Unpolished Gem

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ALICE PUNG

Alice Pung was born the first of four children to Kuan Pung and Chia Kien in Footscray, Victoria, in 1981. Alice's parents, both ethnic Teochew Chinese from Cambodia, escaped the Killing Fields of the Khmer Rouge regime and arrived in Australia in the late 1980s. Alice Pung is named for the title character in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* because her father saw Australia as a wonderland full of opportunity and excitement. Pung spent most of her childhood in Braybrook, a suburb just west of Melbourne, where she attended five different schools, including a Catholic all-girls school. She also attended law school at the University of Melbourne and remains a practicing lawyer in the areas of pay equity and minimum wage. Pung's first book, a memoir entitled *Unpolished Gem*, was published in 2006 to both popular and critical acclaim. In 2007, *Unpolished Gem* was the winner of the Australian Newcomer of the Year Award and it was also shortlisted as an Australian Book of the Year. Pung edited the anthology, *Growing Up Asian in Australia*, in 2008, and in 2011, she published her second book, *Her Father's Daughter*, which won the Non-Fiction Prize in the Western Australian Books Awards that same year. In 2014, Pung wrote her first young adult novel, *Laurinda*, which won the 2016 Ethel Tuner Prize for Young People's Literature. Pung currently lives with her husband, Nick, in Melbourne, Australia, where she is the Artist in Residence in Janet Clark Hall at the University of Melbourne.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In *Unpolished Gem*, Pung's parents talk about how they escaped the Killing Fields, a term used to describe certain parts of Cambodia where the Khmer Rouge regime perpetrated a state-sponsored genocide resulting in over two million deaths. Following the Cambodian Civil War, the Khmer Rouge, supporters of the Communist Party of Kampuchea, targeted and killed anyone in Cambodia who threatened their communist agenda—including those suspected of connections with foreign governments, Cambodian professionals and intellectuals, Cambodian Christians, followers of the Buddhist monkhood, and anyone of ethnic Chinese, Vietnamese, Thai, or Cham origin. The Khmer Rouge, led by Pol Pot, a revolutionary and general secretary of the Communist Party of Kampuchea, held power in Cambodia, then known as Democratic Kampuchea, from 1975-1979. The regime closed schools and hospitals, abolished organized banking—making all money worthless—and forced Cambodian citizens to live and work on communal farms after seizing all personal property and belongings. By the end of 1978, over two million additional Cambodians were dying of starvation under the societal collapse caused by Pol Pot's regime, until Vietnam invaded Democratic Kampuchea on December 25, 1978, effectively ending the genocide and removing Pol Pot from power.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

While Alice Pung credits her paternal grandmother with instilling in her the love of storytelling, she claims John Marsden, an Australian based schoolteacher, principal, and writer, as her single greatest literary influence. Marsden has authored several children's books as well as a series of Young Adult novels entitled *The Tomorrow* series, including *Tomorrow, When the War Began* and *The Dead of Night*. Pung published *On John Marsden* in 2017 as part of Black Inc.'s Writers on Writers campaign, which is a series of six books written by Australians about other inspirational and influential Australian writers. As an Asian Australian, much of Pung's writing focuses on her unique cultural identity, and she is part of a growing community of other Asian Australian writers. Other Asian Australian works include *The Boat* by Nam Le and Shaun Tan's *The Arrival*, a wordless graphic novel that examines the migrant experience in a imaginary world that loosely resembles Australia. Other popular memoirs that also engage and explore unique cultural experiences include *The Glass Castle* by Jeanette Walls and Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Unpolished Gem: My Mother, My Grandmother, and Me*
- **When Written:** 2006
- **Where Written:** Melbourne, Victoria, Australia
- **When Published:** 2006
- **Literary Period:** Postmodern, Contemporary Asian Australian Literature
- **Genre:** Autobiography, Memoir
- **Setting:** Footscray and Braybrook, Victoria, Australia
- **Climax:** Alice breaks up with her boyfriend, Michael, a young white Australian whom her mother disapproves of.
- **Antagonist:** Kien Pung; Alice's inner conflict with her Asian Australian identity in Victoria's "whitewashed" society.
- **Point of View:** First-person

EXTRA CREDIT

Writing Residency. In 2009, Pung attended the University of

Iowa's International Writing Program as a Resident. The program, a writing residency that offers international novelists, poets, journalists, and essayists optimal conditions to explore and produce art, has accommodated over 1,500 writers since its creation in the 1960s.

Publishing Abroad. Pung's 2014 Young Adult novel, *Laurinda*, was revised for an American audience and rereleased as *Lucy and Linh* in 2016.

PLOT SUMMARY

Alice Pung's memoir, *Unpolished Gem*, begins when her parents, Kuan and Kien, arrive in Victoria, Australia with her paternal grandmother, Huyen Thai, and her aunt, Que. Alice's story "does not begin on a boat," she says, but on the streets of Footscray, a suburb of Melbourne, where the streetlights stop traffic. As the Pungs watch the local Australians push a button on the large poles and safely cross the street when the "little Red Man" turns into a "little Green Man," they know that they are in a "Wonder Land." Kien soon gives birth to Alice, her and Kuan's first child, and they name her for the "enchanted" place they now live. The Pungs move into their first home in Footscray, and after much adjustment and confusion, they settle into their new life and continue to grow their family.

Soon, Kien gives birth to a son named Alexander, and Kuan works hard at a local factory. Huyen Thai lives with them as well, and Alice grows up listening to her grandmother's stories of the old country. Alice and Huyen Thai share a special connection, but Kien fights with her mother-in-law constantly. Huyen Thai dictates every aspect of their lives—she manages Kien's money and her daughter—and Kien is suffocating under her control. As a young child, Alice is stuck between the women and their fighting. She loves them both, but they each use her to make the other angry. The women constantly talk behind the other's back, and as Alice "moves from camp to camp," Kien accuses the girl of being a "word-spreader." Kien escapes her unhappiness through work, and she begins to sell **gold** jewelry from the family's garage. She works long hours, and Huyen Thai effectively raises Alice, always teaching her to be proud of her Chinese heritage. Alice tries, but her grandmother always dresses her in a padded **Mao suit**, and the other kids at school make fun of her. Alice doesn't quite fit in, and since English is her second language, she is often afraid to speak.

It is not long before Kien is pregnant again, and Huyen Thai moves out to live in Que's new house. Once Kien gives birth to Alison, she immediately goes back to work, and Alice is stuck taking care of her new sister. She must do everything now, and since Huyen Thai has left, there is nobody to make Alice breakfast or take care of her. Kien quickly gives birth to another baby, Alina, and Alice's work doubles. All she does is go to school and take care of babies, and she grows tired of sacrificing all her time. What's worse, her parents don't appreciate how hard she works, and they only seem to notice when she does something wrong.

Meanwhile, the chemicals that Kien works with begin to bother her skin and lungs, and she must stop working to recover. At home all day without her work, or "purpose," Kien spirals into a deep depression. She can't work and she can't speak English—Kien is certain that she is useless. She becomes determined to learn English and work in Kuan's new electronics store, but she quickly gives up and stays home.

The stress of Alice's home and school expectations continues to wear on her, and then Huyen Thai suffers a stroke. She is left incapacitated, and spends each day staring at Que's ceiling with her one good eye. She soon catches a cold and quickly dies, and Alice's own depression takes a turn for the worst. She can't concentrate on her upcoming exams, and she is sure she will fail. Kuan and Kien take Alice to a doctor and he sends her home with a bunch of pills that Alice pretends to take but actually spits into the toilet. She thinks everything is hopeless. When the day of Alice's final exams arrives, she oversleeps and nearly misses them. Alice is convinced that she will have no academic options, but it doesn't really matter—all that is expected of her is that "she make a good pot of rice, has a pretty face, and is fertile." Kuan convinces her to call and check on her exam grades, and she is shocked to find out that she has scored well. She will be starting the University of Melbourne next year, and Alice thinks for the first time that her life will be okay.

The summer before college, Alice works in Kuan's shop along with Kien, who becomes the leading salesperson despite her language barrier. Alice is finally happy, and then she meets Michael, a white Australian boy. Alice and Michael begin to date, and slowly the two fall in love. She even introduces him to her parents, and Michael tries exceedingly hard to win their approval. Kien, unfortunately, thinks that their differences are "insurmountable." Michael is, after all, a "white ghost," and Kien tells Alice that all Australian men "sleep around" and are no good to marry. Alice loves Michael, but she doesn't feel equipped to make lifelong decisions at just eighteen years old. She ultimately breaks up with him, and while he says understands, Alice doesn't think he really does. She is heartbroken, but she knows that it is the right decision. As Alice and Michael go their separate ways and Huyen Thai is finally laid to rest, Alice is truly happy for the first time. Her future is bright and exciting, and her grandmother has left her with a deep respect and appreciation for her family and Chinese culture.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Alice Pung / Agheare – Kien and Kuan's daughter, Huyen Thai's

granddaughter, and the protagonist of *Unpolished Gem*. Alice is the first Pung born on Australian soil after her family escapes the violence of Pol Pot and the Cambodian Killing Fields. Her father names her after Lewis Carroll's famous story, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, because Australia is an "enchanted Wonder Land." Alice represents her parents' efforts to achieve the "Great Australian Dream," and they are dedicated to raising a genuine Australian child. However, Alice feels out of place in Australia's "whitewashed" society. She doesn't look like her classmates, and she is acutely aware of her differences. Yet Alice doesn't feel entirely Chinese either, and as English words begin to replace the Chinese language in her head, she feels more and more isolated from her family. Alice is saved by her grandmother's stories, which teach her about her Chinese culture and history, and she feels a greater connection to her Asian roots because of them. Huyen Thai also teaches Alice to be proud of her Chinese heritage, and when Alice's mother becomes consumed by her work and ignores her, the stories help Alice to feel loved and cared for. As Alice grows, she becomes a smart and capable young woman, and she constantly pushes the boundaries of both her sexist culture and society. She resents the housework her mother makes her do (her brother, Alexander, doesn't have to do chores because he's a boy), and while she deeply loves her younger sisters, she grows tired of caring for them every day. She wishes she had the same opportunities as boys, whose existence seems "infinitely more interesting," and her life confined to her home feels small and cramped. As Alice nears her graduation, the stress of her studies and responsibilities at home prove too much, and she suffers a mental breakdown. Alice eventually graduates and secures a scholarship to law school, but she still struggles with her future. After she falls in love with Michael, a white Australian boy, Alice ultimately breaks up with him because she feels unable to make serious decisions about love and sex at such a young age. Plus, her mother disapproves of Michael, whom she has deemed the "white ghost." Alice is deeply committed to her family and Chinese culture, and she is determined to find a lasting love like the kind her parents share.

Kien Pung – Alice's mother, Kuan's wife, and the antagonist of *Unpolished Gem*. Kien first meets her husband while working in his Cambodian factory as a young girl, but she doesn't fall in love with him until years later. Kien's family runs to Vietnam to avoid the Killing Fields, and she doesn't see Kuan for years. Kuan escapes and flees to Vietnam too; they meet again, and Kien falls in love with Kuan from the back of his bicycle. In Australia, after the birth of Alice, Kien grows miserable under the thumb of her mother-in-law, Huyen Thai, who controls her money and her entire life. Kien is furious when she thinks Alice and Huyen Thai are talking about her behind her back, and she is prone to depression and suicidal threats. Kien is an incredibly hard worker, and she finds her purpose making **gold** jewelry from the family's garage to help make ends meet. She spends countless hours working every day, and the chemicals she uses burn her skin and lungs. Kien believes that women who stay home to clean and raise their children are "lazy," and she can't bear the thought of not working. Ironically, while Kien challenges typical stereotypes of domestic responsibilities for women, she also gives her daughter more chores than her son, Alexander, and tells Alice that girls don't usually get the chance for a good education like hers. These inconsistencies underpin the sexist nature of both Chinese and Australian culture. Unlike her husband, Kien refuses to assimilate to Australian culture, and for a long time she refuses to learn English. She fears that she is growing old and useless, but Kien proves to be invaluable at Kuan's electronics store, where she is the best salesperson on the floor. Kien and Alice frequently fight, and the only thing Kien worries about more than her family leaving her is her daughter marrying a "white ghost," meaning a white man.

Huyen Thai – Alice's grandmother, Kuan's mother, Kien's mother-in-law, and An Pung's wife. Huyen Thai is of ethnic Teochew origin, but she is forced to leave China after boldly speaking out against the government. She moves to Cambodia where she finds a job as a teacher and falls in love with An, even though he is ten years older and has a wife and two children. Tragically, Huyen Thai loses her first two children, both girls, and she spends the rest of her life pining for her lost daughters. She even goes so far as to try to trade one of her newborn sons for a daughter, but An makes her switch back. She is a strong woman despite her oppressive culture, and she commands over her seven children, and everybody else, for that matter. Huyen Thai has a volatile relationship with Kien, her daughter-in-law, and she frequently makes her metaphorically choke on the "bones in her words" (meaning her sharp or hurtful words). Despite this conflict, Huyen Thai is incredibly close with Kien's daughter Alice, however, and she teaches the girl from a young age to be proud of her Chinese heritage and culture. Huyen Thai shares her life and history through stories of the old country, and Alice learns what it is to be Chinese from long talks with her grandmother. Sadly, Huyen Thai's dies after suffering a stroke, which is compounded by a cold.

Kuan Pung – Alice's father, Kien's husband, and Huyen Thai's son. Kuan escapes the Killing Fields of Cambodia and walks through three countries with his wife, mother, and sister, just to try to have a better life away from the death and suffering of Southeast Asia. He is kind and funny, and deeply in love with his wife. Kuan is fully committed to assimilating to Australia culture when he arrives safely in Victoria after a year in a Thai refugee camp. He takes classes to learn the English language and even works as a translator at the Migrant Hostel. He works several jobs before managing to open his own electronics store, and after years of hard work, he finally owns two Retravision franchises. He builds his business "up from scratch," and achieves the "Great Australian Dream." Kuan spends most of his time at work, and even though he is strict, he and Alice share a close and comfortable relationship. He is very different

from his own father, An Pung, who values only sons and is bored by daughters. Instead, Kuan rubs Alice's feet when she is upset and teaches her that Adam, not Eve, is the one who is really responsible for the fall of man.

Michael – Alice's white, Australian boyfriend, and the "white ghost" Kien fears her daughter will marry. Michael, like Alice, is studying to become a lawyer. He has wanted to be a lawyer ever since he watched *Gandhi* in the tenth grade, and he is an exceedingly kind and gentle young man. Michael has an excellent sense of humor and is a very likable character. He is clumsy and charming when he asks Alice out for the first time, and she has a hard time turning him down. Michael is patient with Alice's strict and confined life, and he tries very hard to win Kien and Kuan's approval. He genuinely loves Alice, and he even agrees to eat meat—including venison—when Kien looks at him suspiciously for being a vegetarian. Alice breaks up with Michael before he goes back to college because she isn't ready for a serious relationship (and because her mother disapproves of him). The fact that Michael is such a good catch and Alice breaks up with him anyway underscores her dedication to her family and her respect for love and the sanctity of marriage.

An Pung – Alice's grandfather, Kuan's father, and Huyen Thai's husband. An is a school teacher in Cambodia, and he already has a wife and two daughters when he meets Huyen Thai. Despite not being able to afford it, An marries Huyen Thai anyway because he loves her, but he is further disappointed when his new wife gives birth to two daughters as well. An prefers only sons, and as such, he is symbolic of the sexist nature of traditional Chinese culture. He doesn't celebrate when his daughters are born, and when his first two daughters as just toddlers, An barely seems to notice. He does go on to be the proud father of five sons, plus two more daughters, and he loves Huyen Thai even though she frequently does "crazy things." An gives Huyen Thai's sixth son to his first wife to take away some of Huyen Thai's power, and she agrees to leave the boy behind. An dies of starvation during the reign of Pol Pot, and Kuan keeps his picture on a Buddha shrine in their house. When Huyen Thai dies, the children put a picture of An on her grave to "remember him."

Alina Pung – Alice's sister, and Kuan and Kien's youngest child. Because Kien is always busy working, Alice must practically raise Alina after she is born. She feeds her and tests the milk on her wrist, and she even makes the girl's clothing on her sewing machine. While Alice resents all the thankless work she is expected to do, she has a very close relationship with Alina. Alina helps to pull Alice out of her depression after her exams, and when Alice stares up at the sky at Huyen Thai's funeral, Alina is there again. Throughout the story, Alina serves to remind Alice of the importance of family and responsibility.

Chia Tang – Kien's father and Alice's grandfather. Chia Tang, along with his wife, Outside Ma, represent the old country. He wears a **Mao suit** made by Outside Ma, and he keeps his money buried in the backyard because he doesn't trust the banks. Chia Tang turns his entire Australian yard into a Chinese vegetable garden, and he gets up early every morning to water it. Alice's grandfather serves as a foil to her own family; while the Pungs try to assimilate, Chia Tang still lives very much like he did in Cambodia.

Que – Alice's aunt, Huyen Thai's daughter, and Kuan's sister. Que moves to Australia with her mother, brother, and Kien, and they all live together for a while when they first arrive in Footscray. Que is strong and capable, and she works counting money at Kuan's electronics store. She lives most of her life with her mother, who dies in her home after suffering a stroke.

Alexander Pung – Alice's brother, and Kien and Kuan's son. Alexander's parents don't expect him to do the same amount of work as Alice because he is a boy and is less mature. However, he is roughly the same age as his sister, and, as Alice points out, girls are mature simply because they are given so much work and responsibility.

Sokem – Kuan's first fiancé arranged by his father, An Pung. Not long after An makes the arrangement, Pol Pot takes over and their two families are sent to separate camps. All of Sokem's family dies in the Killing Fields, and when she finds Kuan later, he is already seeing Kien. After An Pung dies of starvation, Kuan is glad when Huyen Thai does not hold him to the agreement. Sokem can sense that Kuan is in love with Kien, and she quietly bows out.

Chia Ngo Hung / Outside Ma – Alice's grandmother and Kien's mother. Alice calls Chia Ngo Hung her "Outside Ma" because she doesn't live with them like Huyen Thai does. Outside Ma is symbolic of the old country. She arrives in Australia wearing a **Mao suit**, and she makes all her own clothes, including her underwear. She doesn't trust banks, and she keep her money buried in jars in her backyard. She is caring but quiet, and Alice enjoys her easy company compared to her overbearing parents.

Little Brother – Huyen Thai and An Pung's daughter. Little Brother is their second daughter, but she is built like a boy. She is mischievous and refuses to wear dresses, and she is a source of extreme unhappiness for An, who wants only sons. Little Brother dies when she is just a toddler after she falls climbing a shelf and impales her head with a lollipop. Huyen Thai is heartbroken, and before she buries her, she cuts a lock of her hair.

Alison Pung – Alice's younger sister, and Kien and Kuan's third child. Alice spends most of her time taking care of Alison after she is born, which is thankless work. Alice's parents only seem to notice when Alice does something wrong—like when she accidently lets Alison roll off the bed when she is just a baby.

Ah BuKien – A friend of Kien and Kuan Pung. Ah BuKien gets rich selling rice-noodles, and she wants Alice to marry her son. Ah BuKien is an unlikable woman who brags about her money

and calls her son a "retard" when he fails to get into medical school. She eventually stops trying to fix up Alice and her son after he starts working in her noodle factory and Alice is accepted into law school.

Melanie – Alice's cousin and Frank's daughter. Melanie marries a white man and the whole Pung family calls him the "Round Red-Haired Demon" to Melanie's face, except for Frank, who loves his son-in-law like his own. Of course, Kien disapproves of Melanie's marriage, and Alice isn't allowed to go to the ceremony; Kien fears that Alice will also one day marry a "white ghost," which explains why she so deeply disapproves of Michael.

Uncle Frank – Alice's uncle and Melanie's father. Frank can't seem to "escape the counter-effects of colonialism," and he is ecstatic when Melanie marries a white man. He sees his son-in-law's white skin as a sort of status symbol that will gain him respect from others. Frank's opinions are a stark contrast from those of Alice's mother, Kien, who believes that a white son-in-law (a "white ghost") is the worst thing imaginable.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Ly – Kien's sister and Alice's aunt. Ly is what Alice calls "true cutting-edge Chinese chic." She moves to Australia with Sim when Alice is young, and she lives in an apartment at the housing commission.

Sim – Kien's sister. Sim works in Kuan's electronics shop, and she does the work of three people without complaining. When she takes time off to have a baby, Kien fills in for her and becomes the best salesperson in the shop.

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.

CULTURE AND ASSIMILATION

After escaping a state-sponsored genocide led by Pol Pot, Cambodia's tyrannical leader, protagonist Alice Pung's parents finally arrive in Victoria, Australia in 1980 after spending a year in a Thai refugee camp. Kuan Pung and his pregnant wife, Kien, are determined to raise their growing family away from the violence and political instability of Southeast Asia and instead claim their own piece of the great Australian Dream—the belief that through hard work and dedication, anybody can own a home and be successful in Australia. *Unpolished Gem* chronicles the long-term struggles and triumphs of the Pungs as they attempt to assimilate and conform to Australian life and culture, while also maintaining their ethnic Chinese identity. As the first Pung born on Australian soil, Alice is just as out of place in her own family as she is in Australian society, and she soon learns that she does not fit neatly into either culture. Through the writing of her memoir, Alice navigates the duality of her multicultural existence and ultimately argues for the creation and acceptance of a unique Asian Australian identity, one that reflects both her Eastern and Western roots.

