down. He commands the narrator to shoot. The narrator lifts the gun and squeezes the trigger. After several shots, his shoulder hurts from the gun kicking him. When he pauses to load another magazine, he feels an ache in his ears, too. All of a sudden, their enemies stop shooting and it's just the narrator and Bon blasting into darkness. The radio telephone operator (RTO), who was shooting beside them, is slumped over, dead. Someone with a northern Vietnamese accent calls out, telling them to give up. The narrator looks at Bon, who has tears in his eyes. Bon says that, if it wasn't for the narrator, he'd die here. The mission is over. The narrator has saved Bon's life, but only from death.

The narrator's incompetence with the gun and his discomfort from holding it are more signs of his inexperience with actual violence. Bon and the narrator continue shooting into the darkness out of desperation to escape. Bon, however, knows that they will be captured. To protect the narrator, in keeping with his oath, he decides to surrender. Bon has tears in his eyes because he has failed at the only purpose that he has left in his life. Bon will live, but he will spend the next year, and perhaps longer, wishing that he were dead. This, for him, feels like his third and final failure in life.

CHAPTER 19

The Commandant is hurt by the narrator's implication in his confession that life in the camp is worse than death. The narrator acknowledges that, given that he's now a prisoner and the Commandant is in charge, it may be hard for the Commandant to sympathize. The Commandant insists that the narrator isn't a prisoner; he's a guest. Then, the Commandant corrects himself and labels the narrator a "patient" who has been exposed to and infected by dangerous ideas. As a result, the Commandant and the commissar are quarantining him. He tells the narrator that, when his confession satisfies them, he'll move on to what they hope will be the last stage of his re-education. The Commissar believes that he's ready to be cured.

The Commandant doesn't want to believe that his camp is a prison. Instead, he sees it as a place where misguided people receive corrections. This is why he refers to the narrator as a "patient." The ideas with which the narrator has been "infected" are Western ideas. The narrator says that the Commandant is unable to sympathize with him because the narrator is a total devotee of Communism, which makes it difficult, if not altogether impossible, to see that the other side also has some good points.

The Commandant talks about the narrator's origins and describes the relations between the narrator's mother and father as his curse. The Commandant shows him a jar containing a naked, pickled baby with one body and two heads, and two faces pointed in different directions. Two legs are spread to reveal "the boiled peanut of the masculine sex." The narrator has seen the jar several times already. The infant is a result of American experimentation. The Commandant goes on to say that they could have simply shot all of the prisoners, particularly Bon. However, the Commissar believes that they can all be rehabilitated. He then says that the Commissar wants to meet the narrator in the evening. No other prisoner has met him personally. The Commissar wants to clarify some issues with the narrator.

The Commandant thinks that the narrator presents a problem due to his inability or unwillingness to choose a side, which he blames on the narrator's biracial identity. He thinks that these origins have confused him. The pickled baby is representative of others' perceptions of the narrator as a grotesque mistake. Though the narrator isn't American, he is both devoted to American ideas and to his Vietnamese identity, just as he is both Vietnamese and French. The Commandant believes that these qualities make the narrator inherently confused and conflicted.

The narrator knows that he can shorten his stay by just writing what they want: Communist slogans. He believes in the slogans but can't bring himself to write them. His resistance to the appropriate confessional style irritates the Commandant, who accuses the narrator of being a bourgeois intellectual. The narrator counters that Karl Marx didn't exactly write for the people. The Commandant is offended by the narrator's comparison of himself to Marx, thereby confirming his elitism. The Commandant then asks how he likes his wood pigeon. The narrator says that it's delicious. The Commandant tells him that "wood pigeon" is a euphemism for rat, or what he'd call a "field mouse."

The narrator's personal integrity prevents him from simply telling the Commandant and the commissar what they want to hear so that he can leave. He takes interest in the project of writing his confession because it gives him an opportunity to confess for his true crimes and also to come to terms with mistakes that he's made. The narrator points out the hypocrisy of Communists who are rabidly anti-intellectual when their original ideas are rooted in intellectualism.