When the Pungs arrive in Victoria, they are completely out of place in Australian society. The first time that Kuan and Kien approach a street intersection and crosswalk they are amazed that a "little Green Man" flashes on the streetlight when it is safe to cross. To the Pungs, the flashing Green Man is an "eternal symbol of government existing to serve and protect," a stark contrast to the genocidal efforts of the Cambodian government. After her first trip to an Australian supermarket, Kien purchases a can of meat which she quickly turns into an impressive stir-fry. Later, through a television advertisement, Kien discovers that the canned meat is dog food. "How lucky to be a dog in this country!" she thinks. Even pet food in Australia is better than the Cambodian canned goods the Pungs are accustomed to. Soon after their arrival, Kuan is offered a job as a translator at the Migrant Hostel. There he must explain to the other "Cambodian migrants that the reason they are so cold in the mornings is because they are meant to sleep *under* the sheets." To the Cambodians, the beds are made too nicely, and they don't want to mess them up. These experiences, which highlight privileges often taken for granted in mainstream Australian society, underscore the differences between Eastern and Western culture.

Over the span of two decades, the Pungs slowly conform to life in Australia. Kuan owns and operates a Retravision franchise, an Australian-based retailer of computers and electronics, and provides his family with a comfortable middle-class life—proof that they have achieved the Australian Dream. While Alice's grandfather, Chia Teng, turns his Australian backyard into a Chinese vegetable garden, the Pungs' "Asko side-by-side fridge with the ice dispenser" is "packed with fast food that came two-for-price-of-one." Instead of a traditional Chinese diet, the Pungs' diet reflects their modern Australian lifestyle. After Alice's grandmother, Huyen Thai, moves out of their house in Australia, the Buddhist shrines that litter their home and yard fall into dusty disrepair because they "no longer have Granny to maintain the shine." In their new Australian life, the Pungs are less observant of their Buddhist faith. When Alice is a teenager, her parents begin construction of a brand-new home, and each weekend the family drives to the building site to assess the progress. "This was our weekly Sunday trip," Alice says, "to watch the temple being constructed and worship the fruits of our labor." Instead of Buddha, the Pungs are devoted to the Australian Dream and are fully immersed in Western culture.

However, despite the Pungs' best efforts to assimilate, Alice remains an outsider in both Eastern and Western culture. While studying Australian history in elementary school, Alice's class puts on a colonial dress-up parade. When she arrives at school in a **Mao suit**, a traditional Chinese outfit and the symbol of her Eastern heritage, Alice is not given an apron to wear like the rest of the girls because she doesn't look like the other children. Even as a young child Alice is acutely aware of her differences, and instead of participating in the parade, she hides in the bathroom. Alice describes herself as a "sort of permanent exchange student" growing up in Australia, and during her high school graduation, Alice and her family sit at a secluded table of migrants. As they watch the other graduates celebrate and mingle, Alice's parents understand that like them, Alice is merely a "Watcher" of her life. "It must have hit them hard," Alice says, "that we were still sticking by each other, sticking with each other, and not getting out, not fitting in." Regardless of her parents' hard work, Alice is not fully accepted as an Australian. Yet Alice does not feel entirely Chinese either, and she struggles to find her place within her family's culture as well. Alice begins to "run out of words" when speaking Chinese with her mother, and when her grandmother tells her about Chinese history, her "Chinese ears are not Chinese enough to pick up the sounds and meanings of her words." Alice is stuck between two conflicting cultures, and while her identity is certainly unique, she is but part of a growing population of Southeast Asians living in Australia's newly embraced multicultural society. *Unpolished Gem* highlights Alice's experiences as an Asian Australian, an inclusive identity that has long been ignored in mainstream Australian society.

LANGUAGE AND STORYTELLING

Alice Pung's memoir, *Unpolished Gem*, follows her young life growing up in Australia as the daughter of Chinese immigrants from Cambodia. Removed from her Eastern heritage, Alice's Chinese roots come alive through her grandmother Huyen Thai's stories of the old country, and it is through these stories that Alice discovers what it means to be Chinese. Her parents are frequent storytellers as well, and Alice often relies on works of literature and films to enhance her writing and convey her feelings and experiences. Alice's parents name her after Lewis Carrol's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, and her own stress-induced mental breakdown coincides with her reading of William Shakespeare's King Lear, a play in which the title character also descends into complete madness. Stories, especially didactic stories, and the words that make them up are thus central to Alice's life and experiences. Language and storytelling prove to be powerful ways for Alice to carry her culture and history into the future; however, she also argues that language has the power to divide and exclude. Through *Unpolished Gem*, Alice ultimately implies that words and stories, for better or worse, have the power to influence and change one's life.

As a memoir, storytelling is the very foundation of *Unpolished Gem*, and this is mirrored in the stories that Alice's grandmother tells. Alice's grandmother had begun her tradition of storytelling long ago with Alice's father, Kuan, and his siblings. "And tell them stories she did," claims Alice, "with each character coming to life as she stretched her face and contorted her mouth, furrowed her brow and brought to life people she liked and people she loathed to battle it out between the heaven and the earth." Alice's grandmother is a "brilliant storyteller and conversationalist," and Alice is brought up with the same tradition. Growing up, Alice shares a queen-sized bed with her grandmother, and each night she entertains and educates Alice through stories of her early life in China and later in Cambodia. Alice claims that her grandmother possess "a form of magic, the magic of words that become movies in the mind." Alice's Chinese heritage is made more accessible through her grandmother's stories. Alice claims that even after her grandmother's death, she is kept alive by her stories. These stories prove to Alice that there is life before and after her own, and because of this, they are "meant to be a part of [her] forever." Alice writes, "My grandmother and her stories. What would I do without them? She exerted my existence before I knew I had one—before I was conscious I had a life beyond the present—and she told me my childhood." To Alice, her life and existence are affirmed and made real through her grandmother's storytelling.

However, while storytelling frequently brings Alice's family together, it is language and words that often cause problems within their lives. Alice claims that her grandmother is very good at "putting bones in her words, bones to make the other person choke," and her sharp words often metaphorically choke Kien, Alice's mother and Huyen Thai's daughter-in-law. While Alice's grandmother's words are a positive part of Alice's own life, then, she uses the same voice to make Kien miserable. Kien's poor relationship with her mother-in-law is further fueled by Alice's role as a "word-spreader." Both Alice's mother and grandmother talk about each other behind the other's back, and Alice is left helplessly in the middle, forced to tell each woman what the other said about her. Alice is "doomed, early on, to be a word-spreader. To tell these stories that the women of [her] family made [her] promise never to tell a soul." Inevitably, each time Alice tells the other's stories, the already strained relationship between her mother and grandmother worsens. Additionally, Kien never really learns English, making communication difficult. Alice writes, "Over the dinner table, she would watch as my father and his children littered their language with English terms, until every second word was in the foreign tongue." The very language that enables Alice and her family to become part of Australian society is the reason why Kien is an outsider in her own family. Lastly, when Kien brings Alice and her father lunch while at work in the family's

electronics store, their foreign language makes the non-Chinese employees uncomfortable. Alice claims the employees "huddle over the *Herald Sun*, quietly scoff down their pizza or take-away fried rice and get the hell out of there as fast as possible, since they have no idea whether our yelling is about them or not." Language here again serves to create a barrier, this time between the Pungs and the other employees. Each of these instances underscore the power contained within stories and language to divide and isolate.

Alice's father observes that there is more to communication than merely "the strumming and humming of vocal cords," and this indeed proves to be the case throughout much of *Unpolished Gem*. For example, while Alice's mother and grandmother may spend most of their time bickering, they are, ironically, brought together by imported Hong Kong soap operas. The two connect through their shared love of stories, and these quiet hours spent together serve to mend their strained relationship, even if temporarily. From storytelling and movies, to comfortable silences and gossip, Alice ultimately argues the power of language and stories, regardless of the form they may take.

GENDER AND INEQUALITY

Throughout her memoir, *Unpolished Gem*, Alice Pung continually struggles with her status as a woman, both within her Chinese culture and her life in Australian society during the 1980s and '90s. Each time Alice's grandmother, Huyen Thai, tells a story about the birth of one of their ancestors, the father always remains outside the delivery room door, waiting to find out if their newborn child possesses the "desired dangly bits," and Alice's modern life isn't much better. While watching movies like *Stand by Me* and *Dead Poet's Society*, Alice laments that "the Coming of Age of boys is infinitely more interesting." Within these films, boys become who they are by testing their courage and forming meaningful relationships, whereas girls are not given the same opportunities within society. Alice feels confined by her gender, and states "all that matters is that I can make a good pot of rice, have a pretty face and am fertile." As a young Chinese woman, Alice is expected to be weak and dependent upon men; however, Alice's story is full of women who constantly push the boundaries created by society because of their gender, and Alice is no different. It is through this representation of strong women that Alice effectively challenges and dispels popular stereotypes of women as the weaker sex.

The importance placed on boys over girls within Chinese culture is made abundantly clear throughout *Unpolished Gem*. Alice's grandmother is the second wife of Alice's grandfather, An Pung, and the time he spends with her is often a source of contention with his first wife. To quell their frequent fights, Alice's grandfather often tells his first wife, "If you could give me sons, then I wouldn't need to go over there!" Alice's grandfather considers his first wife less important because she has only given birth to girls, whereas Alice's grandmother is the mother of five sons. However, even though Alice's grandfather is the proud father of five sons, he chooses "to forget about the first two babies who died, because they were just girls." This again underscores that to Alice's grandfather, the birth of his sons is more important the birth of his daughters. Furthermore, after the death of her daughters, Alice's grandmother desires a girl so badly that she attempts to trade her newborn son for a daughter. Of course, Alice's grandfather is enraged, not because his wife has traded their child, but because she traded their boy for a girl. "Bundling up our baby like that and setting off to sell him for a useless daughter!" Alice's grandfather cries, making his contempt for daughters plain. Alice's grandfather is a stand-in for Chinese culture more broadly, which clearly values boys over girls.

Alice claims that girls are expected to be "still and silent and sedate," like "a darling geisha behind glass," yet the women in *Unpolished Gem* are strong and outspoken. With each new birth of her five sons, Alice's grandmother gains power within her family and in the eyes of society. Alice writes, "Then, when it came to her sixth, it was too much. […] She controlled these five little boys who were going to grow into men, and it made my grandfather anxious." Alice's grandfather is threatened by his wife's ability to birth and control boys, and he is determined to right this imbalance of power. In an attempt to strip his wife of some of her newly gained power, Alice's grandfather formulates a plan to give his second wife's sixth son to his first wife. Alice notes, "Of course, like all his plans, whether they came into fruition ultimately depended on my grandmother, and this irritated him no end, but there was nothing else for it." Alice's grandmother is a strong and powerful woman, and her husband can do nothing without her approval, despite popular assumptions that she must be weak and submissive on account of her gender. Furthermore, Alice's own mother, Kien, defies stereotypical gender expectations when she refuses to spend her time at home "wiping down the fridge or washing sheets." Instead, she spends long hours away from home making and selling **gold** jewelry in order to provide for her family. Both Kien's culture and society expect domestic responsibilities to be her life's work and mission, but she is determined to define herself outside of this restricted role. Like her mother-in-law, Kien manages to exert power in a culture and society that largely seeks to silence and marginalize her based on her sex.

Alice writes, "Constantly sighing and lying and dying—that is what being a Chinese woman means, and I want nothing to do with it." However, walking away from the confines of her gender is not that simple. Kien's job outside of the home means that much of the household duties, including the raising of her two youngest daughters, are deferred to Alice—even though her son, Alexander, is roughly one year younger than Alice. When Alice questions her mother about the unfair division of labor in

their home, Kien tells Alice that she expects more from her because she is more mature, to which Alice rightly asserts that "girls only mature faster because they have more work to do." The stress of Alice's responsibilities at home coupled with the expectation that she excel academically and become a lawyer leads to a nervous breakdown, for which she requires medication and months to recover. Ultimately, through the writing of *Unpolished Gem*, Alice implies that escaping the trappings of her sexist society and culture is unlikely, no matter how powerful she becomes. Undoubtedly, Alice's future as a lawyer is bright; however, gender expectations within her Chinese culture will continue to dictate her role within her home and family.

FAMILY, LOVE, AND MARRIAGE

The value of family is well established within Alice Pung's memoir, *Unpolished Gem*, and it drives the narrative throughout the book. Alice begins her story in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, where her parents and her paternal grandmother and aunt walk across three countries on foot to escape a state-sponsored genocide. Kuan and Kien, Alice's parents, are determined to start their own family away from the violence and destruction of Cambodia, and the sacrifices they continue to make after arriving in Australia reflect this same dedication to family. Kuan works hard as the owner and operator of a local electronics store—which he "builds up from scratch"—and Kien spends countless hours making **gold** jewelry in the family's garage. The dangerous chemicals that Kien works with blacken her fingers and eat away at her skin, and Alice is left with a lasting sense of guilt over her parents' devotion to the betterment of her life. This devotion is present within Kuan and Kien's relationship as well, and Alice comes from a long line of successful marriages. With her loving depiction of the Pungs in *Unpolished Gem*, Alice effectively argues that within Chinese culture there is nothing more important than family—and family begins with a loving marriage.

Much of Alice's life—including her grandmother, Huyen Thai's, stories—revolves around her family, which underscores the value of family within her Chinese culture. Most of the Pungs work and live with, or near, each other. Multiple generations live under the same roof, and Alice and her aunts often work in Kuan's electronics store. Even Kien works in Kuan's store when she is not busy making jewelry, and the entire family pools their labor and resources to ensure that everyone is cared for. Much of what the Pungs do each day is a family affair. This family-centered working environment is also noted in Alice's grandmother's stories of the old country. Back in Cambodia, all the Pungs worked in their family-owned plastic bag factory, which further emphasizes the closeness of the Pung family. After Kien's sisters, Ly and Sim, come to Australia from Cambodia, they spend much time talking about suitable men to marry. As the women talk, Alice notes that they never refer to any of the men by name, and instead talk only of "the son or cousin of so and so." Alice claims that they do not use names because these men "do not exist in isolation of their family." The individual identities of these men are not as important as who their families are, and this too reflects the importance of family within Chinese culture.

In addition to the importance of family, the relationships of Alice's parents and grandparents also imply that true love is a required element within any family. The first marriage of Alice's grandfather, An Pung, was arranged by his father. Back then in Cambodia, marrying for love was "a luxury that few can afford." While Alice's grandfather is a poor man by most standards, he marries Alice's grandmother anyway because he loves her. While he often wonders if "he did a wise thing, considering the crazy things this second wife does," he is nevertheless in love with Alice's grandmother. Similarly, An also arranges Kuan's marriage to a woman named Sokem in Cambodia. Sadly, Kuan's father dies of starvation under the tyrannical rule of Pol Pot, Cambodia's political leader, and recognizing her son's true love for Kien, Thai allows him to break the arrangement. Both Alice's parents and her grandparents approach marriage not as a business transaction, but as a deep connection between two people. When Kuan marries Kien, he has little to offer her other than "a promise, something for her to picture in her imagination." This promise is the love that Kuan has for Kien, and it is this same promise that leads them, and their family, safely to Australia. Without Kuan and Kien's love, Alice's life in the "wonderland of Australia" wouldn't be possible, and it is this love that sets the standard for marriage within her own life.

Alice's Chinese culture places strict guidelines on whom she should marry and when, and as she gets older, marriage and family are frequent considerations. Alice's father tells her that "a family is like a snake. If the head of the snake is set straight, then the rest of the body follows straight. However, if the head is crooked, then the body gets as bent as ginseng and it is doomed." Alice's parents deeply affect how she approaches her life and relationships, and when she begins to date and fall in love with Michael, a kind and caring young Australian man, Alice ultimately breaks up with him. Alice believes that "love is this 'one true love for ever and ever' kind of thing," and she does not feel equipped to make life-long decisions at such a young age. Additionally, Kien does not accept Michael because he is an Australian, or "white ghost" as she calls him, and she views their differences as "insurmountable." Alice's devotion to her family, and her belief in true love, guides her decisions and life—even when that decision is painful—and it is in this way that Alice argues the importance of family and marriage within *Unpolished Gem*.

SYMBOLS

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

THE MAO SUIT

In *Unpolished Gem*, the Mao suit, a traditional pants suit worn in Southeast Asia, symbolizes Alice's connection to her traditional Chinese culture. When Alice's grandmother, Huyen Thai, first arrives in Australia, she is wearing a Mao suit, and when Kien's parents arrive, they are wearing the suits as well. Huyen Thai even dresses Alice in a Mao suit as a child. Alice dreads wearing it, and the Australian climate is too warm for the heavy outfit, but Huyen Thai worries that Alice will freeze like a "communist peasant" if she doesn't wear the suit. Alice unhappily wears the suit for her school pictures, and the other children at school think she is wearing pajamas. Alice even suffers the ultimate humiliation of twice peeing her pants in the suit at school, and most of her memories about the suit are awful. Ultimately, the Mao suit serves to highlight just how different Alice is from her Australian classmates, and it is just another reason why she doesn't quite fit into Victoria's "whitewashed" society. As a young girl, Alice wants to wear a dress like the rest of the girls at school, but she is stuck with a masculine suit. During the "colonial dress-up parade" at school, Alice is denied an apron because she looks like a boy in the Mao suit; she is doubly humiliated and acutely aware of her differences.

GOLD

Gold symbolizes security, wealth, and success within *Unpolished Gem*. In Phnom Penh under the Khmer Rouge regime, Pol Pot closes the banks and turns their money into "worthless pieces of dirty paper," and only gold retains its value. Once the Pungs leave Cambodia, Kien still buries gold in the backyard to remind her of her life in the old country. She also earns her living making gold jewelry out of her garage, but she considers it too precious a metal to wear herself. While Kien spends all her time selling gold, Alice argues that it is the gold that really owns Kien. Making gold jewelry wrecks her skin and lungs, keeps her from her family, and ultimately leaves her unable to work. Alice also draws a powerful connection between gold and self-worth when she realizes that she is in fact "gold not yellow." Alice's connections with gold suggests that family, not material wealth or gold, is the best indicator of success.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Plume edition of *Unpolished Gem* published in 2006.

Prologue Quotes

He steps out onto the footpath, away from the damp smells of the market. This is the suburb of madcap Franco Cuzzo and his polished furniture, the suburb that made Russell Crowe rich and famous for shaving his head and beating up ethnic minorities, so it doesn't really matter that these footpaths are not lined with gold but dotted with coruscating black circles where people spat out gum eons ago. "Don't swallow the rubber candy," mothers say to their kids. "Spit it out. Spit it out *now*—that's right, onto the ground there." Ah, this wondrous new country where children are scared of dying because they have swallowed some Spearmint Wrigley's, not because they stepped on a condensed milk tin filled with ammunition!

Related Characters: Alice Pung / Agheare (speaker), Kuan Pung

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 3-4

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs in the beginning pages of *Unpolished Gem*, about one month after Kuan arrives in Australia from Cambodia with his pregnant wife, Kien, and his mother and sister. Alice mentions Franco Cuzzo, a local Australian furniture salesman whose iconic television commercials promise low, low prices, and Russell Crowe, a famous Australian actor with a history of racism, because these men are part and parcel of the Footscray experience. This passage serves to underscore the differences between Australian society and Cambodia, and even though the chewed gum that litters the streets is not gold (a symbol of wealth and security within *Unpolished Gem*) the discarded candy is "coruscating," or sparkling and shining, just like gold.

Alice's abrupt mention of a "condensed milk tin filled with ammunition" then contrasts Australia with Cambodia's political and social instability. Condensed milk was a popular field ration during Vietnam, and Cambodian territory was used extensively during the war to transport weapons and troops into South Vietnam. The surplus of empty cans made an ideal container for explosives and stepping on a leftover exploding milk tin is a real concern in Cambodia. This life-and-death matter pales in comparison to swallowing chewed gum, just as the hateful acts of Russell Crowe pale in comparison to Pol Pot, Cambodia's tyrannical and

genocidal leader. This passage effectively communicates the stark differences between the life Kuan and his family have left in Cambodia and the one they now have in Australia.

Part 1 Quotes

❝ Back where my father came from, cars did not give way to people, people gave way to cars. To have a car in Cambodia you had to be rich. And if you had money, it meant that you could drive at whatever speed you pleased. If the driver zipping down the country road accidentally knocked over a peasant farmer, he knew he had better zoom away quick because the whole village might come and attack him with cleavers. The little Green Man was an eternal symbol of the government existing to serve and protect. And any country that could have a little green flashing man was benign and wealthy beyond imagining.

Related Characters: Alice Pung / Agheare (speaker), Kuan Pung

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8-9

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Alice is recounting the first day her family arrives in Australia from Cambodia. This passage represents the Pungs' culture shock and again emphasizes the differences between Cambodian society and Australia. The cars and street lights are both things that many Australians take for granted, but to the Pungs, they are proof that their new country is "wealthy beyond imagining." Staying alive is a constant struggle in Cambodia at this time—even the government is committed to oppressing and killing citizens—and those who are lucky enough to have some wealth care very little about the poor. The rich driver who strikes a peasant in Cambodia must "zoom away quick" not because there are legal repercussions for striking a peasant, but because the peasants are likely to pursue their own brand of justice, even if that involves a meat cleaver. In Australia, the government is committed to protecting and serving citizens (or so the Pungs believe at this point), and the little green flashing man that safely ushers them to the other side of the street seems like proof of this.

❝ Later that evening, in the bed that fills up the entire small storeroom where they sleep, my mother and father lie thinking about their full tummies. "Wah, who would believe that they feed this good meat to dogs? How lucky to be a dog in this country!" My mother puts her hand on her sticking-out stomach and smiles. Good-oh, she thinks. Her baby is going to be born with lots of Good-O in her. Good stuff.