Throwing the fiber cover back over the jar containing the pickled baby, the Commandant congratulates the narrator for finishing the written phase of his education. He then invites him to meet the Commissar. They ascend a hill toward the Commissar's quarters and stop at some stairs leading up to his balcony, where the baby-faced guard and three other guards await them. The Commandant tells the narrator that the Commissar is in charge of him now. If it were up to the Commandant, the narrator would be sent to the fields for his final cure, due to all of his failures, particularly his failure to undermine the production of *The Hamlet*. The narrator thanks him anyway for what he's done for him, and this seems to mollify the Commandant. Before departing, the Commandant reminds the narrator to strive toward sincerity, which is what education is all about.

The baby-faced guard will be one of the narrator's main tormenters, particularly zealous in his effort to inflict sleep torture. The young guard is symbolic of how fanatical ideology is instilled in people while they are very young to make them lifelong devotees who believe that they have a purpose. The guard's fanaticism parallels with that of Bon, though they are politically opposed. The Commandant's allusion to "the fields" means that, if it were up to him, the narrator's punishment would be permanent forced labor in conditions similar to those of a gulag, or labor camp.

The narrator feels his stomach churn as he knocks on the Commissar's door. A voice tells him to come in. The voice sounds familiar. The narrator enters a room filled with bamboo. There's an altar on which sits a gold-painted bust of Ho Chi Minh. At the far end of the room is a platform bed draped in a cloud of mosquito netting. A shadow stirs. A burned red hand parts the netting, revealing "a visage of fearful asymmetry." The face has been scorched away. The Commissar asks if the narrator recognizes him. He reminds the narrator that he asked him not to return. Man is the Commissar.

The narrator is nervous to meet the mysterious Commissar, a man that everyone has only seen from a distance. Man's scorched body has resulted in his transformation from the "blood brother" whom the narrator once knew to the fearsome leader of a Communist cell and a detention camp where he holds his old friends captive. He, too, is a man who knows what it is to live with two faces.

CHAPTER 20

Before the narrator can say a word, the guards seize him, gag him, and blindfold him. The baby-faced guard orders someone to open a door. The narrator is then pushed into "a confined, echoing space." The guards strip him down and make lewd comments about his penis. They push him down on a mattress. A foamy material is wrapped around his hands and feet. He wonders what Man wants from him and thinks that this must be some sort of final test. Every time the narrator is about to fall asleep, a foot nudges him, purposefully keeping him awake.

The guards take away the narrator's power of speech, which is his primary strength. The guards' sexually objectifying comments are meant to degrade the narrator. His hands and feet are bound in the same way as the Communist agent whose rape and torture he witnessed. He is also kept from falling sleep as a form of torture.

A voice comes from far above the narrator, somewhere in the ceiling: "Didn't I tell you not to come?" The narrator asks how he couldn't have come back. He then asks if Man is not his friend, his "sworn brother," and his "true comrade." He asks why he's doing this to him, when the narrator wouldn't do this to his worst enemy. Man says that he's ensuring that worse things won't happen. The Commandant thinks that he's "being too gentle with his pedagogical methods." He would prefer to remove all of the narrator's teeth with pliers. He tells the narrator that if he wishes to leave the camp with his teeth intact, they each have to play their roles.

Man speaks to the narrator from on high, as though mimicking the voice of God. Man is both trying to fulfill his role as the commissar, which is to mete out punishment to those who have been "infected" with Wester ideas, while also keeping his blood oath to the narrator and Bon. This maintenance of both of his roles is similar to how the narrator maintained both of his roles as a captain and a sleeper agent. Now, the narrator must play his role as a prisoner.

Man says that the reason the narrator is in the examination room is to remember what he's forgotten. Man recalls what an excellent student the narrator has always been and is certain that he knows the answer to the question that he must answer to complete his re-education and be released. He asks if the narrator is ready. Man asks, "What is more precious than independence and freedom?"

The narrator's talent as a student is now necessary to save his life. Man asks him a question that is meant to reacquaint the narrator with something that he forgot while he was busy learning American culture and absorbing that country's values. Man wants to reorient him to Communism.

The narrator responds, "Nothing." Man tells him that his answer is not quite right. When the narrator asks again why Man is doing this to him, he reminds the narrator that he warned him not to come back. The narrator reiterates that he had to return to protect Bon. When Man realized that his blood brothers would be returning, he asked to be made the commissar so that Bon and the narrator would be sent to him. The camp is full of those who continue to fight a guerrilla war. Bon has already asked to be shot, and the Commandant would have done it if not for Man.

The narrator responds in the way an American would respond, revealing his immersion in values that are antithetical to Communism. Man knows that the narrator's ideology is no longer pure, which is why he instructed the narrator not to return to Vietnam. His return forced Man to act, both to protect the new regime and to protect his old friends.

The other reason why Man wanted to be the commissar is because he didn't want his wife and children to see his burnt face. He hasn't looked in a mirror in years. He asks the narrator if he can understand what it's like to be frightening to one's own family or not to be recognized by one's closest friends. All he knows is the pain of the napalm burning the skin off of his face and body. He was hit by a bomb released from a plane.

Like Bon's insistence on dedicating himself to soldiering because he no longer has a family, Man has dedicated himself to life at the camp because he is too grotesque to present himself to his family. He is a physical manifestation of the war's devastation.

Man returns to the subject of the narrator's confession and asks him what he did to the Communist agent. The narrator insists that he did nothing to her. He begs again to sleep. Man insists that, only without the comfort of sleep can he "fully understand the horrors of history." The narrator senses that "somebody must have something done to him," but he doesn't want to be somebody, he wants to be regarded as "a nobody." The baby-faced guard nudges the narrator again, keeping him from sleep, reminding the narrator that he's not his "comrade."

Man is forcing the narrator to remember his complicity in the Communist agent's capture, torture, and rape. Man forces the narrator to stay awake so that he can exhume his conscience and admit to some of "the horrors of history" that he helped to commit. The narrator doesn't want to acknowledge his role in history, which is why he wants to be regarded as a "nobody." His impure ideology also means that he's no longer considered a "comrade."

CHAPTER 21

Fixed on his mattress, the prisoner, or pupil, knows that to be a revolutionary subject is to be a historical subject who remembers everything. For this to occur, he must be fully awake, even if his state of wakefulness kills him. The narrator's captor unties his blindfold, and he can see light. The light emanates from hundreds of lightbulbs planted in the ceiling. The room is painted white. The baby-faced guard stands in a yellow uniform in the corner. The others are dressed in white lab coats and sea-green medical scrubs. Surgical masks and steel goggles hide their faces. A man to the narrator's left asks him, "Who are you?" The next questions are "What are you?" and "What is your name?" None of the simple questions are easy for narrator to answer. The Commissar notes how he can't even get his name right. He suggests that the doctor inject the narrator with "the serum" to get him to tell the truth.

This scene, like the beginning of the novel, is strongly influenced by Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man. *The nameless narrator of that novel goes underground and lives in a hole that is "warm and full of light," due to his use of 1,369 light bulbs. In this instance, the narrator sees hundreds of lightbulbs. In both cases, the excess light is deemed necessary to help each narrator to see himself clearly. For this narrator, the light bulbs do not have their intended effect because he* does *see himself clearly, but he doesn't see himself in the way that others insist he see himself.*

The doctor pulls out a contraption from a burlap sack. Its purpose is to deliver static electricity to startle the narrator. The Commissar asks for some privacy with "the patient." Everyone else leaves the room. The narrator sees the ghosts of Sonny and the crapulent major in one corner of the room. The Commissar leans forward and shows the narrator the book they found in his old quarters at the General's villa—the KUBARK interrogation manual from the CIA. The narrator asks for the lights to be turned off. The lightbulbs, like the serum, are parts of an interrogation method invented by the KGB.