Related Characters: Alice Pung / Agheare (speaker), Kuan Pung, Kien Pung

Related Themes:

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Kien has just realized that the canned meat she has fed her family for dinner is actually dogfood. Still, Kien is impressed with the food available in Australia, and even the food marketed for dogs is better than the food she is used to in Cambodia. While Kien's mistake is another example of the culture shock she experiences upon her initial arrival to Australia, this passage also highlights the things typically taken for granted within Australian society. Most Australians are accustomed to good, available food, and most don't know what it is like to go hungry. In Cambodia, starvation was a frequent concern, and even Kuan's own father died of starvation under Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge regime. However, Kien now knows that concerns of starvation are a thing of the past, and this is evidenced by her thoughts that her baby will "be born with lots of Good-O in her." Additionally, the fact that Kuan and Kien are happy living and sleeping in a storeroom reflects the dire conditions that they left in Southeast Asia. Even a storeroom is preferable to a Thai refugee camp or, worse yet, a Communist work farm in Cambodia.

❝ "Your father was trying to tell them that the beds were made to be slept in, when suddenly he was told that he was needed at the hospital. Something must have happened to me, your father thought. Why would a hospital *need* him? He thought about bringing along his acupuncture needles just in case, but there was no time. When he arrived at the hospital, he discovered that the doctors just wanted him to be there to see the baby come out!" In Cambodia the husbands usually find a chair and sit in from of the room where babies were being born until they heard the wahwahwah sounds, and it was only then that they would know that the whole messy business was over and they could find out whether the child had the desired dangly bits or not.

Related Characters: Kien Pung (speaker), Alice Pung / Agheare, Kuan Pung

Related Themes:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

Here Kien tells Alice about the day she was born. This passage is a reflection of the importance of storytelling within Alice's life and culture, but it also highlights the differences between Australian and Cambodian society. Not only do the immigrants at the hostel not know that the nicely made beds are meant to be slept in, but Kuan never even considers going to the hospital to be present for Alice's birth because this is simply not done in Cambodia. This underscores the sexist nature of the Pungs' home culture. Birthing babies, complications and all, is considered below men, and they are only concerned with whether or not their women have given birth to a son, the baby with the "desired dangly bits." Chinese culture places more value on sons than daughters, and this is seen time and time again within *Unpolished Gem*. Luckily, Kuan does not hold many of these sexist opinions, yet he is still affected by them and because of this, he does not initially accompany his wife to the hospital for the birth of their first child.

❝ "Have you thought of a proper name for the baby yet?" my grandmother asks her son. She has nothing but disdain for those parents who do not give their children Chinese names. Did they really think that new whitewashed names would make the world outside see that yellow Rose was just as radiant a flower as white Daisy?

Related Characters: Huyen Thai (speaker), Alice Pung / Agheare, Kuan Pung

Related Themes:

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

This quote by Huyen Thai occurs just after Alice is born, and it reflects Huyen Thai's pride in her Chinese heritage and identity. In Huyen Thai's opinion, a "proper name" is not the whitewashed English names that Chinese parents give their Australian born babies, but the traditional Chinese names that are a better reflection of their ethnic Teochew roots (meaning they come from the Chaoshan region of eastern Guangdong Province in China). Huyen Thai has a deep contempt for Chinese parents who don't acknowledge their true heritage, and her dislike for their English names reflects this. This quote also reflects Huyen Thai's realistic expectations of Alice's acceptance by Australia's predominately white society. She knows that their Chinese culture means that they will never be fully accepted as Australians, but she still refuses to accept that this exclusivity means that the white Australians are somehow better than they are. Her reference to her Chinese granddaughter as a "yellow Rose" relies on the derogatory and racist values of those who consider Asian people "yellow" and inferior compared to Australia's white population, or the "white Daisies," and Huyen Thai believes that they are just as "radiant" and beautiful.

❝ Beautiful things do not need to be expensive, and precious things are to be kept hidden in case of burglars, or guests with kleptomaniac fingers. My parents could never understand those houses where the Royal Doulton plates and family antiques were displayed for every eye to see. After war, people learn to keep good things hidden. They learn that nothing is permanent, and that the most beautiful things are not necessarily the most expensive.

Related Characters: Alice Pung / Agheare (speaker), Kien Pung, Kuan Pung

Related Themes:

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

This quote, which occurs as the Pungs move into their first home in Footscray, reflects the Pungs' cultural differences from their new Australian society. Under Pol Pot, anything of value was confiscated and handed over to the state or stolen by another poor and destitute soul, so the Pungs learned early on to keep precious or valuable items hidden. Additionally, life in Cambodia at this time revolved around necessities and survival, so there was not much room or money for things that served only an aesthetic purpose. Because of this, Kien has a difficult time understanding Australians who display their wealth and valuables. This quote also becomes significant near the end of the book when Michael gives Kien an "understated" bouquet of flowers. Kien almost seems disappointed with the bouquet because it is not overtly, flashily beautiful. Furthermore, the Pungs' realization that nothing is permanent is a reflection

of their experiences with war, but also a reflection of their Chinese culture and Buddhist faith. Impermanence is one of the essential doctrines of Buddhism, and it is one of the three marks of existence within their faith.

> Many old folk who became family friends take good care of them, tell them who are the good boys, and the old women watch with a cunning eye to see which young woman would be best suited for the son or cousin of so and so. "Ah Ly, I know a good young man for you." And they sing the praises of someone's son or someone's brother—never mentioned by name, they are always someone's son or someone's male relative, because they do not exist in isolation of their family. No one exists in isolation of their family, and if they do, there are plenty of old people to look after them […].

Related Characters: Alice Pung / Agheare (speaker), Sim, Ly

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Alice's aunts, Ly and Sim, have just arrived in Australia from Cambodia, and the local Chinese elders take them under their wing. The fact that the local elders adopt the young women and "take good care of them" underscores the importance of family within their culture. Ly and Sim's parents are still back in Cambodia waiting for their immigration papers to be processed, and in their absence, the local elders step in and keep an eye on the young women. The importance of family is further reflected when the elder women fail to tell Ly and Sim the first names of the Chinese men they are trying to fix them up with. As Alice says, these men "do not exist in isolation of their family" because the individual identities of these men are not as important as their families as a whole. Alice's assertion that even if someone does exist without their family, "there are plenty of old people to look after them" also reflects the respect of the elderly within Chinese culture. As people age within the Chinese community, their families keep them at home and care for them instead of shipping them off to nursing homes or long-term hospitals. Because of this, Chinese communities are not short on old people, which means that there are more of them available to look after younger generations.

> When I am a bit older, I don't know whether [my mother's] answer is a lament or curse: "Just wait till you get older and have a mother-in-law like mine. *Then* you will understand. You will understand." What will I understand? I wonder. Suffering? There are far better things to understand than the inconsolable hardships of life. Constantly sighing and lying and dying—that is what being a Chinese woman means, and I want nothing to do with it.

Related Characters: Alice Pung / Agheare (speaker), Huyen Thai, Kien Pung

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after one of Kien and Huyen Thai's frequent fights, and Alice has just asked her mother if she is sad. Kien clearly feels unhappy under the control of her mother-in-law; however, this quote also reflects the sexist assumptions that Alice is growing up with but trying to avoid. Alice assumes that to be a Chinese woman also means that she must always suffer in some way, and she has no interest in this. Alice's father certainly doesn't feel this way, and it is clear to Alice that this level of suffering is reserved just for women. Kien is stuck most days in the house with Huyen Thai—it is assumed that Kien will stay home and take care of the house and family as part of her domestic responsibilities—and she is not given the same opportunities as her husband to work outside of the home and become part of another, presumably supportive and fulfilling, community. Huyen Thai's excessive control of their lives—she manages all their money and even handles all the mail—is a reflection of her own oppression as well. Huyen Thai, like Kien, has been given very little control over her own life, and control over her family gives her the power and voice that she has long since been lacking.

> Or perhaps my word-spreading is also the only way to see that there was once flesh attached to these bones, that there was once something living and breathing, something that inhaled and exhaled; something that slept and woke up every morning with the past effaced, if only for a moment. That there was a good beginning, and in this good beginning the stories would come like slow trickles of truth, like blood coursing through the veins.

Related Characters: Alice Pung / Agheare (speaker), Huyen

Thai, Kien Pung

Related Themes:

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after Alice is caught between Kien and Huyen Thai's arguments, when the women take to talking badly about each other to a four-year old Alice. Alice's "word-spreading," or her involvement in the women's opposing gossip, is a reflection of the overarching message within *Unpolished Gem* that language and words often have the power to divide and exclude. Each time Alice spreads the hateful words of her mother or grandmother, her family becomes more fractured, but strangely, the women's pain is also proof that they are human and capable of more than the insults they constantly level at one another. This quote also implies the importance of storytelling within Alice's life and development. Much of what her grandmother and mother tell her are stories of the old country, such as Alice's father's engagement to another woman before her mother and the fact that Huyen Thai was actually the second wife of Alice's grandfather, and these stories inform Alice's Chinese identity and understanding of her heritage. Despite the intended hurtful nature of these stories, they are absolutely "slow trickles of truth," and they teach Alice what it means to be Chinese.

> My grandmother was possessed of healing powers, or so it was claimed by those who knew her back in Cambodia. Five sons, people exclaimed—seven children, all of them so bright! Of course, everyone chose to forget about the first two babies who died, because they were just girls.

Related Characters: Alice Pung / Agheare (speaker), Huyen Thai

Related Themes:

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Alice is remembering her grandmother's stories about her life in the old country, and while this quote highlights the importance of storytelling within Alice's life, it also reflects the sexist nature of Cambodian society and her Chinese culture. Huyen Thai is only considered powerful because she has given birth to so many sons. This story would surely be different if Huyen Thai were the mother of five daughters, as a houseful of daughters would likely not bestow her with such admiration and power. The fact that nobody remembers Huyen Thai's first two dead children "because they were just girls" also reflects the value placed on sons within their culture. Of course, Huyen Thai is also the mother of two living daughters, but they are mentioned only in passing within this quote, which also implies that it is surprising that even these two children are "bright" just like her sons. Ironically, while it is men who have stripped most of Huyen's Thai power, it is only the creation of more men that restores some of this power and places her on more equal ground.

> When it came down to childrearing, they were her children, he had nothing to do with such prosaic things. Fathers were only there to plant the seeds, it was mothers who did the watering and the fertilizing. Of course, the paternal influence would occasionally return to lop off a few leaves for good measure, and smirk for photographs in front of his prize garden, but he made sure to leave immediately afterwards in case the cumquats only glowed orange but were black inside. It was never the pa's fault if the kids went bad.

Related Characters: Alice Pung / Agheare (speaker), An Pung, Huyen Thai

Related Themes:

Page Number: 37-8

Explanation and Analysis

This quote also occurs as Alice remembers her grandmother's stories from the old country, and it shows An Pung's approach to "childrearing." An feels that raising children is "prosaic" and beneath his station and capabilities as a man. This lends insight into how hard it must have been for Huyen Thai to raise all of her children, and mourn those who died, without any help from her husband. Beyond the initial sexual act, or "planting the seed," An has very little interest in raising his children, expect for occasionally punishing them and smiling for family pictures, which implies that An wants to take the credit for his "prize garden" but doesn't want to put in any of the work. Furthermore, An does not assume any responsibility for the children if they behave poorly, and any bad behavior is a direct reflection of his wife, since raising them is her responsibility alone. Alice's reference to the children as "cumquats" also reflects her Chinese heritage, as a cumquat

is a small citrus fruit typically cultivated in China.

"If you could give me sons, then I wouldn't need to go over there!"

Related Characters: An Pung (speaker), Huyen Thai

Related Themes:

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

This quote, spoken by An Pung, also occurs as Alice remembers her grandmother's stories from the old country. Huyen Thai is An's second wife, and this is what An tells his first wife when she complains about him visiting Huyen Thai. An's first wife is the mother of two daughters and no sons, and An holds this over her head as the reason why he has taken a second wife. Of course, An married Huyen Thai because he loves her, and his first marriage was arranged by his own father and not rooted in any romantic feelings. Still, An tells his wife this solely to hurt her and make her feel like less of a wife and woman because she has not given him sons. An is bored and disappointed with his family full of women, and when Huyen Thai continues to give birth to sons, he actually gives one of Huyen Thai's baby boys to his first wife to spread the "wealth."

Part 2 Quotes

"She's built like a boy," said my grandfather, "and now you've given her that terrible name. She's going to grow up like a boy if you're not careful, and then no one will want her. Who wants a girl always running about this way and that? Keep that child still, and stop calling her Little Brother! What do you think it is—some kind of joke? Do you think it's funny hah?"

Related Characters: An Pung (speaker), Little Brother, Huyen Thai

Related Themes:

Page Number: 77

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Alice is remembering the story of her grandmother's second daughter, a little girl named MeiHuay whom Huyen Thai calls Little Brother. An is already disappointed that Little Brother was not born a boy, and he is further angered by the fact that she is built like a boy. Ironically, the same characteristics that An finds undesirable in his daughter are the same qualities he would likely applaud were she a boy, and this emphasizes the double standards present within their sexist society. While An certainly desires a son, a girl who acts like a boy is worse than simply having a daughter, and Little Brother acts like a boy when she "runs this way and that." This implies that young girls should be quiet and reserved, and not run and display excessive energy like boys. Furthermore, An implies that no man will ever want to marry Little Brother if she continues to behave in such masculine ways, and he certainly doesn't think that her boyish ways, or Huyen Thai's nickname for her, are cute or funny in the least.

A lady was the most abhorred thing you could become, because ladies were lazy bums who sat around wasting their husband's money and walked down the street with perfectly made-up mien visiting the jewelry stores to which my mother delivered her wares. My mother was certainly not a lady. She worked and worked and worked, and when she wasn't working she was cleaning, and when she wasn't cleaning or working she was sick. You could always tell who was a lady by what they complained about, the length of their nails and whether they put milk or butter into their coffee.

Related Characters: Alice Pung / Agheare (speaker), Kien Pung

Related Themes:

Page Number: 94

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after Alice complains to her mother that she has too much housework to do. Kien cries and laments her work as well, and then implies that Alice is too much of "a lady," or a "lazy bum" who is content to sit and spend a man's money. This quote lends valuable insight into Kien's character. As a woman, Kien is expected to care for the home and children; however, she is also determined to have an identity and purpose outside the domestic sphere as well. When her outside job and domestic responsibilities prove too much, she relies on Alice to pick up the slack, which happens to be a considerable amount. Kien "abhors," or deeply detests, the very thing that she is expected to be—an upper-middle class housewife who doesn't have to work because her husband provides for her. Since she refuses to do this, she is buried under twice the work when

she chooses to work outside the home. Her life is entirely consumed by work in one way or another, and it is through this excessive amount of work that she desperately tries to prove her own worth and value.

❝ Coming of Age was explained to me in books, and in the books Judy Blume characters waited with delirious anticipation for their period. I didn't see what the big deal was when it happened to me. So what? It just meant I could make babies if I felt the urge, and of course that was the last thing on my mind. So I wrote the date in my diary, and dreary life continued on as usual. Coming of Age for boys was infinitely more interesting, I thought, when I watched *Stand by Me* and *Dead Poets Society*. Boys formed friendships by discovering cadavers. They walked on railway tracks, started secret clubs, cried over their own cowardice and occasionally shot themselves in the head when pushed too far. It didn't matter if girls were cowards, there was no opportunity or reason for us to test our bravery. All that mattered was that we could make a good pot of rice, had a pretty face and were fertile.

Related Characters: Alice Pung / Agheare (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 95-6

Explanation and Analysis

Alice has just begun to menstruate, and it fails to live up to the hype. This quote is also in keeping with the importance of storytelling throughout *Unpolished Gem*. Alice's life is greatly informed by Judy Blume books and popular movies, and she keeps track of all of this in her personal diary, her first attempt at writing her memoir. Alice is certain she will feel differently when she officially becomes a woman, but like most things she does, this is completely ignored too. Much of her young life has been leading up to this point, but Alice is not sure that she even wants to have children—the very thing that is expected of her as a woman. Furthermore, Alice is way too busy studying and doing her household chores to ever get the chance to walk on railroad tracks or test her bravery, and this is further evidence of the oppression she faces based on her gender. Still, Alice comes to the unfortunate conclusion that all of this makes very little difference since she is only expected to be a wife, a mother, and a housekeeper.

❝ To raise a girl, I realized, you'd need gallons of Social Conditioner with added Spirit Deflator. Rub onto every limb until limp, put the child into a chair and wait until she sets. When appendages harden, you know you have a perfect young woman—so still and silent and sedate that you could wrap your precious one up in cotton wool and put her in a cabinet. Ah, look at the darling geisha behind glass.

Related Characters: Alice Pung / Agheare (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 105-5

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after Alice's parents ground her as punishment for talking to a boy. This quote reflects just how small and sheltered Alice's life is. Her parents rarely let her out of the house as it is, and now she is being punished for merely speaking with a boy. The conversation was completely innocent, and Alice did not initiate it, but her parents still react as if she has done something inappropriate.

When Alice refers to herself as a "darling geisha behind glass," she implies that she only exists to please men. A geisha's main job is to entertain and satisfy men, and this is exactly what Alice feels she is being conditioned to do. Alice's parents punish her because they are needlessly worried that Alice will go too far with a boy and become "tainted goods." If Alice does not remain chaste and pure, then no man will want to marry her. Alice's parents lock her away to protect her from boys. Ironically, these are the same boys that will turn into the men she must remain pure for. Of course, nobody is concerned about the boy's purity, and this underscores the double standard present in Alice's sexist society and culture.

Part 3 Quotes

❝ As the house was being built, my father took his only day off work to drive us to its foundations. This was our weekly Sunday trip, to watch the temple being constructed and to worship the fruits of our labour.

Related Characters: Alice Pung / Agheare (speaker), Kuan Pung

Related Themes:

Page Number: 127

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs as the Pungs' brand-new home is being constructed in Braybrook, another suburb of Melbourne, Australia. First and foremost, this quote confirms that Kuan and Kien have achieved the Great Australian Dream, or the idea that with honest work and dedication, anyone can live a successful life in Australia. At the same time, they are only "successful" in the sense that they can afford a house—not that they are truly accepted by white Australians. Yet they continue to idealize Australian culture and fervently desire to assimilate, as Pung shows when she describes their fancy new house as a "temple" being built where they worship their own potential financial success in this wealthy country.

Nothing could look too peasanty. No dark wooden furniture, but rather white and peach and pale green. Family came to visit, not to celebrate but to do the tour so that they could get home-furnishing ideas for their own houses, so that they too would look modern and not too peasanty.

Related Characters: Alice Pung / Agheare (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 130

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs as the Pungs move into their new home, and it reflects how hard they are trying to assimilate into their new Australian society. As ethnic Teochew originating in the Guangdong Province of China, Kien and Kuan badly want to prove that they are not peasants, and this is why their new home cannot "look too peasanty." They consider their life in the old country dark and devoid of beauty, so they only decorate their new home in pastels, pale colors that also mirror the pale complexions of their Australian neighbors. The Pungs' obsession with becoming as Australian as possible, and the aversion they feel for their previous life, parallels popular stereotypes of Western superiority. The fact that the Pungs' new home is the envy of their family also suggests that the extended Pungs desire this same Australian lifestyle, yet they do not seem to actually enjoy their new home. Their home has become a conversation piece rather than a place where their family comes together to enjoy each other's company, and this is further reinforced when Kien does not allow anyone to turn on the lights or sit on the furniture.

I sat slumped in the back seat of the car. It was true, I couldn't. It wasn't that I couldn't understand the English, it was that I didn't have the Chinese terms in me to be able to explain. I was running out of words.

Related Characters: Alice Pung / Agheare (speaker), Kien Pung

Related Themes:

Page Number: 142

Explanation and Analysis

Kien has just asked Alice to explain a bank statement to her that is written in English, and Kien becomes angry when Alice can't do this simple task. Kien assumes the Alice can't explain the statement to her because she doesn't understand what it means; however, this isn't true. Alice can't explain because she doesn't know enough Chinese, not English. This underscores the duality of Alice's multicultural existence. Alice was born speaking Chinese as her primary language, but the longer she is immersed in Australian culture, the more she is consumed by English words. When Alice says she's "running out of words," what she means is that she is running out of Chinese words, as the English language takes over in her daily life. Alice's inability to adequately converse with her mother in Chinese makes her feel less Chinese and less like a part of her own family. Since she has already established that she doesn't really fit into Australian society either, Alice is unsure of her rightful place and cultural identity.

Part 4 Quotes

"Good. There are some cultures that still do this, aren't there?" Then she turned to me. "For example, the Chinese. They believe in and worship many Gods. Don't you, Alice?" And I did not think of my grandmother and her many gods, the chants, the plastic blue meditation mat, the swirls and whorls of the pattern on it - ten thousand shades of blue like a frenzied ocean, the smell of incense in my pores. The red-faced sword-wielding God whom we kept outside. The good-for-business God whom we called Grandfather. The Goddess of Mercy with her China-white face, her royal porcelain contentedness sitting serenely on a lotus surrounded by bald little babies, pouring water out of a vase. And the dust falling on them in the new house, because we no longer had Granny to maintain the shrine, and we no longer needed to light incense to hide the smell of baby pee rising from the carpets.