The purpose of the electricity, the lightbulbs, and the serum is to extract from the narrator what his tormenters want to hear: they want him to identify himself and his allegiances. Their discovery of the old CIA manual makes his allegiances seem less clear. He cannot be both a Communist and a worker for the CIA. His duplicity is deemed a sickness, which is why they regard him as a "patient."

The narrator can no longer feel his body. When the Commissar asks if he can remember what he's forgotten, the narrator thinks he can. However, he can't articulate it. If he could, perhaps the wire that delivers shocks would be removed from his nose and the taste of battery in his mouth would go away. He recalls that the Communist agent was interrogated in a movie theater. She lay in the center of the large room, naked on a table covered with a black rubber sheet. Her hands and feet were roped to the table's four legs. The movie screen serves as a backdrop from which Claude watches the agent's interrogation with the help of a projector.

The torture has succeeded in separating the narrator from his awareness of his body, leaving him only with his mind and his memories. This forces him to come to terms with his betrayal of the Communist agent. Her interrogation in a movie theater reinforces the notion of torture as spectacle, which was made even clearer when the narrator participated in the production of The Hamlet.

The crapulent major was in charge of the interrogation, but he abdicated his role to the three policemen in the movie theater, while he sat watching from a folding chair. The Communist agent cried out that she was innocent, while the police officers decided on who would rape her first. A middle-aged policeman climbed on top of her and asked for her name; she said nothing. When he repeated the question, she said that her first name was Viet and her given name was Nam. The policemen were silent at first, then they burst into laughter. They took turns raping her. After the oldest policeman finished, the room was quiet, except for the agent's sobbing. For a final show of cruelty, the policemen took an empty soda bottle and shoved it inside of the agent. Finishing this story, which the narrator views as a consequence of history, he asks if he can sleep.

As Claude said, the crapulent major was indeed guilty of something. Both he and the narrator seemed to have forgotten about this incident when they had their conversation about the major's impending assassination. The narrator could have saved the agent by exposing himself as a Communist, but that would have probably resulted in his being killed. Still, his passiveness during the agent's rape and torture indicates an unwillingness to act, especially if the action would compromise his own safety or comfort. The narrator enjoyed his privileges from knowing Claude and the General and didn't wish to lose them.

CHAPTER 22

The Commandant accuses the narrator of being unwilling to sacrifice himself to save the Communist agent, though she was willing to sacrifice her life to save the Commissar's. The narrator admits that he's a man who's guilty of the crime of doing nothing. The Commandant says that the injuries that the crapulent major and that Sonny suffered are not equal to those suffered by the Communist agent. She couldn't walk when they liberated her. They found the policemen and made them pay "the price." The Commandant wonders if the narrator should pay the same price.

The Commandant's accusation underscores the sense that the narrator has a poor level of commitment to the Communist cause. The Commandant thinks that Sonny and the major suffered less because they were shot, which ended their pain relatively quickly, while the agent was tortured. The Commandant strongly implies that he also tortured the policemen in revenge.

The narrator says that he wishes he were dead. He figures that Man will finally release him "from this small world with its small minded people," who treat "a man with two minds and two faces as a freak." Man puts his gun down on the floor and kneels by the narrator's side. He unties the sack from around his right hand and then unties the rope binding it. The narrator holds his hand before his eyes, looking at his scar. Man places the pistol—a Soviet gun called the Tokarev, whose design is based on the American Colt—in the narrator's hand. Man leans forward, pressing the muzzle between his eyes and steadying the narrator's hand. "Why are you doing this?" the narrator asks. Man says he thinks that this is the only way in which he can save the narrator.