Related Characters: Alice Pung / Agheare (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 174

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs as Alice's class is studying *King Lear* in school, and the teacher asks the students what paganism means. One student rightly guesses that it is the act of worshipping many gods, and Alice's teacher assumes that Alice is a pagan simply because she is Chinese. This racist microaggression committed by Alice's teacher assumes that the monotheistic religions dominant within Australian society, mainly Christianity, are superior to paganism (and further that Alice is "pagan" just because she is Chinese). Ironically, paganism is also a word broadly used to describe the religion of peasants, which is exactly the image that Kien and Kuan are trying to escape.

What's more, Alice doesn't know the first thing about paganism. While she is technically a Buddhist, her family hasn't really observed their religion since leaving the old country and assimilating to Australian culture, and their own shrines sit ignored without Huyen Thai to care for them. The Pungs only light ritual incense to hide offensive smells in their home, and when asked directly, it is only Huyen Thai who prays to these gods. Alice's ignorance of her religious heritage is evidence of her assimilation into Australian society, yet her assumed religious beliefs are yet another reason why she still doesn't quite fit in.

"Why don't you get on stage too?" my parents asked me. As if I could just jump on stage with people I had never spoken three words to all year and insert myself gracefully into their picture. And suddenly the reality must have sunk in for my parents, for all the parents on our table, that their children were not more popular, that we did not talk to the beautiful people. It must have hit them hard—that we were still sticking by each other, sticking with each other, and not getting out, not fitting in. They had thought of this new life in simple cause-and-effect terms: that if they worked their backs off to send their children to the grammar school, then we would automatically mingle with the brightest and fairest of the state.

Related Characters: Kuan Pung, Kien Pung (speaker), Alice Pung / Agheare

Related Themes:

Page Number: 186-7

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs during Alice's graduation ceremony, where she sits with her parents at a table full of immigrants and completely avoids her white classmates and teachers. This quote is significant because it represents the moment when Kien and Kuan finally realize that Alice is not fully accepted as an Australian. When Alice states that she does not "mingle with the brightest and fairest of the state," she implies that she does not mingle with the white kids. Alice frequently establishes throughout *Unpolished Gem* that her parents want nothing more than their children to be viewed as Australian instead of Chinese, and it is now clear to them that this is impossible. The fact that Kien and Kuan want their children to be Australian, not Chinese, is yet another reflection of the widespread opinion that Western societies and people are superior to those from the East. Additionally, this quote further establishes Alice as an outsider struggling with the duality of her multicultural identity and existence.

My grandmother was meant to be a part of me forever, so that I would always know that there was a life before me, and a life after me. My grandmother and her stories. What would I do without them? She asserted my existence before I knew I had one—before I was conscious I had a life beyond the present—and she told me my childhood. "Agheare, when you were small you could recite long Teochew songs and poems." "Agheare, when you were small you could speak in Cantonese." It seemed as if I could do anything when I was small. We slept in the same bed, and it was always warm. Now there would be no one left to remind me of my roots, no one to tell me to be proud to be part of a thousand-year-old culture, no one to tell me that I was gold not yellow.

Related Characters: Alice Pung / Agheare (speaker), Huyen Thai

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 193

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after Huyen Thai dies, and it shows the importance of storytelling within Alice's life. Alice's grandmother will live on through her stories, and the life of these stories will outlive even Alice. Huyen Thai's stories

have been an important part of Alice's life for as long as she can remember, and it is through these stories that Alice learns about the old country and what it means to be Chinese. Huyen Thai's deep respect for the Pungs' Chinese heritage is evident in her use of Alice's Chinese name, Agheare, and it is because of Huyen Thai that Alice learns to respect her own culture and history. As the Pungs continue to slowly assimilate into Australian culture, Huyen Thai's stories seem to be the only lasting proof of Alice's Chinese identity. After all, as a child she could speak Cantonese and recite Chinese poetry, skills that she certainly doesn't have anymore.

This quote also serves to underscore how close Alice was with her grandmother, and the void of love and affection that is created by her death. Huyen Thai's assurance that Alice is "gold not yellow" also is a reminder of the racism that is widespread throughout Australian culture. Gold is symbolic of wealth and value, and in this way, Huyen Thai reminds Alice that she is just as good as white Australians.

Part 5 Quotes

❝ At Footscray Retravision, there was a propensity for some mainland Chinese to refuse to buy items made in China. Whenever they said haughtily, "O, zhonggno zuo de wo buyao"—I don't want anything made in China—I couldn't help myself. I would ask with salesgirl innocence, "But sir, aren't you made in China?" Of course, I always had to feign that little giggle that sounded like two brightly coloured balloons rubbing rapidly up against each other. Unlike my younger sisters, who grew up in tastefully bland pastel dresses, I had spent my childhood with a grandmother who packaged me into padded Mao suits and made me aware that I had to defend myself against all the other blandly dressed banana-children—children who were yellow on the outside but believed they could be completely white inside. My grandmother had warned me that those children grew up to become sour, crumple-faced lemons. I now believed her.

Related Characters: Alice Pung / Agheare (speaker), Huyen Thai

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 214

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after the death of Alice's grandmother. It has already been established that Huyen Thai's stories have instilled Alice with a great respect for her Chinese heritage and culture, and this passage is significant because it is a direct reflection of this respect. When Chinese customers come into Kuan's store and reject Chinese items, they also reject their own Chinese identity and heritage by extension. Their refusal of Chinese items suggests that Chinese products aren't as good as products made in Australia or elsewhere. Alice playfully reminds these customers that they are Chinese as well, and while she "giggles" and feigns "salesgirl innocence," Alice takes her Chinese identity very seriously. Because of her childhood spent in a Mao suit, the physical symbol of her heritage and culture within *Unpolished Gem*, Alice is used to standing out as Chinese. Alice again uses the word "yellow" as a derogatory way to describe her Chinese identity, yet she reclaims this word and instead uses it as proof of her pride, and this is further reinforced by the fact that she has not become "sour" and "crumple-faced" attempting to hide her true identity.

❝ I thought, if I were a young man I would be scared of my parents too. Perhaps not my father so much, because he was able to sit down and reason things out. But my mother—there was no way she would be able to understand an alien, let alone an alien her own daughter had chosen. My mother saw the differences as insurmountable—she was only comfortable with the familiar, yet she still believed that Princess Diana was the most dazzling creature ever to grace the earth, and that white women were more beautiful than we could ever be.

Related Characters: Alice Pung / Agheare (speaker), Michael

Related Themes:

Page Number: 242

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after Michael, Alice's white boyfriend, expresses interest in meeting her parents. This passage is significant for several reasons. Of course, Michael is terrified at the prospect of meeting Alice's parents, and he initially seems more worried about Kuan, Alice's father. Michael's assumptions that Kuan is the scarier of the two, and his belief that Kuan's opinion is more important in the ultimate approval of Michael, reflects a subtle sexism that holds men as more powerful and formidable than women. However, nothing could be further from the truth in Alice's family. On the contrary, it is Kien who ultimately must

approve of Michael, which she will never do because she considers their cultural differences "insurmountable." Kien would rather her daughter marry a Chinese man. However, when Alice points out that Kien believes white women are more beautiful than Chinese women, she exposes her mother as contradicting herself in her prejudices.

Epilogue Quotes

❝ Then, four weeks later, I decided that one of the little ones had to go. It was time. I imagined they were quivering in their cotton-wool padded prison, I was so excited. But when the drawer was opened—horror of all horrors, worse than finding my fortunes furtively stolen—ants spilled out and the bunny had melted and the goo that gushed from the eggs had wrecked my box. I didn't care about the ants that would crawl up my arms, I pulled the whole drawer out of the cupboard and dug my hands in deep. While Alexander and Andrew watched, I started pulling out each egg one by one—or what was left of them—trying in desperation to find one that was not insect-infested, trying to sort through the foil and frustration, not wanting to believe that these squished tragedies were once my pride and joy, the things I had looked forward to most in the world for more than four weeks.

Related Characters: Alice Pung / Agheare (speaker), Huyen Thai, Alexander Pung

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 281

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs at the end of *Unpolished Gem*, when Alice reminisces about the chocolates wrapped in gold foil that her grandmother had given to her as a child. Alice had hidden them away, just as her mother has always taught her to do with cherished items, but when she goes to eat them, they are ruined. This passage is significant because it serves as one final warning about the potential dangers of keeping valuables hidden. Alice's mother is constantly worried that expensive things will be stolen, but as Alice points out, wasting her chocolates from disuse is worse than having them stolen. In this way, Alice effectively argues against hiding away valuable things instead of celebrating them. Alice's parents have effectively kept *her* locked away within their strict and confining home, and in the process, they nearly lose her. Like the chocolates, Alice is her parents' pride and joy—their most valued possession—but their overbearing nature has metaphorically turned her into a "squished tragedy." With this passage, Alice argues the importance of her freedom, and her desire for her parents to respect her voice and decisions.

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.

PROLOGUE

Alice Pung begins her story at a marketplace in Footscray, a suburb of Melbourne, Australia, and she is quick to point out that her story "does not begin on a boat." Alice's father, Kuan, is shopping at the market full of "fat pigs and thin people," and all around him migrants negotiate in broken English. Alice's mother, Kien, is not at the market—she is in an Australian hospital waiting to give birth to Alice.

Alice's desire to make plain that her family does not arrive on a boat dispels popular racist stereotypes that all Asians immigrate via boat. The assumption that all Asians arrive on boats implies that Asians are less advanced and civilized than those living in the Western societies they immigrate to.

As Kuan walks through the market, the ground is saturated with watered-down blood from the butchers' cleaning hoses, and he thinks about pig's blood jelly. Kuan loves the jelly, but now he thinks about the unsanitary way the blood is collected from a hanging carcass, allowing urine and other unappetizing bodily fluids to drain into the blood and become part of the jelly. He does not think about his former life in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, where he frequently ate food contaminated with dirt and disease.

Kuan's thoughts about the pig's blood jelly reflect his assimilation as well as the differences between Australian and Cambodian society. By this point, he has only been in Australia for roughly one month, yet his eating habits are already changing. Kuan could not afford to be a picky eater in Cambodia—food was far too scarce—but in Australia he has the luxury of turning down food he considers unsanitary or unappetizing.

The shoppers and vendors speak a wide variety of languages, and many do not understand each other. In order to communicate, they shout and make hand gestures, poking their fingers in the direction of their desired commodity. Kuan notes that "the loudest pokers always win, and the loudest pokers are usually women."

The multiple languages spoken at the market underscore the diversity within Australia's Asian community. These languages also highlight the power of words to divide and exclude, while the hand gestures and finger pointing suggest that all communication is valuable, even the non-verbal kind.

Kuan leaves the Footscray market after purchasing a bag of pigs' feet and walks through the crowd of people. Mothers are busy scolding their children and yelling at them to not swallow their chewing gum. In this "wondrous new country," children and mothers worry about chewing gum instead of stepping on "a condensed milk tin filled with ammunition."

The mothers' benign worry over chewing gum emphasizes the stark differences between Australian and Cambodian society. Condensed milk was a popular field ration during the Vietnam War, and a surplus of empty cans made it an ideal container for explosives.

As Kuan watches the mothers and their children, he wonders if his new baby will be a boy or a girl. He smiles to himself as he pushes the button on the traffic light and remembers the first time that he "encountered these ticking poles."

Typically, Chinese culture values boys over girls; however, Kuan's smile suggests that he does not hold to this this opinion—he will be happy either way. Instead, he values the idea of family.

PART 1

Alice's story jumps back to the previous month, when Kuan and Kien first arrive in Australia with Kuan's mother, Huyen Thai, and his sister, Que. The Pungs are fascinated as they walk down the street. "Wah! Look at that!" says Alice's grandmother as she takes in the new sights and sounds. The family is decked out in clothes from the local St. Vincent De Paul thrift shop, expect for Alice's grandmother, who wears a handsewn "pyjama suit." They walk proudly down the street.

The Pungs' fascination with their new Australian surroundings is a reflection of their culture shock. At this point in time, Cambodia is poor and underdeveloped compared to Australia, and they are unaccustomed to such abundant wealth. They even consider their second-hand clothes a luxury, except for Huyen Thai, whose traditional hand-made clothes reflect her pride in her Chinese heritage.

Huyen Thai watches in amazement as an old man pushes a button on the traffic light and the cars stop, allowing him to safely cross the street. Kien notices a group of young girls do the same nearby. "Wah!" she cries. As Kuan pushes the button and declares it simple, he tells the women not to "gawk like Guangzhou peasants." They watch as the "little Red Man" disappears and the "little Green Man" appears.

As ethnic Teochew Chinese, the Pungs are *Guangzhou peasants, and Kuan's comment observes widespread racist assumptions that Western societies and people are superior to those in the East.Here, Kuan implies that just because they are Chinese, they do not fit in Australia's Western society.*

Back in Cambodia, cars do not yield to people. Only the wealthy can afford to drive, and those people do whatever they want. To Kuan and his family, the "little Green Man is an eternal symbol of government existing to serve and protect."

This too underscores the differences between Cambodia and Australia. The Cambodian government systematically oppresses and kills citizens, but in Australia the government is (seemingly) committed to their safety.

Alice notes that much in Australia is "taken-for-granted." The people do not hide, there are no bombs, and there are no lepers. There are no soldiers in the streets, and most Australians have never even heard of Pol Pot, "Brother Number One in Socialist Cambodia." To Australians, Pol Pot "sounds like an Eastern European stew," one "made with 100% fresh-ground suffering."

Pol Pot is the leader of the Khmer Rouge regime, a Communist party that has taken over Cambodia and perpetrated a country-wide genocide. The fact that Australians think Pol Pot is an Eastern European stew reflects Australian ignorance of cultures that are non-Western.

At the Migrant Hostel, there is a never-ending supply of sugar packets and jam at the breakfast table, and water flows from a tap. As the Pungs first arrive in Australia Alice says, "there are many wahs of wonder." On their way to declare Australian citizenship, Kuan memorizes the names of the streets— "King Street, William Street, Queen Street, Elizabeth Street"—and when they approach an escalator, Kien refuses to step on the moving track.

In Cambodia there are widespread hardships and starvation, and the ample supply of sugar and jam is unheard of to the Pungs. As a former territory of the British Empire, the names of the Australian streets reflect the history of European colonialism and assumptions of Western superiority.

The first time Kien and Huyen Thai shop in an Australian supermarket, they are overwhelmed by the size, selection, and cleanliness of the store. "Ay, stop gawking like such peasants," Que says. This is Que's second trip to the market, and she is quickly becoming an expert. Kien thinks of those left behind in Cambodia and is shocked to find the food so cheap. The women purchase a few cans of meat for fifty cents apiece and return to their new home in Footscray.

Que's comment again suggests that they should be ashamed of who they are, which further perpetuates racist notions of Western superiority. Their culture shock in the Australian grocery store also underscores the corruption of the Cambodian government. The price of food under Pol Pot's reign is marked up in an effort to starve the people.

At home, Kien cuts the meat and prepares a stir-fry. "It smells so good," says Que as she piles the hot food on a plate. That night while watching television, the women see an advertisement for the canned meat and realize it is dog food. "How lucky to be a dog in this country!" Kien proclaims. She smiles and rubs her pregnant belly. "Good stuff," she thinks.

This too underscores the differences between Australian and Cambodian society—Australian dogs eat better than Cambodian people, and in this moment, Kien knows that her baby will have a good life and not struggle to survive in the same way she has.

Later, as Kuan explains to the other immigrants at the hostel that they are meant to sleep *under* the bedsheets, not on top, he is told he is needed at the hospital. Kuan nearly has "a heart attack," and is stunned to discover the doctors only want him to be present for the birth of his baby. Cambodian fathers usually wait until "the whole messy business is over" before seeing their newborn children—then they find out whether "the child has the desired dangly bits."

The immigrants sleep on top of the sheets because the beds are made too nicely and they don't want to mess them up, again showing their culture shock. Kuan assumes that there is something wrong with Kien when he is summoned to the hospital, reflecting the sexist nature of Cambodian society as Pung describes it—men are only concerned with whether or not they have a son.

When Kien wakes in the hospital, she notices how clean it looks and smells. The colorful food on a nearby tray looks like a place setting for a party, and when she is handed her baby, she is "the most crumple-faced walnut she has ever seen." Alice is the first Chinese baby the hospital workers have ever seen, and they all marvel at her full head of hair. The baby refuses to take Kien's milk, so she feeds her a bit of coffee and condensed milk to "shut her up" and goes to sleep.

If Kien were to have given birth in Cambodia or in the Thai refugee camp, her experience would obviously be much different. Likely, she would have given birth at home—or whatever passed for home at the moment—with the aid of a relative or maybe a midwife. The fact that Alice is the first Chinese baby the hospital workers have ever seen further underscores how out of place the Pungs are in Australian society.

Later, Huyen Thai asks Kuan what he plans to name his child. She hates people who don't give their children Chinese names. "Do they really think that new whitewashed names will make the world outside see that yellow Rose is just as radiant a flower as the white Daisy?" she wonders. Kuan decides that his daughter's Chinese name will be Agheare (translation Good News) because she has been born into Paradise.

This too reflects Huyen Thai's pride and commitment to her Chinese heritage, but she is also more realistic about how they will be accepted within Australian society. Kuan is convinced that his new baby will enjoy all the perks of this "Paradise," but Huyen Thai is less optimistic—she knows their skin color will always be considered.

Kuan must also give his daughter an English name "that her future legions of white-faced friends will remember." He recalls reading a story translated from English many years ago in which a little girl finds herself in a strange and magical land. This new land of Australia is also a "Wonder Land," so Kuan decides to name his daughter Alice. "Ay, this girl is going to have a good life indeed!" declares Huyen Thai.

Kuan is optimistic that his child will be fully accepted in Australian society. He assumes that Alice will have "legions" of white friends, which is not the case. Alice spends her childhood and adolescence as an outsider, and while Australia is certainly a safer place to live compared to Cambodia, she still suffers because of it. Alice's name and her connection to Lewis Carroll's story introduce the importance of storytelling in Unpolished Gem.

A few years later, the Pungs move into their first home in Braybrook. Alice says, "there is no such thing as tacky cheap knick-knacks" "for Wah-sers like us." Their home is filled with colorful plastic baskets and figurines, and plastic sandals are piled in every corner so no one's feet are ever bare. Kuan reminds his family frequently that they "are wealthy beyond measure." Even the richest people in Phnom Penh don't live this well, he says. The family's furniture, which was donated by a local charity, is better than what can be bought in Cambodia.

This too underscores the differences between Cambodian and Australian society. Life in Cambodia)as Pung describes it) is drab and tragic, and based only on necessities that often go unmet. The Pungs buy tacky knick-knacks simply because they are pretty, which is considered an extreme luxury in Cambodian society at this time. Clearly, the Pungs are not rich, but they are by Phnom Penh (the capital of Cambodia) standards.

Kien takes great care decorating the rooms of the house, and everything is just as she imagined it would be. The only downfall to her new life is her mother-in-law, Huyen Thai, who is "an unfortunate permanent fixture." Kien tells Alice that pretty things must not always be expensive, but expensive things "must be kept hidden in case of burglars." Kien can't understand people who display antiques and valuables.

Kien's advice to hide expensive things reflects her experiences in Cambodia. Under Pol Pot's Communist regime, all personal possessions, especially those of value, were confiscated by the government. If one was lucky enough to hold on to something of value, it had to be kept hidden and secret. Huyen Thai is a "permanent fixture" in Kien's life because multiple generations of Pungs live under the same roof, which is a reflection of the importance of family within Chinese culture.

When Alice comes home from kindergarten with crafts made from macaroni noodles and construction paper, Kien, Huyen Thai, and Que "wah over it" and display each piece prominently. Alice and her brother, Alexander, make paper chains out of shopping advertisements from the newspaper during Christmastime and hang them throughout the house. "Isn't this much better than white paper?" Huyen Thai cries, impressed with the multitude of colors.

This image is particularly powerful because Alice's art project is made from food. Food would never be put to such a useless end as a child's art project in Cambodia, and it reflects their wealth in this new world. The Pungs are Buddhists, and the fact that they observe Christmas is also evidence of the Pungs' assimilation; however, Huyen Thai's preference for colorful paper over white paper—which symbolically represents Australian culture and society—is a reflection of her pride in their Chinese heritage and identity.

From the outside, "you cannot tell that this is a Chinese house," Alice says. There is no telltale "I Ching mirror" or cumquat trees for luck. The Pungs are trying to assimilate, and they don't want to bring shame to their people by "growing chickens in the backyard or keeping goats as pets." Instead of Chinese plants and herbs like mint and lemongrass, the Pungs grow geraniums and white oleander.

Instead of goats and chickens—animals that produce food and sustain life—the Pungs grow poisonous flowers. White oleander is toxic and deadly if ingested, and since the word "white" is frequently associated with Australian society in Unpolished Gem, *this passage implies that this society is, in a sense, toxic as well.*

When Kien's sisters, Ly and Sim, arrive from Cambodia, Alice comes "face to face" with what she calls "true cutting-edge Chinese chic." The women are glamourous and wear dangly **gold** jewelry and colorful polyester suits, the "silk that requires less ironing." Their apartment at the housing commission is better than the apartments in the Hong Kong soap operas that Kien and Huyen Thai buy from the illegitimate video shops in town.

Alice is not use to women like Ly and Sim because Kien doesn't dress this way. She never wears gold, a symbol of wealth and security within Unpolished Gem, *and she doesn't wear colorful clothes. Until this point, Alice assumes that all Chinese women dress like her mother. The bootleg Hong Kong soap operas, a reflection of Alice's Chinese heritage and identity, underscore her feelings of illegitimacy within Australia's whitewashed society.*

The apartments at the housing commission overlook a park, and they have cupboards full of coffee, sweetened condensed milk, and packages of instant noodles. Ly and Sim paint their nails with polish they paid only twenty cents for, and they curl their hair with their friends who are training to become hairdressers.

This passage again underscores the difference between Australia and Cambodia. Parks are unheard of under Pol Pot's tyrannical reign and food is scarce. Ly and Sim's cupboards are full of food, and they still have money to spend on beauty products. Furthermore, women in Cambodia are not always given the opportunity for vocational training, such as becoming a hairdresser.

Ly and Sim talk about local men, always referring to "someone's son or someone's male relative." They don't use first names, Alice notes, because the men "do not exist in isolation of their family." No one does, she says. As the aunts apply their makeup and gossip about men, "there is no fear of not finding a family." The women are "so trusting," and because their new Australian government "takes such good care of them," they believe "all Australians are alike."

Ly and Sim's references to men as "someone's male relative" underscores the importance of family within Chinese culture. The individual identities of the men are not as important as who their families are. Alice's mention that the women are "trusting" foreshadows the upcoming sexual assault of Ly's friend at the hands of an Australian man.

Once, Alice recalls, Ly's friend had forgotten the number of Ly's apartment and knocked on a stranger's door to ask to use their telephone. "Fon, fon?" she asked, holding her hand to her ear like a telephone. An Australian man let her in, and as she was dialing, he snuck up behind her, poked her bottom and held "his front up against her back." She immediately ran, leaving behind the shoes she had taken off at the door, and ran directly into Ly in the stairwell of the housing commission. Both women realized they were "not so safe here." Even though they were "young and lovely," Alice says, "they were not invincible."

There is clearly a language barrier between Ly's friend's and the Australian man, and her use of gestures highlights the nonverbal aspects of communication that Alice Pung explores throughout her memoir. The man's sexual assault of Ly's friend underscores the gender inequality within Australian society—not just in Cambodia. He attempts to touch her sexually without her explicit permission, a move that implies his assumed power over her.

In the meantime, as Alice grows up, Kien teaches her to respect her elders and instills in her a sense of "filial piety" that "permeates through every pore." At dinner, they all wait for Huyen Thai to pick up her chopsticks before they begin to eat, and Alice's grandmother frequently tells stories about Kuan and his siblings waiting for her before they ate as well. She claims that if her children did not hold their bowls properly, they would beg, "Give me a whack over the knuckles if you catch me doing that again!" To Huyen Thai, her story is proof she had raised her children well, but as Alice watches her father smile, she doubts that it is true.

The Pungs' deep respect for Huyen Thai and other elders is evidence of their Chinese culture. Filial piety—or the act of revering one's family, especially one's parents and grandparents—is considered a primary virtue of Buddhist ethics. Huyan Thai's story about her children's manners is evidence of her love for storytelling, and the power of storytelling to teach lessons and relay cultural values and practices.

Before she eats, Huyen Thai says grace and prays to Buddha to bless "Father Government," who treats them "better than our sons do." She asks Alice to write a thank-you letter to the government for taking care of them. To Huyen Thai, "Father Government" cares for them because "Motherland China didn't want them."

Huyen Thai's prayer to Buddha underscores her expectations of the respect she deserves as an elder. Furthermore, as a political refugee, Huyen Thai feels as if they have been rejected by their homeland.

The only Pung who is not thankful for Father Government is Kien. Huyen Thai prevents Kien from enjoying the government's "everlasting abundance," and Kuan is forever loyal to his mother. Huyen Thai controls all of the Pungs' money, and all government checks are turned over to her. Instead of writing a letter to the government, Kien writes her parents in Cambodia, but she doesn't tell them how miserable she is because Huyen Thai handles all the mail.

In Huyen Thai's Chinese culture, women often handle the finances, and as Kien's mother-in-law, she assumes this power over Kien and uses it to control her and make her unhappy. Kien suffers in silence because Huyen Thai controls every aspect of her life—right down to the mail.

The next day, Kien gives the letter to Huyen Thai to mail. The letter is full of meaningless and banal words, and Kien wishes that she could write what she really feels—that this family treats her like a "servant." "Ma, why did you let me go?" Kien thinks as she hands her mother-in-law the envelope.

This is evidence of Kien's deep unhappiness in Australia. At times, she thinks that she could be happier living back in Cambodia and wishes that her parents had not agreed to her marriage and emigration.

Later, Huyen Thai and Alice stand in line outside the bank to collect Huyen Thai's "old people's **gold**." The others standing in line are sullen and unhappy, and Alice's grandmother remarks on their sour faces. These people don't know how good they have it, she says, "just like your mother." Huyen Thai is so happy, she decides to do a good act to "spread good karma."

Gold serves as a symbol for wealth and security within Unpolished Gem, *and Huyen Thai's government stipend means that she will always be taken care of. Huyen Thai's underhanded comment about Kien underscores her strained relationship with her daughter-in-law.*

At a pet shop, Huyen Thai buys a fish and a red plastic bucket and then boards a bus. She tells Alice that they are going to let the fish go because Buddha has blessed them. After a short ride, they get off the bus and Alice's grandmother dumps the bucket into a muddy riverbed. After the terrible years of Pol Pot, Huyen Thai says, "Father Government is so good to us now!"

The red bucket highlights the family's preference for bright colors, and Huyen Thai's actions in releasing the fish reflect her Buddhist belief in karma. By doing a good deed—that is, letting the fish free—she is repaying the universe for the goodness of "Father Government."

Back at home, Huyen Thai divides all the money into separate piles and gives Kien just enough to purchase groceries. As Kien shops the next day, she worries about what kind of woman Alice will grow up to be. Huyen Thai constantly spends time with the child, and even though Kien knows that it is better for Alice to have many people who love her, she resents not being able to spend more time with her daughter. Kien wants Alice to be hers alone, but still she thinks it is "better the girl go to the other side of the Served rather than stay on the side of the servants."

Huyen Thai's division of the money is further evidence of her control within the Pung family. Kien feels stifled and oppressed by her family. She has already established that they treat her like a servant, and she doesn't want Alice to lead the same life. Ironically, Kien does treat Alice like a household servant when she gets older, but for now, she wants her daughter's life to be better than her own, even if that means spending time with her grandmother.

Kien grows upset with Alice for talking with Huyen Thai behind her back. "You are so evil," Kien tells Alice, threatening to take Alexander and run away. When Alice begs her to stay, Kien threatens to commit suicide. "You will never see me again!" she cries, calling Alice a "word-spreader."

Alice's status as a "word-spreader" highlights the power of words to divide and exclude. The negative words spoken by Kien and Huyen Thai, along with Alice's repetition of them, divide the Pung family and create dissent.

That night, Alice stays awake listening for sounds of Kien and Alexander's departure. Thankfully, the next morning she wakes to find her mother and brother still there. "I don't like word-spreaders," Kien says. Alice is stuck. If she stops telling Huyen Thai things, the girl's grandmother will stop loving her, and Kien is sure to stop loving Alice as well if she doesn't tell her things about Huyen Thai.

This passage underscores the psychological damage that Kien and Huyen Thai's gossip has on Alice. She is convinced her mother will leave her, yet she is worried that neither her mother nor her grandmother will love her if she stops spreading their hateful words.

Huyen Thai tells Alice that Kien doesn't love her children because she works in the garage making jewelry instead of taking care of them, which is "the greatest role of a woman." Alice's grandmother makes Alice's breakfast each morning and criticizes the clothing Kien has purchased for her—they aren't warm enough, she says. Instead, she dresses Alice in a padded **Mao suit** sent from Hong Kong.

The padded Mao suit is a physical symbol of Alice's Chinese culture, and it is one of the reasons why she doesn't fit into Australian society. Huyen Thai's criticism of Kien because she works out of the home underpins the sexist nature of their culture—it is assumed that Kien will stay home and care for the children because she is a woman.

Kien is constantly unhappy, and when Alice asks her why she is so sad, she tells Alice she will understand only once she grows up and has a mother-in-law. "Constantly sighing and lying and dying—that is what being a Chinese woman means," Alice thinks, "and I want nothing to do with it."

To Alice, being a Chinese woman means that she must constantly suffer because of the restrictions imposed on her gender, just like her mother does.

In the meantime, the word-spreading continues. Huyen Thai tells Alice that Kien was not Kuan's first fiancée, and Kien tells Alice that Huyen Thai once gave away a son. "Words with bones in them," Huyen Thai calls the word-spreading, and they are enough to "make the other person fall flat on their back and die."

Alice's comparison of Huyen Thai's words to bones serves as a compelling metaphor for the power of words and language to inflict actual pain. Huyen Thai's words are not harmless; instead, her words absolutely can hurt Kien, which by extension hurts Alice as well.

Huyen Thai tells Alice stories about Cambodia, where she was regarded as a woman who "possessed healing powers." Her seven children, five of them boys, were proof of her power, and children everywhere were drawn to her. Her husband, An Pung, thought her power nonsense—he wanted "nothing to do with such prosaic things." As a man, his job was only to "plant the seed." If the children turned out badly, it was no fault of his.

An Pung's opinion of Huyen Thai's power underscores gender inequality within Chinese culture. He considers child-rearing too simple a task for a man, and instead leaves this entirely to his wife. Beyond sex and the actual conception of a child, An takes zero responsibility in raising his children.

Huyen Thai mothered all the children living nearby, and they took to calling her "Ma." An would scoff at his wife's collection of children and reminded her of their fourth boy. "Fourth boy was the past!" she yelled at her husband. "Indeed," he said, "bundling up our baby like that and setting off to sell him for a useless daughter!"

An's use of the word "useless" to describe a daughter is further evidence of the sexist nature of their culture. He cares very little that Huyen Thai's heart was broken with the death of their two daughters—he cares only about fathering sons, which he sees as an outward reflection of his own virility and masculinity.

As the mother of five sons, Huyen Thai desired a daughter "above all else." Crying, she told An that she only traded the children to save money. After all, daughters cost less to feed. She did eventually get their son back, but An refused to keep living with her. He had begun to stay with his first wife, a marriage which had been arranged by his father. An had married Huyen Thai because he loved her, even though he couldn't really afford it, and he wondered if it was all worth it, "considering the crazy things this second wife did."

Huyen Thai's excuse that girls cost less to raise than boys also suggests that girls are worth less than their male counterparts. Whatever her motivation, Huyen Thai's attempt to swap her child with another is extreme, and the fact that An does not leave her after does imply that he deeply loves her. An and Huyen Thai's love, along with Kuan and Kien's, sets the standard for love within Alice's own life.

An was bored living with his first wife. The daughters he shared with her were "dull things," and she frequently complained that he went too often to Huyen Thai's house. "If you could give me sons, then I wouldn't have to go over there!" he yelled at her. By the time Huyen Thai gave birth to their sixth son, An grew nervous with the amount of power his wife had over their children. He began to devise a "plan to recruit his own army," but "like all his plans," whether he was able to pull it off depended on Huyen Thai, and "this irritated him to no end."

Again, this reflects the sexist nature of An's Chinese culture. He is bored by his daughters because they are girls, and he uses the fact that his first wife only gave birth to girls over as a form of punishment by suggesting that he wouldn't have taken a second wife if she had been able to give him sons. Still, An is, to some extent, powerless against Huyen Thai, which serves to challenge stereotypical gender roles. An's irritation also implies his deep love for his second wife—loving her means he also gives up some of his masculine power, which he is willing to do even though he doesn't like it.

Soon after, An snatched Huyen Thai's newborn son and gave him to his first wife. "He took my son to the Other Side!" she yelled, plotting to get him back. She even went so far as to go to the home of the first wife, but she came back "empty-handed." Alice finds her grandmother's story difficult to believe. How could she let her own child be taken away? Alice doesn't know, but she does know that her grandmother never took her son back, and years later a strange man from Macau appears at Huyen Thai's funeral.

Alice can't reconcile the Huyen Thai she knows with a woman who would allow her boy to live as another woman's son; however, her obvious acquiescence to An's plan suggests that she too respects the importance of sons within Chinese culture and family. After all, she has been blessed with six sons while An's first wife doesn't have any.

PART 2

"Woe!" cries Huyen Thai. "Why do you smell like piss?" she asks Alice. Alice tells her she smells like urine because she has peed her pants. Alice's grandmother asks why she didn't just ask her teacher to use the bathroom. Alice doesn't want to talk about school, but she knows that her grandmother will not tell her parents her secrets, so she figures it is safe to tell.

Alice doesn't want her parents to know about school because then they will know that she doesn't fit in. Both Kuan and Kien badly want Alice to be an Australian and to have opportunities that were not afforded to them, but Alice has learned that being an Australian is more than simply being born on Australian soil.

That day had been kindergarten picture day at school and Alice was, as usual, wearing a padded **Mao suit**. Despite the warm spring weather, Huyen Thai still worried that Alice would "freeze like the communist peasants from the Middle Kingdom." The teachers wanted Alice to slide down a slide for the photo, but she worried that she would leave a "streak of incontinence," and she refused. She spent the day indoors, standing at an art easel so she wouldn't have to sit down in her wet suit. When the school pictures are developed and the only shots of Alice are at the easel, Kien and Kuan proudly proclaim, "We have an artist in the family!"

Kien and Kuan see only what they want to. They fail to see within the photo that Alice is miserable and feels like an outsider. Her Mao suit is a physical symbol of Alice's differences from her white classmates. Like the Mao suit, which is incompatible with Australia's climate, Alice too is out of place in her whitewashed Western school, and her incontinence is a reflection of the humiliation that she feels.

That night, in the queen-size bed they share, Huyen Thai asks Alice why she doesn't tell the teacher she needs to use the bathroom. "Do you know how?" she asks. Alice confirms she does, and even though she tells her grandmother that she doesn't know why she doesn't ask, she knows that it is because she is afraid. Just as Alice thinks that her grandmother has fallen asleep, Huyen Thai begins to tell a story.

The Pungs speak Chinese at home and English is a second language for Alice, which further serves to alienate her from her English-speaking classmates. Alice is afraid to ask her teacher to use the bathroom because their language differences make her feel like an outsider.

Huyen Thai tells Alice that when her own children were young, they had only one mattress. She slept on the mattress with her five sons, and each night she would be woken by wet clothes. She tells Alice that she is glad Alice doesn't have a "night-time bladder," but that she must learn to ask to use the bathroom if she wants to "be able to make some friends."

Of course, Alice's lack of friends has nothing to do with her incontinence. Most of Alice's friends throughout the book are also immigrants, which highlights the difficulties they encounter being accepted by Australia's white society.

School picture day is not the last time Alice "fills her pants," and it happens again in the second grade. Alice's class is learning about Australian History, and they are having a "colonial dress-up parade" the next day. She rummages through boxes of old clothes looking for an ankle-length dress, but she knows she will never find one in her home. So, of course, "the **Mao suit** comes out," Alice says.

Again, the Mao suit represents Alice's Chinese heritage, and Alice wearing the suit during a parade to observe colonial history is highly ironic. Historically, colonialism has sought to erase and marginalize Eastern cultures, which makes the Mao suit during the parade a powerful image.

At school, the other children ask Alice why she is wearing pajamas, and when they line up for the parade, the teacher doesn't give her an apron like the rest of the girls. "No, Alice, I don't think you need one," she says. Alice is distraught. She will be the only girl without an apron, and she wants it to cover her pajamas pants. "Excuse me, Miss Higgins," Alice says to her teacher. "I need to go to the toilet." Instead of friends, Alice thinks, "I bring home soiled washing."

Alice feels unincluded because she is denied an apron, but worse, she is made to feel like a boy because she isn't wearing a dress. While this underscores the cultural differences between Alice and her classmates, it also reflects the sexist nature of Australian society as well, which assumes that women must be ladylike and wear a dress.

Sometime later, Alice goes to visit Chia Ngo Hung, Kien's mother, whom Alice calls "Outside Ma," and the two sit and pick lice from Alice's head. She has come to Outside Ma's because no one else wants her around because of the nits. Outside Ma never asks about school or friends, and Alice is thankful for her silence.

The fact that no one else wants to deal with Alice and her lice increases her feelings of isolation and rejection, even within her own family. At least at Outside Ma's, Alice isn't forced to talk about how she doesn't fit in.

Both of Kien's parents had come from Cambodia once their immigration papers were processed, and they arrived in Australia wearing brand new **Mao suits**. Chia Teng, Kien's father, quickly turned his new backyard into a Chinese vegetable garden, and he wakes at six each morning to tend to his plants. Outside Ma still makes all their clothes, including their underwear, and they keep all their money buried in Nescafé jars in the backyard.

Unlike Alice's immediate family, Kien's parent's have not tried to assimilate to Australian culture. Their Mao suits again are symbolic of their Chinese heritage, and their Chinese vegetable garden implies that they do not eat local cuisine. They keep their money buried because the Cambodian government confiscated everything of value, and Alice's grandparents have learned to be cautious and hide their money.

The next day, Kien applies lice treatment to Alice's head that "smells like cat-piss." It must be left on for twelve hours, and Alice is forced to go to school with the treatment still in her hair. The treatment doesn't work, and Kien has no choice but to take her to a salon. She has the hairdresser give Alice a perm, hoping that it will kill the nits. Sitting in the car afterwards, Alice feels like a "Chinese Ronald McDonald, minus the Happy Times."

Alice's perm serves to further humiliate her. Her persistent nits have already made her even more of an outcast, and Alice's classmates are sure to know why her mother has insisted she get a perm. The references to Ronald McDonald emphasize the fact that she can't really relate to popular Western icons or social representations.

When Kuan tells Huyen Thai that he is going to open an electronics store, she thinks he is crazy. An Asian grocery store is better, she says, but he is not convinced. He has no desire to sell soy sauce, so he buys a small shop with no bathroom and begins selling watches, batteries, and radios. Local gangs constantly harass him for money, and they frequently steal from him. "Just like in Cambodia," he says.

To Huyen Thai, an Asian grocery store is a better fit for Kuan, a Chinese man. Kuan, however, is committed to assimilating to Australian society, which is why he would rather open an electronics store.

A shop-to-shop supplier often stops by Kuan's shop to sell cheap adaptor plugs. Kuan thinks the adaptors are too cheap and is leery about buying them. "How do you make a profit?" he asks. The supplier tells Kuan that he steals the adaptors from big stores, like Kmart, and then sells them cheap. Six months later, when Kuan becomes a Retravision franchise, he tells the supplier that he can no longer order from door-to-door suppliers.

Kuan's hesitance to buy from the shady supplier is a reflection of his own good nature and basic decency. Kuan is an honest business owner and family man, and he has no desire to steal from anyone just to get ahead. Instead, Kuan is dedicated to the Australian Dream—the belief that with hard work and honest dedication, he can succeed in Australia.

Kien continues to work making jewelry in the Pungs' garage. She fires up her kiln early in the morning and works late into the night. Kien pours **gold** into plaster molds and waits for it to harden, and then she polishes the jewelry by hand. Most customers order 24-carat gold, but why they would want to wear the pale metal is beyond Kien.

Gold represents wealth and security within Unpolished Gem, *and Kien does not wear gold jewelry because she believes that anything of value should be hidden to keep it safe from burglars. To Kien, wearing gold as visible jewelry is an unnecessary risk.*

After making the jewelry, Kien delivers her products to the shops in Footscray and the surrounding areas. Occasionally, her customers cannot pay, or they owe her **gold** and don't have it. She "relies only on their promises," which she keeps written on scrap paper in her purse.

Kien is illiterate, yet her ability to keep track of her accounts despite this is a testament to her capabilities. In this way, Kien challenges popular sexist stereotypes, both within her Chinese culture and Australian society, that assume women are less capable than men.

Kien "negotiates, supplies, markets, and chases up creditors," all without speaking English, but she never considers herself a businesswoman. The representatives from Sony who come to sell televisions to Kuan are businesspeople, but she is a "housewife with a handbag filled with **gold** wrapped in McDonald's napkins."

Kien's low opinion of herself reflects her sexist society. She doesn't believe that her efforts constitute a business despite much evidence to the contrary.

Soon, Kien becomes pregnant again. This time she is constantly sick and swollen, yet Kien insists on continuing to work. Que decides that it will be easier if Huyen Thai comes to live with her, and Alice's grandmother soon moves out of their house. Without Huyen Thai, Alice begins to look "disheveled," with messy hair and clothing, and there is nobody to make her eggs in the morning.

Kien's refusal to stay home and care for her children and home serves to challenge popular gender stereotypes. Both Kien's culture and her Australian society assume that children and the home are the responsibility of women, yet she refuses to follow this unwritten rule.

The Pungs' house turns dark and boring, and nobody comes to visit. During that year, Alice learns "to be alone" and realizes how unsocial her family is. She hardly ever goes outside, and one day while exploring a cupboard under the stairs, she finds human hair hidden in Huyen Thai's old Buddha shrine.

The dark and isolated nature of the Pungs' home mirrors Alice's own isolation. Her parents want her to fit in, yet they do very little to ensure that she does.

When Huyen Thai stops by a few weeks later to gather more of her things, Alice asks her about the hair in the Buddha shrine. "Ah," Huyen Thai says. "This hair is your Auntie Que's." She tells Alice that whenever she cut her daughter's hair, she would keep a piece.

The fact that Huyen Thai saves Que's hair is proof of her deep love for her daughters. Huyen Thai begins a tradition of keeping locks of her daughters' hair when her first daughter tragically dies, and she continues this with Que.

Back in Cambodia, Alice says, Huyen Thai's first two babies, both girls, died when they were just young. After her grandmother gave birth to her first daughter, An Pung was "inconsolable." Usually, in Chinese culture, when a baby turns one month old, they are considered one year old because the time in the womb is counted as well, but there was no celebration for this baby. Three months later, the baby fell ill and died quietly in the night. Huyen Thai cut a small piece of the baby's hair before burying her.