Both the narrator and Man wish that they were dead so that they can escape from their mutual burdens. The narrator has the burden of having to define himself as one thing when he knows himself to be two things. Man has the burden of playing the role of a commissar, which disrupts his ability to be a good friend to the narrator. They both struggle with dual moral burdens. They both also struggle with the inability of other people to see them for who they really are.

Man says that they're in an impossible situation. The Commandant will only let the narrator leave after he redeems himself. That leaves the matter of what will happen to Bon. The narrator says that he won't leave without Bon. Man surmises that the narrator will die in prison then. He presses the barrel of the gun against his head even harder. Man asks the narrator to shoot him. He wonders how "a teacher" can teach something that he doesn't believe. He wonders how he can continue to live in his condition. He asks the narrator to pull the trigger.

Man admits that he instructs others in an ideology that he no longer wholeheartedly believes—that is, if he ever was a total believer. The narrator may be guilty of duplicity, but Man seems to be guilty, too, of being inauthentic. He has claimed loyalty to the Vietnamese Communist cause, but he no longer has total faith in it, perhaps due to its abuses of the populace.

The narrator tries to pull the gun away from Man's head and put it toward his own, but he doesn't have the strength. He sees the ghosts of Sonny and the crapulent major behind Man. They stare with longing at the gun, wanting to shoot the narrator. Man apologizes for being selfish in wishing for death. If he dies, then the narrator and Bon will surely die too. The Commandant can't wait to drag Bon out to a firing squad. Still, Man won't release the narrator from the prison until he can answer his question about freedom, though the Commandant is willing to let the narrator go for admitting that he wanted his father dead. Man gets up, raises his hand in farewell, and exits the room.

Man realizes that he cannot yet die because that would require him to break his oath to Bon and the narrator. The narrator's conscience conjures up the images of Sonny and the major wishing for his death because the narrator thinks that this would be just retribution for his participation in their murders. The Commandant's satisfaction with the narrator's admission comes from the latter's denial of half of himself in favor of his Vietnamese identity.

The overhead speakers click on in the narrator's room and release the sound of a screaming baby. The narrator finds it impossible to think. A clicking sound makes him realize that he's listening to a tape. He wonders if he screamed like this at his mother when he was an infant. The narrator wonders who's screaming. The sound transports him back to the lost memory of his birth. Finally, he realizes that the "somebody" who is screaming is him. He's screaming his answer to Man's question: "Nothing!" This time, however, the narrator believes his answer. He has embraced nothingness as the only true state. He is enlightened.

The sound of the screaming baby is a cue for the narrator to return to his original state, to become the blank slate that he was at his birth. It is impossible for him to become "nobody" because everyone who is born is "somebody." He can return to a newborn state, however, by accepting that everything that he has learned and every purpose that he has embraced means nothing inherently. None of it gives life any essential meaning.

CHAPTER 23

With that one word, "nothing," the narrator completes his re-education. Now, he's preparing for his "watery departure" from his country. After the narrator answered the question, the Commissar reentered the room, turned off the light and sound, unbound him, and embraced him, cradling the narrator's head until he stopped screaming. The Commissar comforted him and said, "Now you know what I know, don't you?" The narrator knew—it was all a joke. He began to laugh so hard that the baby-faced guard and the Commandant came to investigate the noise. When the Commandant asks what's so funny, the narrator says, "Nothing!"

The narrator is happy to enter this state of enlightenment, which frees him from the burdens of having to define himself, of having to choose a side, of having to act, and of having to embrace a political purpose to give his life meaning. Once he accepts that life has no particular meaning, he feels free. The commissar knows the same thing, but he must pretend to embrace a political purpose so that he can save Bon and the narrator from execution.