An is "inconsolable" because he had hoped that Huyen Thai would give birth to a son. He doesn't celebrate her birth like he would a boy, which is also evidence of his disappointment. Again, Huyen Thai cuts a lock of her hair as a keepsake, and she continues this tradition with Que.

Less than a year later, Huyen Thai was pregnant again. She gave birth to another girl and An thought for sure he was cursed. Huyen Thai named her MeiHuay, beautiful flower, but called her "Little Brother." This new baby had "sturdy legs" and a "strong face," and everyone soon began calling her Little Brother as well. An was angered by the name. "She's built like a boy," he said, "and now you've given her that terrible name. She's going to grow up like a boy if you're not careful, and then no one will want her."

An believes he is cursed because he can't seem to father a son, and this is why MeiHuay's nickname, Little Brother, is so ironic. All of the qualities that might make a boy desirable, such as a strong build and assertive personality, are exactly what make Little Brother undesirable in the eyes of her father and their culture.

Little Brother was very mischievous, and Huyen Thai had a difficult time keeping her in line and out of trouble. "What a bad girl you are, Little Brother!" Alice's grandmother would yell at her daughter. The child refused to wear dresses and she was constantly dirty. "Discipline that child!" An Pung would order his wife.

An expects Huyen Thai to discipline Little Brother for behaving much like a boy would, which are undoubtedly the very same things that An would applaud if Little Brother had been born a boy, which highlights the double standards within their sexist culture.

Huyen Thai soon gave birth to another child, a son this time, and An Pung threw a big celebration when the baby turned one month old. Before the party, Little Brother tried to take the lollipops that An had set aside for the guests, and he snatched them away, putting them up on a high shelf. Little Brother cried and fussed, throwing a tantrum over her lost lollipop.

When An celebrates the birth of his son and takes the lollipops away from Little Brother, claiming they are for the guests, his actions are another reflection of his disregard for his daughter and his preference for his son.

After An left the room, Huyen Thai gave Little Brother a lollipop to calm her down and went back to preparing food for the party. Suddenly, she heard a loud crash from the other room. When she ran into the room, Huyen Thai saw the high shelf was no longer on the wall and there were lollipops and blood everywhere. "I told you not to give her those lollies on a stick!" An yelled at his wife.

An is quick to blame Huyen Thai for Little Brother's accident and death, yet Alice's story establishes the fact that An placed the lollipops on the high shelf. An too thus shares in the blame of this tragedy. This highlights the power of storytelling to reveal truth that may otherwise be hidden or erased.

For as long as Alice can remember, Huyen Thai has always warned her not to run with pens or pencils in her mouth. Alice's grandmother claims there was a child in her neighborhood who fell from his chair with a chopstick in his mouth, which "poked right through to the back of his head."

Huyen Thai likely doesn't warn Alice against running with pens in her mouth because of a neighborhood child, but because of Little Brother's accident with the lollipops. Huyen Thai simply changes the story to hide her grief of losing a child.

At nine years old, Alice spends most of her time caring for her baby sister, Alison. Kien continues to work in the garage making jewelry, and Alice has little time to play with her friend, Beatrice. Alice learns to prepare Alison's formula and test the temperature on the inside of her wrist. Kien never tells Alice that she is a good sister or daughter.

This marks the point when Kien begins to treat Alice like a servant, the very thing she had hoped her daughter would avoid. Kien pushes her own responsibilities onto Alice because she is a girl, and as such, Alice is expected to do the housework.

One day, as Alice is taking care of Alison, the baby rolls off the bed and onto the floor. Kien runs into the room, yelling and screaming, and tells Alice she is "doomed" if Alison is "brain-damaged" from the fall. Alice prays to Buddha to protect her sister and promises to never complain again, but then she realizes that if Buddha does exist, he wouldn't "torment" her so.

Alice's religious faith is shaken here. Kien cuts Alice very little slack and she has an incredible amount of responsibility despite her young age. That fact that she is a victim to such unfair circumstances feels like proof to Alice that there is no benevolent higher power.

When Kuan comes into the room, he "tut-tuts" his tongue at Alice. "Can't even be responsible for anything, not even looking after your sister for a little while," he says. Alice doesn't tell him that she has been looking after the baby all day, and she watches as her parents rush Alison to the doctor.

Alice is responsible, and Kuan's "tut-tut" is very condescending. His actions and words dispel all of Alice's hard work on account of this one accident, which really could happen to anybody.

With her parents and sister gone to the hospital, Alice figures that she is doomed anyway. She considers suicide, but she hates blood and is too short to effectively hang herself. She remembers about the white oleander in the backyard and thinks about poisoning herself. Later, Kien and Kuan return from the hospital. "You are lucky," says Kien. Alice is so relieved that Alison is alright that she forgets to be thankful for not killing herself.

Alice's suicidal ideations reflect how deeply unhappy she is, and in this light, it is difficult to view her as "lucky." Alice's disregard for her own life mirrors her parents' disregard for her as well, and this is why she is thankful for her sister's life and not her own.

Meanwhile, Alice begins to sew to try to take her mind off her guilt for failing to take proper care of Alison. She learns embroidery as well, and she makes hats and stuffed animals. Kien has another baby, Alina, and Kuan buys Alice a sewing machine, which she uses to make clothing for Alina.

Alice is kept at home raising children—and now even making clothes—and the fact that Kien has had another baby suggests that this kind of domestic work will not end anytime soon.

Other members of the family and friends begin dropping their own children off for Alice to watch as well, and she is soon drowning in childcare and housework. She complains to Kien that Alexander isn't expected to do as much as she is, and Kien claims that he doesn't know how to do housework because he is a boy. Alice is "more mature," Kien says. "Girls only mature faster because they have to do more," Alice says.

Alice's comment also highlights her sexist culture and society. It is expected that she will do the household chores because she is a girl, and since she has more responsibilities than Alexander, she has been forced to mature faster. Alexander has the luxury of childhood, whereas Alice is expected to raise her younger sisters as if she were an adult.

Alice drinks cups and cups coffee sweetened with condensed milk to keep herself energized and motivated. The caffeine gives her the shakes, but she doesn't care. She does manage to escape her housework long enough to do her homework and even read a few books. Alice watches movies like *Stand by Me* and *Dead Poets Society* and thinks that coming of age for boys is much more exciting than girls. Alice isn't given the same opportunities a boy, and all that matters is that she can "make a good pot of rice, has a pretty face, and is fertile."

Alice needs coffee because she is exhausted. Between her responsibilities at home and the pressure put on her to succeed academically, Alice is spread too thin, and this foreshadows her nervous breakdown later in the text. A childhood spent raising her siblings means that Alice is not afforded the same opportunities as boys.

A couple of years later, one of Alice's aunts asks her if Kien had a celebration when Alice's "time came." Alice is confused, and Kien says, "Don't be ridiculous, no one does that anymore." Alice realizes that girls come of age easily—they begin to bleed and are "certified women." Kuan and Kien begin to warn their daughter about rapists. "You never know," Kien says, "how dirty-minded men are."

Kien's failure to celebrate Alice's coming of age parallels An's failure to celebrate the births of his first two daughters. Alice's realization that girls are "certified women" after they menstruate implies that a woman's sole value lies in her ability to reproduce.

At fifteen, Alice wishes she had a boyfriend to talk to or go to the movies with, but Kuan tells her that she is too young for relationships. She must study hard, he says, because her "future is so important." Alice becomes the "cover-up girl" for her friends when they want to go out with boys. They tell their parents that they are going to the library with Alice or working on a school project.

The fact that Alice's friends use her as a cover with their parents when they go out with boys reflects popular stereotypical notions of Chinese women as chaste and studious. If their daughters are with Alice, then they likely aren't up to no good with boys.

One day, a boy calls Alice on the phone and her mother hears his voice on the other end. Kien says boys and girls don't "just chat," and she is convinced that Alice is having an inappropriate relationship with the boy. They ground Alice during the school holiday, so she won't be able to go out with any boys.

This is evidence of how strict Alice's parents are and how small and confined her life is because of it. Kien assumes that because Alice is a girl, her virtue must be guarded, or her future husband will not want her.

Alice stays locked in her room for two weeks, and her parents assume that her silence is an admission of guilt. Alice realizes that to raise a girl, "you need gallons of Social Conditioner with added Spirit Deflator. Rub onto every limb until limp, put the child into a chair and wait until she sets." Once the arms and legs harden, "you have a perfect young woman—so still and silent and sedate." Alice feels like a "geisha behind glass."

Alice's comment is yet another reflection of her existence in a sexist society and culture. The purpose of a geisha is to please and serve men, and this is very much how Alice feels. Ironically, her parents ground her to keep her virtue safe from boys—so that she will remain desirable to the men these same boys will become in the future.


Huyen Thai tells Alice to "love sensibly," but Alice fails to see how passion can be experienced sensibly. When her grandmother was a young woman in China, she got into trouble with the government for speaking passionately about land rights and landlord abuses, and that surely wasn't sensible. In fact, it was the reason why Huyen Thai had to leave China in the first place.

Huyen Thai's resistance to the Chinese government further serves to challenge the strict gender roles within Chinese society. As a woman, Huyen Thai should not be so outspoken; yet she is.

Shortly after Huyen Thai fled China, Alice says, she met An Pung. They were both teachers at the same school, and even though An was ten years older and married, Huyen Thai fell in love with him anyway. Huyen Thai and An were "diseased with love." Alice does not see this as sensible either.

The story of Huyen Thai and An Pung highlights the power of love, and it is this type of love that Alice hopes to experience herself in the future.


Later, Kien tells Alice about how she first met Kuan. Kien worked in the Pungs' plastic bag factory back in Cambodia, and she still remembers the day that Kuan and Sokem became engaged. Then, Pol Pot's regime took over and Kien's family escaped to Vietnam while the Pungs were sent to the Killing Fields.

The Killing Fields are the communist farms implemented under Pol Pot's regime where citizens were sent, either to be killed outright or to be worked to death. The fields are home to the mass graves of over one million bodies.

Five years later, Kien and Kuan met again in Saigon. Kien sensed that Kuan liked her but was too shy to say it. They went for walks together and Kuan even let Kien borrow his bicycle. One day, Kien went to the Pungs' to return Kuan's bicycle and found Sokem there as well. Sokem had lost her entire family in the Killing Fields, and she had returned to marry Kuan. Huyen Thai invited Kien into the house anyway.

When Huyen Thai invites Kien into the house, she silently consents to her relationship with Kuan. An was the one who arranged Kuan's marriage to Sokem, and now that both of these men are dead, their deal died with them as far as Huyen Thai is concerned. Kuan's mother allows him to marry for love just as she did when she married An.

Kien and Kuan were married in Vietnam, but they didn't celebrate until after they arrived in Australia. Before Kuan asked Kien to marry him, he knew that he must have something to offer her. Of course, he had nothing, so he offered her what he did have— "a promise, something for her to picture in her imagination." He planned their escape through a refugee camp in Thailand, and after one year in the camp, the couple was finally able to get out of Southeast Asia. They were given the choice to go to either Canada or Australia, and since no one wanted to live in the snow, they chose Australia.

Kuan's promise reflects his deep love for Kien. While he has very little to give her, their new life together in Australia is proof of what great love can accomplish. Furthermore, the Pungs' decision to move to Australia suggests that they are not committed to assimilating to Australian culture per se, but any culture that is available—and inviting.

PART 3

"Ah!" yells Kien as she sits straight up in bed. She has felt little peace since the Pungs moved into their new house, and she has finally figured out why. "It's our toilet!" she cries. "Our ensuite toilet!" The family's Buddhist shrine, the one with An Pung's picture on it, is located downstairs, directly under the toilet. "We are crapping on our gods and ancestors," Alice says. "That is why there is no peace in this new house."

Kien's belief that the placement of their shrine beneath their toilet is somehow disrespectful is humorous, but it also underscores her faith and longing for her home culture. Kien believes that she is being punished for insulting Buddha and their ancestors.

The Pungs take dreams and ancestors very seriously, and dreams are discussed as a family at meals. Kuan had avoided going back to Cambodia for years now because his dead grandfather told him not to in a dream. Kuan's brothers own six new banks in Cambodia and are doing very well, but the ominous dream keeps him in Australia. Now, he has abandoned the idea of going back to Cambodia altogether and is focused on the "Great Australian Dream."

The Pungs' belief in the importance of their dreams comes from their culture—but ironically, this is also what keeps them from returning to Southeast Asia. Kuan's dream also reflects the respect for elders within Chinese culture, as Kuan listens to his grandfather even in his dream.

Alice thinks about how Huyen Thai had saved all her money from the plastic bag factory to buy a terrace house in Phnom Penh back in Cambodia. Before she even had the chance to move in, Pol Pot's regime forced her to the countryside to work. It's seems obvious to Alice that Kuan should feel leery about going back. When they began to build the new house in Australia, Kuan had "poured over the details" each night. "Such a big house for such little people," Alice's friends said when they saw the plans.

The comments made by Alice's friends highlight the subtle racism present in Australian society. Alice's friends don't believe that the Pungs need such a large house since Asian people are typically small in stature, which implies that big, fancy houses are reserved for people who are generally taller and bigger—like white people. By calling the Pungs small, Alice's friends devalue them.

While the Pungs were building their new house, Alice continues, they would drive each weekend to the construction site to assess the progress. "This was our weekly Sunday trip," Alice says, "to watch the temple being constructed and to worship the fruits of our labour." Kien even dressed Alison and Alina in dresses for the drive. Alice and Alexander would grow bored at the building site, but Kuan and Kien stood for hours, pointing at this or that, planning the future.

This passage reflects Kuan and Kien's dedication to the Great Australian Dream. They are so determined to become successful and give their children a chance at a better life that they approach it like a religion. Kien even dresses Alison and Alina in their Sunday best as if they are going to temple or church.

In the new house, the colorful and tacky knickknacks and paper chains are gone. Here, things are "different, things are whitewashed. Nothing can look too peasanty." The house is decorated in pale pastels, and the Pungs are the envy of their entire family.

This reflects the Pungs' efforts to assimilate into Australian culture. Their new home means (superficially at least) that they have achieved the Australian Dream.

Kien has felt uneasy in the house ever since they moved in, so she tries to distract herself by working in the garage. Moving the Buddha shrine does little to make her feel better, and she realizes that she must be feeling uneasy because she cannot find the glass jars of **gold** she had buried in the yard at the old house in Braybrook. She keeps the jars "as a residue of the fear left from the old country." Under Pol Pot, money became "worthless pieces of dirty paper," but gold retained value. Kien is convinced she has left four jars buried in their old backyard.

Gold is symbolic of security within Unpolished Gem, *and since she has very little sense of security living in the new house, Kien is convinced she feels this way because their gold is unaccounted for. This also highlights the differences between the Pungs' life in Cambodia and their life in Australia. The fact that Kien could so easily forget about jars of gold is evidence of their wealth in Australia.*

The next day, Kien calls the Cantonese woman who bought their old house and tells her that there are the remains of Pung ancestors buried in her yard. The woman is "scared to death of the ancestors, everybody is," and she tells Kien to come and dig them up right away. Kien and Que dig several holes, but they don't find any **gold**.

The Cantonese woman shows just how widespread and powerful the fear and respect of elders—living or dead—is in many Southeast Asian cultures, not just the Pungs' Chinese culture.

"Kim" is both Vietnamese and Chinese for **gold**, Alice says, so the jewelry stores in Footscray are collectively called the Kims. One day after school, Alice goes with Kien to the Kims to collect money for her gold and jewelry. Alice notes that the Vietnamese Kims are stylish and the women wear fashionable clothes and hairstyles. The Chinese Kims, she says, are much "less chic" and have a "turnip-and-carrot-soup sort of existence." The Chinese Kims, Alice says, are just like her mother. They do not own gold or wear gold— "the gold owns them."

The fact that the Vietnamese and Chinese words for gold are the same implies the universal value of gold. Alice's description of her mother's existence as "turnip-and-carrot-soup" precisely defines Kien's no-nonsense character. There is nothing flashy or fancy about Alice's mother. This is why Alice is so taken aback by her mother's sisters, Ly and Sim, who turn out to be "Chinese chic" when they arrive in Australia.

Sometimes the Kims go bankrupt, and even though they know that they are closing, they still accept **gold** from Kien. The next week, when she comes to collect, their shops are boarded up and they are gone. One Kim has owed her for months, so Kien sits in the store all day, staring at them behind the counter. "Chinese people shouldn't owe any debts," Kien says. The Kims insist they have no money, so they give Kien a gold bracelet as surety until they can pay.

Kien's ability to collect money from the bankrupt Kims is further proof of her capabilities as a successful businesswoman. Ironically, Kien uses her quiet nature, one of her stereotypically feminine qualities, as a source of power during her interaction with the Kims. Sitting and staring at them all day unnerves them until they are forced to pay to make her stop.

Kien is constantly haggling prices and payments, and many of the Kims try to undercut her. They say that because Kien's husband owns two Hi-Fi stores, she doesn't need the money as much as they do. They question why she even works at all. Surely, she doesn't need to. What the Kims don't know is that as they undercut her prices, "they are also stripping away her sense of purpose." Kien still has a good twenty-five working years left in her, and she can't imagine spending them at home.

When the Kims insist that Kien doesn't need to work because her husband is so successful, they undermine Kien's own success and desire to have a purpose and identity outside of being her husband's wife and her children's mother. Kien needs more than this to be happy, and the Kims' comments, which also reflect the sexist opinions of society at large, do not respect this.

Alice notes that Kien is "not a talker," but "a shouter." She is especially loud in the car, and Alice wears headphones under a scarf to drown out the noise. "The less she has to say," Alice says, "the louder she gets." She mostly shouts about money and how much everything costs, and the cost of Alice's education is at the top of her list. "Not every family can send their kids to such a school," she tells Alice. "Especially not the girls."

Kien's comment that most girls don't get the opportunity for a good education reflects the sexist nature of their culture. A good education is a right reserved for boys because women, who typically work in the home, don't require advanced studies to clean and raise children.

Kien tells Alice that when she was a child, all the Chinese schools were shut down. Kien has worked most of her life, and she believes that instead of making kids brighter, too much school leads to becoming "limp and lazy." She gets angry because Alice can't explain the bank statements to her—even "with all that education"—and says that she should "at least know the simplest things." Alice is ashamed because her mother is right; she can't explain the bank statements—in *Chinese*. She is "running out of words."

It isn't that Alice doesn't understand the bank statements, but that she doesn't know enough Chinese to effectively communicate this understanding to her mother. Alice speaks mostly English, which reflects her assimilation to Australian society, but it also underscores the power of language to exclude and isolate—Alice feels out of place within her own family because she doesn't speak the same language as her mother.


Since she is running out of words, Alice doesn't talk much, and even at school she is quiet. "One wrong word could mean being found out for a philistine," Alice says. At home, Kien gets louder. At the dinner table, her family speaks mostly in English, and they don't acknowledge that Kien can't understand them.

A philistine—someone who has no understanding of culture or language—perfectly reflects how Alice feels about her Chinese culture, and it also reflects how Kien feels about the English language and Australian culture.


A classmate at school tells Alice that "migrants don't assimilate. They all come here and stick together, and don't bother to learn the language." But Kien insists on learning English. She has Alice find an address for a language school on map. "I'm going to learn it now," she says, "no matter what." The class is only ten dollars per term— "a bargain," Kien thinks.

This student's opinion represents widespread racist assumptions that immigrants have no desire to assimilate. Most of Alice's family, with the exception of her mother, have fully immersed themselves in Australian culture. Furthermore, it is Alice's dedication to speaking English that has caused her distance from her own mother and culture.

Kien asks everyone to start speaking to her in English, so Alice talks to her mother in slow, broken words and phrases. She asks how she is doing and if she had a good day. "Stop asking crazy pointless questions," Kien yells, "and let me learn something useful!"

Kien wants to speak English but she seems unwilling to start with the basics. To her, basic phrases are stupid and pointless, and their simplicity makes her feel stupid by extension.

All of the migrants in the English class speak varying levels of English. Kien doesn't understand the worksheets that the instructor hands out, and she thinks the simple sentences and phrases are senseless when she does figure them out. "Who gives a crap about the man with tin can over his head? Stupid idiot." Alice helps her read one of Alina's children's books, and they read it three times. Alice applauds Kien for reading the entire book, but she dismisses her. "I don't know what it says," Kien says. "I just memorized the whole thing when you first read it to me."

Kien feels stupid and inferior because she can't speak English, but the fact that she can so easily memorize a book, even a children's book, suggests otherwise. Most people would be unable to remember multiple foreign words and phrases, but Kien does it so well that Alice assumes she is reading the book.

Alice continues to sink further into quiet isolation, and the more she studies, the less she speaks. She says that she always checks the "English as a second language" box on every form she fills out, but she is "beginning to think in English." "At least I am losing my word-spreading status," Alice thinks to herself.

The more English Alice speaks, the further she gets from her Chinese culture and heritage, again showing the power of language to isolate and exclude.

Kien continues to have difficulties learning English, and she frequently cries and yells that everyone is going to leave her. "I am getting old and you are all going to leave me because I don't know the English!" she screams. But she is still determined to learn, and she constantly asks Alice how to say this or that, until Kien's "questions became more difficult to answer than the literature Alice has to study in class."

Kien's ability to learn English relies on Alice's ability to speak Chinese, which she has slowly been losing as the Pungs assimilate to Australian culture. Alice's inability to effectively help her mother is yet another reason why they are drifting apart and why Alice doesn't quite fit in her own Chinese culture.

One day during a holiday from school, Kien takes Alice with her to visit one of the aunts. The women trade their stories of suffering and woe, and Alice "realizes that it is the same everywhere." Inside all these Chinese homes are "countless silent women" who are "living the dream lives of the rich and idle in Phnom Penh, and yet their imposed idleness makes them inarticulate and loud." Alice's aunt laments that her teenage children no longer talk to her—they go straight to their rooms after school. "Aiyohh," Kien says, "yours don't speak to you anymore? Well, I have it worse. Mine *can't* speak to me anymore!"

The suffering of all the women in Alice's life is another reflection of the trappings of their sexist society and culture. The women are not given the same outlets as men—meaning they often do not have careers or a place in the community outside the home—and because of this their lives feel restricted and small, leading to a deep unhappiness. Even money and security are not enough to counter this, and their suffering is only worsened by their language barrier.

"At least you have a daughter," Alice's aunt tells Kien. "Yes," says Kien, "but she's gone with the ghosts already. She's going to marry one, and then it will be the end of us." The women decide they are "doomed" because they don't know English. Their children are likely to ship them off to a nursing home, like the Australians do. "Kids these days have no loyalty," Kien says.

This passage highlights the differences between how the Chinese treat the elderly compared to the Australians. Nursing homes are nearly unheard of within Chinese culture, since children usually care for their parents when they get old. Kien's concern that Alice will marry a "ghost," or a white man, foreshadows Alice's relationship with Michael and her inability to commit to him partly because of their cultural differences.

Later, when she burns the taro cakes while cooking dinner, Alice feels like she can do nothing right. She asks Kien to teach her to cook, but Kien tells her she doesn't need to learn. "When you get married," Kien says, "you're going to be making ghost food for your ghost husband." Plus, Kien says, why should she teach Alice anything if she is just going to leave her anyway? Alice remembers that her mother has English class in the morning, but Kien says she has stopped going. "Who would I speak the English to, I ask you?" she questions.

Of course, Kien's refusal to continue her English lessons because she has nobody to talk to contradicts her previous concerns that her family will leave her because she doesn't speak English. Her insistence that Alice doesn't need to learn to cook because she will "be making ghost food for her ghost husband" shows her disapproval of Alice marrying a white man instead of a Chinese man.

Sometime later, the Pungs hang a new chandelier in their sitting room. Alice flips the switch to watch the light dance around the crystals, and Kien screams, "Turn it off! What are you doing? Stupid, turning it on and off like that wasting energy!" The light is only to be used for visitors—just like the couch and the dining room table.

Kien's reaction to Alice turning on the light reflects how empty their lives really are. Kuan and Kien have worked hard to have a nice life and own nice things, yet they refuse to use them. They don't get the chance to enjoy anything because everything is kept hidden or turned off, a habit they have maintained from living in Cambodia.

Kien tells Alice that it is time to go pick up Alina and Alison from school. But it is already too late. Alice had walked the long way home from school and stopped by her sisters' school because she figured her mother would forget. She did. Kien's shoulders "slump." "Another failure," she thinks. She can't take care of her kids properly, and she hasn't been able to work lately either.

Even Kien believes that taking care of the children is solely her responsibility—even though she has no desire to actually do it. Without her work to give her purpose, she feels directionless and useless.

The chemicals Kien uses to process the **gold** have begun to affect her lungs and make her cough. The cough has failed to improve, so she has not been going out into the garage. Instead, her workspace is dark and covered with an old bedspread.

The bedspread covers Kien's workspace like a shroud, and it represents the death of her true passion. Kien only values herself because of her work, and without her gold, she feels likewise worthless.

Kuan wants Kien to sell all her **gold** processing equipment and just stay home with the kids, but she can't see herself doing such a thing. Still, she is getting old and running all over Footscray is becoming difficult, and she worries a purse-snatcher will take her bag of gold. Plus, the skin on her hands has blackened and begun to crack from the chemicals. Like "a coal miner's hands," Alice thinks.

Kien's worries that someone will steal her gold, albeit realistic, are also a reflection of her experiences back in Cambodia. Furthermore, her blackened hands like "a coal miner's" are physical proof of the hard work she has put in to achieve the Australian Dream and ensure a better life for her children, a continual source of guilt for Alice.

Kien wishes that she could work in Kuan's shop counting the money like Que, but she doesn't speak English. "I am a useless person!" Kien cries. Her doctor diagnoses her with depression, and she complains of her constant "scattered thoughts." She is given little white *Zoloft* pills and told to wait.

Again, Kien equates her inability to speak English with her own uselessness, further underpinning the power of language to isolate and exclude, which is also a major cause of her depression.

Kien can't stand staying home and she has a hard time occupying her days with housework. She does the grocery shopping, but even a good deal fails to cheer her up. She begins to obsess about the cleanliness of the house, and yells over any stains or scratches.

This passage plays on stereotypical jokes of Asian people appreciating a good deal. The fact that Kien fails to be happy even when she is saving money highlights just how depressed she is.

Kuan knows that Kien needs to work again if she is ever to get any better, so he decides that she should come to work at his store despite her poor English. Kuan asks Alice to look after the house while Kien goes back to work, and she is "exuberant." Alice sees her mother going back to work as "the best thing that has happened in a long time" and doesn't mind having more work because of it.

Alice hates housework and she resents being expected to do it just because she is a girl; however, her use of the word "exuberant" illustrates how eager she is to get her mother out of the house so that Kien can at least feel useful again.

Kuan hires Kien as a salesperson. She is given a time-card and put in the toilet-cleaning rotation (his store is now big enough to have one), and he brings home invoices to familiarize her with the language. Kuan teaches her how to write "washing machine," "hair dryer," and "toaster." Kien writes the words over and over, and tapes scraps of paper all over the house with new words on them. Alice watches as her mother "persists."

Kuan's toilet-cleaning rotation implies that he does not view typical housework and cleaning as solely women's work. Kuan also takes his turn cleaning the toilet at the shop because splitting up this dreaded task is the fair and equal thing to do, which speaks directly to Kuan's inherent goodness and decency.

Kien does well at the store until she must print a receipt, then "she is stumped." She grows frustrated and hits random keys, claiming, "Sometimes receipts print, sometimes not." At home, Alice keeps the house clean and makes all the meals. Kuan even drives her to the market to do the shopping. She babysits Alison and Alina, and they play games and laugh. "Wah, look how good the house looks!" Kien says. "I am doing an excellent job," Alice thinks.

This is the first time Kien has given Alice any credit for the work that she does around the house. Her comment suggests that she appreciates Alice and her efforts, and Alice secretly hopes that doing a good job around the house will ensure that Kien keeps her job at Kuan's shop.

The next week, when Alice returns home from a walk with her sisters, she is surprised to see Kien's car in the driveway during the middle of the day. Kien tells Alice she was given the wrong amount of money to take to the bank—she was one hundred dollars short—and that Kuan "wants her gone at any cost." "I can't work there any longer!" Kien cries. Kuan swears it was a simple mistake, but she is convinced he only wants to humiliate her. Alice soon comes down with the flu, and Kien takes the week off to care for the house and kids. "We all know by the end of that week that it will probably be forever," Alice says.

Again, Kien is convinced that others believe her stupid and worthless because she cannot speak English, which serves to further isolate her from her family, and from her job at Kuan's shop. Kien is looking for a reasonable excuse not to return to the shop, and Alice's illness is the perfect reason to stay home. Of course, Kien's mishap at the bank was only a mistake on Kuan's part, but Kien's insecurities don't allow her to see this.

PART 4

Later, when Alice arrives at the Pungs' shop after school, she doesn't see her father. It is unusual for Kuan not to be there—he's always there—and he always needs help filling out forms or running newspaper ads. Que tells Alice that her father is at the hospital. Alice freezes. "Why?" she asks. Huyen Thai has had a stroke, Que says.

Kuan needs Alice's help with forms and advertisements because Chinese is his primary language. Kuan does speak English fluently, but he frequently needs help making sure he doesn't make a mistake.

Alice goes to the hospital later that evening, and everything there is white and blue. The stroke has left Huyen Thai blind in one eye, but she doesn't know it yet. Once she is discharged from the hospital, Kuan finds a caregiver to look after her at Que's house. Huyen Thai requires twenty-four-hour care, but she is "not the softest soul to look after." Alice's grandmother bites and scratches the help, and she often refuses to eat.

Huyen Thai's actions again challenge typical stereotypes of women and femininity. Alice has already established that Chinese women are expected to be quiet and sedate, but her grandmother refuses to behave this way, even in her incapacitated state.

That week in school, Alice begins to study William Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Her teacher has written the word "paganism" on the blackboard, and she asks the students what it means. "Belief in many gods?" one of the students asks. "Good," says the teacher. Then she turns to Alice. "For example, the Chinese. They believe in and worship many Gods. Don't you, Alice?"

The teacher's comment is a racist microaggression that assumes that just because Alice is Chinese, she knows all about Chinese religions. When her teacher looks at her, all she sees is Alice's Chinese identity.

Alice is mortified. "Er, my grandmother worships many gods. Buddha, Goddess of Mercy, Lord of Business, she prays to them all to bless us." The class laughs, and Alice laughs too, hoping that they aren't laughing at her. She thinks of King Lear and Huyen Thai going mad incapacitated all day long at Que's house alone.

Just as Alice suspects, her Australian classmates laugh at her grandmother's religion because it is so different and foreign compared to their own overwhelmingly Christian belief system. Alice's reference to King Lear, who goes mad within Shakespeare's play, again shows the importance of storytelling within Unpolished Gem.

One morning, Alice wakes "with a false skin on her face." Her new skin is made of rubber, and it takes serious effort to move the muscles in her face. No matter how she tries, Alice can't seem to remove the "rubber death-mask." Alice feels "a funeral in her brain, and she hasn't even studied Emily Dickinson yet."

In another literary allusion, Alice refers to Emily Dickinson, a famous poet who suffered from depression, as she makes sense of her world through storytelling and literature. Alice's "false skin" is evidence of her own depression, which makes it difficult for her move her face or smile.

Alice is seventeen now. Her grades have earned her entrance into a good school, and a boy has even asked her out, but she still feels like she "lives in a big bubble." She doesn't relate to the kids at school, and they think she is "naïve," a girl in an "ivory tower of books and ideas." Alice tries to believe that her "real life will begin sometime soon. When this false one ends."

Alice's "false life" is a reference to her sheltered and small life. Her parents keep her locked away in an effort to protect her from danger—mainly men—and she is exceedingly unhappy because of this. Alice's sheltered existence is yet another reason why she doesn't fit in at school.

Kuan and Kien schedule meetings with the administrator at Alice's school. He asks what medication the doctors have ordered her to take. Alice has "little pink pills for focus, big white ones to help her settle, and tiny white ones to help her sleep." Kuan has also prescribed his own apothecary remedies for Alice to try, and each night he massages her feet and shoulders.

The loving way Kuan tends to his daughter and massages her feet and shoulders is again proof of his inherent goodness. He doesn't view Alice as less valuable because of her gender, and his attention to her unhappiness is evidence of this.

Kien buys Alice a new white dress for her graduation dinner, and Alice feels like she is dressing for a "polished pine box." She borrows a sleek black dress from a friend instead and tries to sneak out of the house in it. "What are you wearing?" yells Kien. When Alice's friends arrive to pick her up, she is like "a wind-up obedience toy" in her white dress and shoes—a pair of "shiny plastic middle-aged-woman pumps."

Alice's white dress is an outward reflection of her purity, and it also reflects her parents' (and society's) expectation that she remains chaste and virginal. The black dress symbolizes the exact opposite, and Kien seems able to sniff it out. Alice's shoes are another source of her humiliation, and they will again be another reason why she doesn't fit in and feels awkward around her Australian classmates.

At the dinner, Alice and her family sit at the only "ethnically-enhanced table." There is a family of Muslims and another Vietnamese family, and there are even a few immigrants from Russia. Kuan and Kien realize that Alice too is a "Watcher." She doesn't fit in with the other students as they celebrate their graduation and snap pictures. Alice's parents thought if they worked hard enough, Alice would fit in and live a beautiful life. This certainly is not the case.

For Kuan and Kien, their "ethnically-enhanced table" is definitive proof that Alice does not fit in. They assumed that by moving to this new place, giving their children Western names, and immersing themselves in Australian culture, their child would automatically be seen as Australian, not Chinese, but this is obviously not the case.

Alice's final exams are coming up, but she can't concentrate long enough to even think about them. The school nurse teaches her how to breathe, and she is convinced she will fail her exams and be "condemned to a life sentence of dirty dishes and rubber-faced, blank-wall staring." Now that school is nearly over, Alice thinks, her only expected role is to "attach her tentacles to an emotionally un-bruised boy with a doctor's bag."

Alice's expected role as a doctor's wife further emphasizes her sexist culture and society—good grades hardly matter if she is destined to scrub dishes and raise babies.

Alice feels "great contempt" for any boy who is interested in her. After all, those boys must have terrible taste anyway. Alice goes to visit Huyen Thai and her grandmother begs her to take her "to a place with no darkness." Alice wishes she could. Anyplace Alice goes with her grandmother, Huyen Thai would be sure to say: "This is my granddaughter, she is so clever, she is so smart. She knows everything, for someone so young. Aiia, she can also make anything and do everything."

Alice's contempt for the boys who show interest in her is another example of her self-deprecation, and another symptom of her depression induced by the demands and restrictions of her sexist society. Huyen Thai is the only one who has truly understood and appreciated Alice, and now she is in danger of losing her too.

Huyen Thai catches a cold and dies a short time later. Alice thinks that her "grandmother is not meant to die. She is meant to be with Alice forever." Huyen Thai never cared when Alice ran out of Chinese words, and she was always happy to see her. Alice knows that Huyen Thai will be part of her forever—through her stories. Alice is who she is because of those stories, and she will remember them forever. Still, Alice says, there is "no one left to remind me of my roots, no one to tell me to be proud to be part of a thousand-year-old culture, no one to tell me that I am **gold** not yellow."

Alice's connection to her grandmother and her culture through storytelling highlights the power of storytelling to influence one's life and inform one's identity. Alice learns what it means to be a proud Chinese woman from her grandmother's stories of the old country, and this is reflected in Alice's reference to herself as "gold not yellow." Alice's sense of self-worth is in large part because of the respect she has learned for her culture through her grandmother's stories.

Alice's exams come and go, and she manages to sit upright and answer all the questions. Afterward, Kuan tells Alice, "Go on, go and have fun while you're young. Go out with boyfriends." Alice can't believe her ears, but he insists. "Brush your hair," he says. "Make yourself look pretty." Kien tells her to focus on housework—that will "keep your mind off things." Alice doesn't have the energy to do anything. Plus, people in public "will be able to see through this rubber mask," Alice thinks.

Kuan's advice for Alice to "make herself look pretty" suggests that this is her greatest strength as a woman now that she is allowed to go out and not just study. Instead of acknowledging that Alice is smart and has accomplished great things while in school—things that are sure to make her future bright—he encourages her to rely instead on her femininity and beauty.

Alice doesn't even want to keep working at Kuan's shop. Everyone is sure to know that she is a failure who can't get into a decent university. "All that money," she thinks about her private education, "all that waste." Kuan and Kien tell her to keep her feelings to herself. "Don't tell people how you are, don't show your aunties how you are at the moment," they tell her.

Kuan and Kien's comment reflects popular opinions that mental illness and depression is something to be ashamed and must be hidden from others. Their comments make Alice appear as an overly emotional woman who has no clinical reason for her feelings.

Meanwhile, Alice stays in her room, crying. She can't concentrate enough to even read a book. One day, Alina knocks on her door and silently walks into the room. She climbs into Alice lap and snuggles her small body next to her sister. Suddenly, Alice hears Alina sniffle and realizes she is crying. "It is contagious," Alice thinks, "this disease." The next day, Alice "decides to do something useful."

Since Alice has raised Alina and spent so much time with her, Alina's negative response to Alice's depression motivates her to recover. Alice's reaction to Alina's tears underscores just how important Alice's family is and how much they mean to her.

Alice organizes the cutlery draw. "It doesn't mean anything," she tells herself. "Nothing means anything. Why are you doing this?" "Shut up," Alice tells herself. She is finally doing *something*, even if it is small and ridiculous. Alice thinks about Huyen Thai and wonders what they did in the old country when they failed exams. She knows women weren't allowed such things then, and she should feel lucky, but she can't.

This small act represents Alice's recovery from this spell of depression, but her internal dialogue still shows the restrictions and oppression of her sexist society. No matter what Alice does, it is likely to mean very little because she is a girl. The fact that women haven't always been able to study reflects the progress society has made, but there is still much more to be done.

Kuan and Kien keep telling Alice to call the exam hot-line to get her scores and "put an end to her torment," but she hesitates. Finally, she punches in the numbers and waits. She immediately hangs up. "I must have heard wrong," she thinks. Kuan tells her to dial again, so she does. Despite sleeping in and nearly missing the exam, Alice has scored well, and she has been accepted into the law program at Melbourne University. "I will live," Alice thinks.

Much like Kien, Alice does not want her life to revolve around domestic chores and childrearing. She feels that in order to have a meaningful life, she must also have an identity outside of the home.

That summer before college, Alice works in Kuan's shop. She is comfortable among the toasters and televisions, and she "always retreats to this place after something traumatic" happened. Alice is in charge of mobile phones, and she commands her small space behind the counter.

The mobile phone counter is the only place where Alice feels she truly belongs. The duality of her cultural identity—that is, being both Australian and Chinese—has left her feeling like she doesn't belong anywhere.

While Alice and Kuan work, Kien brings three-courses lunches down to the shop, and they all eat together in the employee breakroom. As the family eats, talking loudly in Chinese, the non-Chinese employees "huddle over their Herald Sun, quietly scoff down their pizza or take-away fried rice and get the hell out of there as fast as possible, since they have no idea whether the yelling is about them or not."

This passage again underscores the power of language to divide and isolate. Just as Kien is isolated in her own home when her family speaks English, the Pungs' English-speaking employees are isolated when the Pungs speak Chinese.

Alice's Aunt Sim, who also works at the store, is pregnant and unable to work, so Kien suggests she go down and help out. "Mind you," Kien says, "just while my sister goes off and has her baby." Kien sells electronics the same way she sold gold, and she quickly becomes the best salesperson in the shop. She doesn't need English to bargain cost. "I sold three microwaves and a fridge today," she tells her family after work. Alice and Kuan look at her with jealousy. They wish they could sell three microwaves and a fridge in one day too.

The fact that Kien is the best salesperson at the Pungs' shop despite her inability to speak English fluently highlights the overarching theme of the importance of communication, even non-verbal communication, within Unpolished Gem. *Just like in her own gold business, Kien does not need English to haggle price and numbers, and she effectively proves this when she outsells the others in the shop.*

PART 5

Later, Kien tells Kuan that Ah BuKien, a family friend, "wants to discuss Agheare for her son." Kuan laughs. "That crazy antiquated relic thinks she's still living in Confucian times," he says. Alice knows the woman well. She made all her money selling rice noodles and built a huge mansion. Now, whenever they drive by, the Pungs say, "Look, there's BuKien's rice-noodle house."

Confucius was a Chinese teacher and philosopher who was born sometime near 550 BC. When Kuan calls Ah BuKien an "antiquated relic" "living in Confucian times," he implies that her desire to marry Alice and her son is a dated concept—one that ignores Alice's own independence and voice.

Once, Alice remembers, Ah BuKien gave the Pungs a tour of her house and took great care describing every piece of furniture, including the price. "Do you know how much this cost?" Ah BuKien said pointing at a coffee table. "Do you? Guess." In the car on the way home, Kien said the table was ugly, but Alice disagreed. "You just watch it," Kien said. Kien thought Ah BuKien had "peasant taste." After all, the table *was* imported from China. "My parents abhorred anything that reminded them we would grow up yellow and there was nothing they could do to save us," Alice says.

Alice's use of the word "yellow" to describe herself is a derogatory reference to her Chinese identity. To Kien and Kuan, they want their children to be Australian, not Chinese, and Ah BuKien's Chinese table is a reminder of their true heritage. Both Kien and Kuan equate being Chinese with being a peasant, no matter how much money Ah BuKien spent on the table.

Alice has never met Ah BuKien's son. He is always busy with tutors and studying. Still, Ah BuKien tells Kien that her son has not been accepted into medical school, and she has not been successful trying to pay his way. "Only a percentile of 92.4! The boy is a retard!" she cries. Alice has no desire to marry the "rice-noodle boy—quivery, white and malleable, made exactly like Ah Bukien's pasta."

The way Ah BuKien talks about her son is terrible, and it reflects popular negative stereotypes about the physically and mentally disabled. Ah BuKien's ugly words also underscore the amount of stress Alice is under to perform well academically.

Back at Kuan's Retravision shop, the local Chinese population refuses to buy any items made in China. "But sir," Alice asks an older gentleman, "aren't *you* made in China?" Huyen Thai had always taught Alice to be proud of being Chinese. She had raised Alice to "defend herself against all the other blandly dressed banana-children—children who were yellow on the outside but believed they could be completely white inside." Huyen Thai always said those children would grow to be "sour." Now, with this man refusing a Chinese television, Alice knows she was right.

This passage again highlights the power of storytelling. Huyen Thai's stories of the old country have instilled in Alice a sense of pride in her Chinese heritage and history, and when her customers reject a television because it is made in China, they likewise reject their own Chinese identities. Because of her grandmother's stories, Alice understands that she can never be entirely Australian because a large part of her will always be Chinese.

One day, Ah BuKien comes into the shop. She doesn't seem interested in buying anything, and she casually asks Alice the results of her final grades. Alice suddenly understands she isn't looking to buy a toaster—she is there to size up Alice for her son. Well, thinks Alice, "if she is searching for my child-bearing hips, she won't find any."