The narrator goes back to his isolation cell. All he wants to do is sleep. The doctor pulls a sheaf of 307 pages out of his briefcase—the narrator's confession. He pulls out another sheaf of papers and asks him to copy the confession. The narrator spends hours copying what he already wrote. Then, he asks for more paper so that he can add what happened after his confession in the examination room. The narrator thinks back to his former self—the man with two minds—and feels sorry for him. He had been foolish enough to think that he could represent a group of people in *The Hamlet*, when he couldn't even represent himself. The doctor pats the pages of the manuscript and nods with satisfaction, telling the narrator that he's nearly done.

The number 307 may come from Proverb 30:7 in the Bible: "Two things I ask of you, Lord; do not refuse me before I die." The narrator is using his confession to redeem himself—not necessarily to God or to anyone in authority at the camp, but so that he can make sense of his own life and his choices. Though his confession satisfies the doctor because it seems to admit to the futility of embracing Western culture, the document also serves to express the narrator's own past confusion about the meanings of identity and moral purpose.

The narrator hasn't seen the Commissar since the end of the examination. They meet in his quarters for the last time. Man uneasily offers the narrator tea. He announces that both Bon and the narrator are leaving the camp and the country. A truck awaits them at the gates. They're going to Saigon, where Bon has a cousin. Bon's cousin has tried twice to flee the country. This third time, he'll succeed because the Commissar has paid for his escape, along with that of the narrator and Bon. The narrator embraces Man and weeps. Though he's setting the narrator free, Man will never be free, except in death.

The narrator will go back to where he started. Once again, he finds himself trying to escape from Saigon. In this respect, there is an aspect of completion to the novel, which comes full-circle. However, this time, the narrator is leaving Vietnam not as a man with dual identities, always masking one side of himself from others. He is now someone who can embrace twoness because nothing really matters.

So, what has the narrator learned, he asks? While nothing is more precious than independence and freedom, *nothing* is also more precious than independence and freedom. The two slogans are almost the same, but not quite. The second slogan is the joke. Besides a man with no face, only a man with two minds could understand this joke. As a result, the narrator begins to think of himself as "we" instead of "I." Before the narrator leaves, Man gives the narrator back the rucksack that he took, along with the narrator's copy of *Asian Communism and the Oriental Mode of Destruction*. Man also hands the narrator the copy of his confession. He then orders him to leave.

The narrator leaves with two books. The first is a book in which a Westerner explains Asian identity to him, while the latter is a book in which the narrator explains his identity to himself. The first book represents the imposition of Western cultural imperialism. Formerly colonized subjects have an obligation to write their own stories, and these stories may include their colonized histories. The narrator is "we" because he is a product of history and of his own invention.

The narrator has no shortage of paper when he arrives in Saigon, where everyone is required to write confessions and submit them to local cadres. They are exercises in fiction, since they have to find things to confess. They end each confession by saying that nothing is more precious than independence and freedom. On the evening of their departure from Vietnam, the narrator pays for Bon's fare and his own. They'll travel by bus to a village three hours south, where a ferryman will wait by a riverbank. They'll ask him the coded question: "Can you take us to our uncle's funeral?" The ferryman will give the coded answer: "Your uncle was a great man."

Under the new Communist regime, everyone writes confessions. This is their moral purpose, to confess constantly to things that they have done wrong. In this regard, the Communists have not fully abandoned their Catholic pasts, which required them to do the same thing with a priest every week. The confessions are meaningless now because they rely more on the invention of crimes to satisfy superiors, and have less to do with existential exploration.

The narrator, Bon, and their navigator will then get onboard a skiff and glide across the river to a hamlet. Down the river, a fishing trawler that holds 150 people will await them. They may not survive the trip in the tight, suffocating space. The only cause that the narrator espouses now is wanting to live. He writes the final sentence of his confession—the one that will not be revised: *We will live!*

The narrator finally realizes in the end that his only purpose is to live. Life has no meaning beyond life itself. His uses of political ideologies, books, and prestigious positions to give his life meaning were merely distractions from life itself. Knowing the truth, he has finally achieved happiness.

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