This too reflects the trappings of Alice's sexist society and culture. Ah BuKien wants to make sure that Alice is good enough for her precious son—that is, she wants to make sure she is smart enough—even though she really expects Alice to stay home and have children.

Alice suspects that Kien wants her to marry Ah BuKien's son, and she feels like the women are "conspiring against her liberty." Kien wants her to be quiet and docile, and always warns her to be "careful." Translated into Chinese, Alice says, "'careful' means to have a 'small heart.'"

Kien and Ah BuKien are "conspiring against Alice's liberty" because they wish to deny her own voice and independence in choosing her husband. Alice's heart feels small because she obviously does not love Ah Bukien's son.

One day, Ah BuKien again comes into the shop and tells Kien that her son is no longer going to school. Instead, she says, he is working at the factory. "What!" Kien yells. "You mean your rice-noodle factory?" Smugly, Kien tells her at least he is making money for her. Kien and Kuan have five years of law school to pay for. As Ah BuKien walks out of the shop, Alice knows she won't be back.

Kien's comment to Ah BuKien is a subtle dig at the failures of Ah BuKien's son. Alice knows Ah BuKien won't be back because Kien has made it clear that Ah BuKien son's is not good enough for Alice. Kien will not have a son-in-law who works at a noodle-factory, and as happy as this makes Alice, her decisions are still being made for her.

In the meantime, Alice is walking with a young white boy named Michael. He is kind and funny, and they fight when he insists on escorting her home. Alice worries about her family spying on her—she is "more scared of interloping Indochinese 'aunts' than the local drug-dealers, because the latter generally left her alone."

Alice knows that her family, especially her mother, will not approve of her dating a white boy, and since she is accustomed to having very little freedom, she is convinced that her family is spying on her.

Michael asks Alice if she would like to have dinner with him. Alice thinks he might like her, but part of her thinks he's just a "sinophile," and she is "his third-world trip or something." She has never been on a real date before, and she's not sure how all of this works. In her mind, Alice tells him that she doesn't "do conventional *Karate-Kid-Part-II* romances," but out loud she says, "Umm, yeah, okay."

A "sinophile" is obsessed with Chinese people and culture, and Alice worries that Michael is not interested in her for the right reasons. Alice's reference to Karate Kid Part II, *a movie in which the main character, a white boy, falls in love with an Asian woman, potentially mirrors Alice's own circumstances.*

At dinner, Alice fights with her inner "Voice of Reason." She tells herself that she is "turning into one of those anxious killjoy Asian women," and she tries to relax and enjoy herself. Not everything has to be so "serious." Michael looks at her and says, "What will your father say when I ask you to be my girlfriend?"

Ironically, Alice's inner voice too relies on stereotypes of Chinese women being anxious, which is the very thing she is rebelling against. Additionally, Michael's question implies that Alice requires the approval of her father and is not capable of making her own decisions.

In the meantime, Alice's cousin, Melanie, marries a white man, and most of their family calls him "the Round Red-haired Demon," even when Melanie's around. Of course, Kien refers to him as a "white ghost," and she tells Alice never to marry one "because you know how they sleep around."

Of course, Kien's opinion of white men, or "white ghosts," equally relies on racial stereotypes. There is nothing about white skin that makes these men more promiscuous then other men.

Melanie's father loves her new husband. "The white skin did the trick" because Uncle Frank "can never escape the counter-effects of colonialism." He tells the family that when Melanie takes this new husband to Cambodia for their honeymoon, "they will be swamped by kowtowers from all sides, heh heh!" Alice says that her family believes that they "were rescued by white people even when the white people didn't see themselves as our rescuers."

European colonialism operated under the assumption that Western societies were superior to those in the East, and Uncle Frank's remarks reflect this same opinion. His belief that his son-in-law will be "swamped by kowtowers" in Cambodia assumes that they will respect him simply because of his white skin.

Alice says that her family are "hypocrites." They love the white people for accepting them here in Australia, and they certainly love Australia. But "the more we love these things," Alice says, "the more it makes us realize how much we hate the dirt, the sludge and the smells of our homelands [...] But most of all, we hate ourselves for loving them."

Just like Uncle Frank, Alice and her family have begun to view white people as superior to Asians, even though they know that this is ridiculous and overall damaging to society.

"So...umm, how about it?" Michael asks. Alice sits silently. Alice thinks to herself that he needs a "bowl haircut" and a "shirt-and-tie combo" before she can be his girlfriend. She wants to know if he is only asking her out because she is "exotic," but she doesn't ask. "No," she finally says out loud. "I can't." Michael becomes self-conscious. He's never asked anyone out before like this. Maybe he's doing it the wrong way. She assures him he isn't and they both agree to start over.

Alice thinks that Michael will need a "bowl haircut" and a "shirt-and-tie-combo" because these things are stereotypical attributes of Chinese men. This implies that Alice believes that Michael is too good for her as he is, and must be made to look more awkward, or Chinese. Of course, Alice is only being sarcastic, but her thoughts are not too far from the widespread stereotypes of Chinese people.

After their initial dinner, Alice's relationship with Michael gets "easier." She decides to "loosen her small and tightly coiled life" and date like a normal person without worrying about "being under the spotlight of the Indochinese (in)security cameras." Each time Alice goes out with Michael she tells her parents she is going to the university library. They don't ask questions because she is "trading on her reputation as a studious daughter." They never mind if she is studying as long as she is home by six P.M.

Even though Alice decides to "loosen up," her life is still very tightly controlled by her parents. While she may ignore the fact that her family is probably still spying on her, her parents only allow her to go to the library and she must be home long before it gets dark.

"Have you ever hopped on a random train and got off at a place you have never been before?" Alice asks Michael later. He hasn't, and neither has she; Alice has never been out of Melbourne. As the two chat, Alice tells Michael how she was "brought up to believe that the fall of man was Adam's fault entirely." He laughs, but Alice swears it's true. Kuan has always told her that Eve warned Adam not to eat the apple, but he did anyway. That's why men have an Adam's apple, to remind them of their bad decision-making.

The fact that Alice has never been out of Melbourne underscores her small and confined life. Kuan's story of the fall of man, further use of storytelling within Unpolished Gem, *also implies that he respects women, since the fall of man is traditionally viewed as Eve's fault. Kuan's use of a Bible story also reflects his assimilation to Australia's overwhelmingly Christian culture.*

Alice tells Michael that it doesn't look like he even has an Adam's apple. "Yes, I do," he says, taking Alice's hand and placing it on his neck. Alice freezes. She has never touched a boy before. "What a very nice neck you have," she says awkwardly. Michael easily shifts the conversation, making her feel better. "Did you always want to be a law student?" he asks. She hasn't, but law is "practical." As a child, she wanted to be an artist or a teacher. He tells her he has wanted to be a lawyer since he watched *Gandhi* in the tenth grade.

The fact that Michael wants to be a lawyer because he genuinely wants to help people highlights his good nature, which makes Alice's rejection of him based on their cultural differences all the more powerful. In this vein, he appears to be more idealistic than Alice, who only wants to be a lawyer because it is a "practical" profession.

Michael tells Alice she should get home before her "tracking device goes off." Kuan usually calls when it gets late, and it is about six o'clock. "Don't you feel frustrated sometimes?" he asks. Of course she is, but she doesn't want to tell him that. "I'm not afraid of the dark, you know," Alice says, staring him down. "Don't ever give me that patronizing 'poor you' look!" she says firmly. He quickly apologizes, saying he had only wanted to get her home so that he could see her again. "Oh," she says.

Alice responds poorly to Michael's comment about her "tracking device" because she views him as just another man who is trying to tell her what to do. When he tells her that it is time to go home, he assumes a certain level of power over her, and Alice is determined to make her own decisions, no matter how small.

After several dates, Michael begins to ask Alice about meeting her parents. "Soon," she tells him. Neither Kuan nor Kien have any idea about Michael. She promises to tell them about him this weekend, and Michael is terrified. "I'm scared of your parents and I haven't met them yet!" he says. There is not much to fear in Kuan, Alice thinks, but Kien is a different story. She sees Alice and Michael's cultural and racial differences as "insurmountable."

Kien is sure to see Michael as a "white ghost," and she has made plain to her daughter her opinions of white men. At this point, Michael seems to be more concerned with Alice's father (Kuan is the one Michael has specifically asked about), as he assumes that Alice's father has the majority say because he is a man. Of course, this is not the case.

Alice thinks about Kien. In her face there is a "simplicity" that stands out, and she has a beautiful laugh and smile. But when she is angry, "her face literally darkens." She can never hide feelings of suspicion either, and she is suspicious when Alice brings Michael to dinner with them in China-town.

Kien's facial expressions and her inability to hide her feelings also underscore Alice's predominant argument of the importance of communication in Unpolished Gem*—even non-verbal communication.*

Michael is a vegetarian. "No meat at all?" Kien asks. "Buddhist? Taoist?" She thinks it is ridiculous when Alice tells her he "feels sorry for the animals." Michael immediately takes a few prawns, and some chicken, and then some venison. "Oh, I love Bambi," he says. Kuan tells him how "impressed" he is with his chopstick skills.

The fact that Michael is willing to eat meat as a vegetarian just to win the approval of Alice's parents further implies that he is an exceedingly nice guy. He is willing to suffer just to make this initial meeting go better, which will make this situation easier on Alice.

"This fish reminds me of the Pol Pot years when the starved, dead bodies floated up the river during the flood," Kuan says. He goes on to talk about his job dragging the bodies away from town, but his story is sprinkled with jokes and laughter. Most people who have conversations with Kuan about Cambodia don't know "whether to laugh or cry," Alice says.

Kuan's story of his life in Cambodia further stresses the cultural differences between Michael and the Pungs. Likely, Michael is not able to relate to such a tragic story, and the fact that he doesn't know whether to laugh or cry emphasizes his discomfort.

After dinner, Michael gives Kien a lovely, "understated" arrangement of flowers. "Tanks you velly march," Kien says. Alice can tell that Michael is trying to figure out if Kien likes him, but even Alice doesn't know yet. She does know, however, that Kien has no idea what Michael is saying to her.

The fact that understated things are often more valuable than loud or brightly colored things is completely lost on Kien. She assumes that Michael's understated gift, while thoughtful and likely expensive, is cheap.

Later at home, Alice listens to Kien's "list of objections to potential husbands." She thinks Aussies "sleep around" and have loose morals, and she thinks Cantonese men gamble too much. Vietnamese men "spend too much," while Teochew men are "stingy." Just don't "remain unmarried," Kien warns.

Kien finds fault with all men, to the point that there really isn't anyone left for Alice to choose from. At the same time, she insists that Alice must *get married, humorously contradicting herself.*


Kien tells Alice that Michael probably "splits everything in half." Alice lies and says he doesn't. The truth is she "hates splitting bills" too, but she doesn't want to tell her mother that. She would rather pay it all than split the bill. All or nothing, she thinks. She tells her mother that "some non-Asians" think splitting the bill is "true equality." "Hah!" Kien laughs. "What kind of relationship is determined by a calculator?"

To Alice, true equality is not splitting the dinner bill after a date. True equality is expecting that women will occasionally pay for dinner. Splitting the bill makes it easier to remain uncommitted, according to Alice, and she would rather pay then be only half-dedicated to her partner.

Alice thinks about Michael's female friends. She has met a few, and they always hug and kiss him when they see him. Alice knows it is "innocent," but still it bothers her. "*They* don't have *issues* with physical contact like we do," Alice thinks. "Are you listening to me?" Kien yells, interrupting her thoughts. She isn't.

This too underscores Alice and Michael's cultural differences. Alice is deeply bothered by Michael's female friends kissing him, even platonically.

Kien continues to give Alice a hard time about Michael, and when they walk downtown by the jewelry shops and the Kims ask if her daughter has a boyfriend yet, Kien says, "No." One day, Kien tells Kuan that Alice was seen kissing Michael at Alina's birthday party. "I gave him a peck on the cheek!" Alice yells. "What shame!" Kien yells. "And you stop kissing that boy!"

Kien considers it inappropriate for Alice to kiss Michael, even on the cheek. Kien's insistence that Alice "stop kissing that boy" is further evidence of her stifled existence and the control her parents assume over her life as a young, and presumably vulnerable, woman.


One night, Alice pulls up to Michael's college at 10:30 P.M. "Ummm…look what time it is," he says uncomfortably. Alice knows she should go home. They are surely waiting up for her. Plus, they let her see Michael as much as she wanted—he just had to come to their house, and they are not to go upstairs to her room.

Michael is uncomfortable because it is way too late for Alice to be out, and he knows that her parents do not approve. However, this is can also be viewed as Michael telling Alice what to do. Of course, she knows that she should go home.

Alice says her parents are worried that Michael will "deflower her," but that is unlikely, and her room isn't even that exciting. It is painted all white with heavy pink curtains and looks like it belongs to a "blonde-haired sixteen-year-old sweetheart" "in an American movie." Other than the same bed she shared with Huyen Thai, it is completely empty.

Alice's parents are concerned that if Michael "deflowers" Alice, she will be less desirable to other men because she will be considered tainted. This assumption relies on sexist ideals that women must be chaste and pure, which is an unfair stereotype since nobody is concerned with Michael's purity.

Earlier that night, Alice had taken Michael upstairs after Kien had gone out. Not to sleep with him—just "to see what he looked like" in her room—then she could say that she had broken one rule at least. Michael had been hesitant, as he didn't want to break *any* rules, but he agreed. On the way back down the stairs, Kien walked in and caught them.

The fact that Michael is hesitant to break the rules again suggests that he is an exceedingly nice boy, and her parents' concerns are unwarranted and based only on race and culture. Alice, on the other hand, is looking to break the rules just to push the boundaries and feel some semblance of power over her own life.

"What were you doing upstairs with the boy?" Kien had asked. Alice told her that they were vacuuming. Michael begged Alice to just tell her parents the truth, nothing happened anyway, he said. Alice knows her mother would never believe her anyway. "I'm just going to stick with my story," she said. "Tell her *I* told you to go upstairs," Michael ordered. "No, no," he said. "Tell them that I *made* you go upstairs." He wants to save me, she thought.

Again, Michael is willing to take the blame to save Alice, which implies that he is nice guy; however, his willingness to take the heat also implies that Alice can't handle it on her own.

Now, as Alice leaves Michael at school, she knows the vacuuming story will work, just "as she knew it would from the beginning." Kuan is too embarrassed to say a thing to Alice when she gets home. "Some things" he thinks he's "better off not knowing."

Stereotypically speaking, Chinese culture is not comfortable speaking about sex and sexuality, and Alice is banking on this stereotype when she tells her parents such a ridiculous lie—a lie that also happens to depend on the stereotype that Chinese people are obsessively clean.

In the meantime, Michael tries hard to be accepted by Kuan and Kien, and when Alice does her chores at home, he offers to help. She declines and tells him to watch television. "You know," he says, "if we ever…errr…live in a domestic-type relationship, you can't do this. It unbalances things." Alice doesn't want to live with him, but if she did, she "would do anything to make his life easier." She felt indebted to him for his kindness and understanding. She is probably just wasting his time anyway, so she wants to "make it up to him." So, Alice begins to wash his clothes and cook his meals, and she even packs his bags when he goes back to college.

This too underscores Alice and Michael's cultural differences. Michael, who is trying hard to overcome Western society's own sexist tendencies, specifically tries to respect Alice's gender. While Alice deeply wants to be considered an equal, she is more concerned with the respect Michael has shown for her culture. Ultimately, Alice feels guilty because she knows she has no intention of committing to Michael. Plus, there is always the chance that her overly domestic actions will actually push him away.

Each night Alice drives Michael home, and if it is past 10:30 P.M., Kuan usually goes with them. Tonight, they opt for "quality, not quantity" time, and they drive back early so they can be alone. His room is a mess, so Alice cleans it. She finds old photographs of an ex-girlfriend, yearbooks, and even a few condoms, which she puts between the pages of *2001: A Space Odyssey*. She knows that he has had sex before, and she has no intention of having sex with him. That will "be the end," she thinks.

Michael's copy of 2001: A Space Odyssey *is another not to outside examples of storytelling, but it also represents Alice's feelings as an outcast, or an alien, in Australia's western society. Alice and Michael have a very different approach to sex, among other things, and when Alice places the condoms inside the book, she metaphorically acknowledges these differences.*

Alice is sure that Michael will not understand why she doesn't want to have sex. It isn't "only to do with her parents" either. "I only get one go in this lifetime," Alice says to him, "and I don't want to screw it up, literally speaking." Still, he tries to understand but doesn't get anywhere. "Do *I* make you happy?" he asks. Alice lies to him and begins to cry.

Alice isn't ready to make these decisions, but she clearly isn't ready to break Michael's heart either. However, if she continues to see Michael, she may jeopardize her future chances for true love—like Kien and Kuan's.

In the following days, Alice helps Michael pack and get ready to return to Perth for college. Alice takes him to a park nearby and they sit in the silence. "You brought me here to tell me something," he says. Alice tells him that she loves him, and she thinks that "love is this 'one true love forever and ever' kind of thing," but she is not ready to make that kind of decision. Michael begins to cry. Alice reaches over and wipes his nose with her sleeve. "Come on," she says, "it's snot that bad."

Alice frequently responds to uncomfortable situations with humor. When Alice breaks up with Michael it is evidence of her commitment to her family (and her mother's disapproval of Michael), but it also shows her respect for the idea of true love—she is not sure that her love for Michael is the "forever and ever" kind.

Alice and Michael laugh and then sit in the silence. "Well," Michael finally says, "I'm going to miss you." Alice says she will miss him too. After she drops him off at home, she thinks about Kuan and Kien, young and in love. Kuan wanted to live with Kien "for the rest of his life" and "see their lives multiply into four new ones."

Michael's easy acceptance is further evidence of his decency and of his respect for Alice. He doesn't try to change her mind or become angry, and he is kind up until the very end. Alice's thoughts about her parents prove that she is still optimistic regarding her chances for true love.

When Alice gets home, Kuan and Kien are sitting on the couch together, sharing a mango. "Good to see you home not so late tonight," Kuan says. "Let them eat their mango in peace," Alice thinks to herself as she goes upstairs to her room.

Kuan and Kien sitting quietly on the couch sharing a mango with each other is a reflection of their deep love. They are comfortable together and still in love after all this time, and this is the kind of relationship that sets the standard for Alice's own future.

EPILOGUE

"What are you doing, Alice?" Alina asks as Alice lays on the grass looking up at the sky. Alina lays down on the grass next to her sister. "What am I supposed to be looking at," Alina asks. "Up," Alice says. "Just up." Three small cousins lay down as well and they all look up at the sky. "Agheare, what the hell do you think you're doing?" Kien yells from across the grass.

Alice realizes that her life really is going to be all right, and just like when she realized that she must snap out of her depressed state, her love for Alina aids her in this understanding.

Alice ignores Kien. She can hear her mother telling Kuan that she is laying in the grass "with no shame," and Alice looks around the cemetery. Que is setting a bowl of soup on top of a grave, and another aunt puts out a bowl of pasta. There is a huge spread of food across the grave, and Uncle Frank stands back and admires the marker. "Eight thousand dollars," he says. "I helped pick it out." Kuan and his siblings put fake flowers on the grave, and they all stop to fight about their placement. "What a misery effort," Que says. Then, they each line up to light the incense. "Buddha bless our mother," they all say softly.

Here Alice seems no longer bothered by her mother's criticisms, which represents a major accomplishment on Alice's part. Since she was a young child, Kien has been shaming her, and Alice now knows that she has nothing to be ashamed of, least of all her Chinese heritage. This scene, which almost closes the book, is a good encapsulation of Alice's family: Chinese Buddhist culture combined the capitalist sensibilities of Australia, and humor combined with tragedy.


PUNG is written in large **gold** letters across the grave marker. "It's so deep!" Alison says as she throws rice into the open grave. Alice notices that one of the cousins has brought Easter bunny chocolates wrapped in shiny gold foil for the children. Alice thinks about Little Brother, and as they all walk away from the grave, they are told not to look back.

PUNG written in gold symbolizes the value of family, especially the elderly, within Chinese culture. The gold-wrapped Easter bunny chocolates are humorous evidence of their assimilation and Australia's multicultural society—the Pungs pray to Buddha while eating Christianity-themed chocolates.


Alice remembers back to when she was a kid and Huyen Thai still lived with them. Her grandmother had given her four solid chocolate eggs. "Don't eat them all at once," she said. Alice's cousins ate their eggs right away, but she made a small box out of paper and put them in her drawer. She had wanted them to last, so she waited four weeks until she went to eat one. When she opened the drawer, she saw that the chocolate had melted and ruined her box. There were even ants crawling around the drawer.

Alice's memory highlights the risks of hiding away cherished items of value, like Kien's gold or even her refusal to turn on the sitting room chandelier. When things—or people, for that matter—are hidden away and ignored, one runs the risk of losing them. When Kien and Kuan hide Alice away they nearly lose her, just like Alice lost her chocolate, and this also reinforces Alice's deeper message about the importance of family within Unpolished Gem.


Alice began to cry, and both Kien and Huyen Thai tried to console her. Huyen Thai offered to buy Alice more chocolate, but she didn't want new chocolate. "It doesn't matter anyway," Alice said. Huyen Thai helped Kien clean up the melted puddle, and for once, "they did not yell at Alice for making such a mess of things."

In Alice's final memory, her mother and grandmother are actually getting along, and no one is telling Alice that she ought to be ashamed of herself. In this moment, the chocolates really don't matter that much because all Alice truly needs is her family.

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