

# Chinese Cinderella



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ADELINE YEN MAH

Adeline Yen Mah was born in Tianjin, China, the fifth child of a wealthy businessman and an accountant. Yen Mah's mother died of a fever two weeks after her birth, due to birthing complications. Because of this, Yen Mah was considered to be bad luck by her family members and she was mistreated by most of her siblings for her entire childhood. A year after his first wife's death, Yen Mah's father married a very young half-French, half-Chinese woman and had two more children with her. As described in *Chinese Cinderella*, Yen Mah's stepmother despised her stepchildren and was vicious in her mistreatment of them, creating an abusive and fearful home environment. Yen Mah spent much of her childhood in and out of boarding schools, often being moved around due to the Japanese occupation of China and Mao Zedong's march of Communism across the country, which caused many civilians to flee their homes. Though her father mostly neglected her, Yen Mah was a top student all throughout her childhood. After she won an international playwriting competition, her father decided to send her to England to study medicine, offering her an escape from her dismal childhood and abusive home. Yen Mah left China in 1952 to study at the London Hospital Medical School and, after completing her studies, established her medical practice as an anesthesiologist in California. When Yen Mah's father died, her stepmother forbade his children to read his will. After her stepmother's death two years later, Yen Mah discovered that she had been disinherited by her parents. She wrote about the period from her childhood up until discovering that she had been disinherited in her 1997 memoir, *Falling Leaves*, which went on to become a New York Times bestseller and was translated into over twenty languages. The memoir's success encouraged Yen Mah to end her medical career and commit herself to being an author. Two years later, Yen Mah published *Chinese Cinderella* as an abridged version of her memoir, covering only her childhood and aimed at a slightly younger audience. This too was a huge financial success and won a number of literary awards. Yen Mah wrote several more books for children and young adults, as well as a reflection on Chinese traditional philosophy and medicine. She also founded and heads the Falling Leaves Foundation, a cultural institution dedicated to promoting the study of Chinese history and language. Yen Mah has married twice and has two children.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Though China was the most dominant nation in Asia until the mid-1800s, Britain's defeat of China in the Opium War in 1842

put an end to their reign. After losing Hong Kong and Kowloon to the English, China continued to be defeated time and again by foreign powers for the next century, each of which set up their own domain within its borders. In the year of Yen Mah's birth, Chiang Kai-shek and the Nationalists were the closest thing China had to a national leader, though other figures vied for power, as well. Japan had occupied Beijing and Tianjin, although a number of other foreign powers controlled smaller sections of Tianjin, forming independent "concessions." Yen Mah's family initially resided in Tianjin's French concession, so, in her early years, they were governed by French leaders and French laws and taught by French nuns. In 1941, on the same day that Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, Japanese forces also invaded Tianjin's various concessions and seized control, prompting Yen Mah's father to flee the city and disappear for two years. In 1945, after Japan was defeated, a civil war broke out between Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists and Mao Zedong and the Communists. Many civilians fled the Communists as they made their way across the mainland. However, Yen Mah's parents sent her back to Tianjin, even though Mao's forces were very close to capturing it and most of the city's residents had evacuated. Fortunately, Yen Mah was rescued by an aunt and fled with her and her family to Hong Kong, which was yet a British colony and at least temporarily safe from the Communists. In 1950, the Korean War engaged the United States in the fight against the spread of Communism in Asia, which hampered its movements and prevented Mao from occupying Hong Kong, as well.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Yen Mah's memoirs provide a powerful insight into life in China in the mid-twentieth century, offering a lens into the social position of women, as well as the constant political turmoil of Japanese occupation, the Nationalists, and the Communists. Similar memoirs written by Chinese women in this era include *Red Scarf Girl* by Ji-li Jiang and *Snow Falling in Spring* by Moying Li, both of which are coming-of-age tales set during the rise of Mao Zedong. Further reflecting on the position of women in China is Jung Chang's *Wild Swans*, a biography of three generations of women in her family starting with her grandmother, whose feet were bound and whose father tried to sell her as a warlord's concubine. In its first-person account of child abuse, *Chinese Cinderella* bears much in common with Dave Pelzer's *A Child Called "It,"* published around the same time, which also provides a firsthand account of a childhood filled with malice and neglect.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Chinese Cinderella: The true story of an unwanted daughter*
- **When Written:** 1996
- **Where Written:** Anaheim, California
- **When Published:** September 7, 1999
- **Literary Period:** contemporary
- **Genre:** memoir
- **Setting:** Tianjin, Shanghai, and Hong Kong
- **Climax:** Adeline is called home to speak with Father, where he reveals that she has won an international playwriting competition.
- **Antagonist:** Niang
- **Point of View:** first-person

## EXTRA CREDIT

**The Abridged Version.** *Chinese Cinderella* is an abridged version of the author's 1997 memoir, *Falling Leaves*, covering only her childhood and aimed at young adults.



## PLOT SUMMARY

*Chinese Cinderella* is the true memoir of Adeline Yen Mah's childhood, describing her life up until she is fourteen years old. Adeline is born to a wealthy family in Tianjin, China, as their fifth child. Her mother dies due to birth complications and her family thus views Adeline as "bad luck" and a curse upon them. One year later, Adeline's Father marries a half-Chinese, half-French woman whom the family calls Niang. Niang despises the five children from her husband's first marriage and heavily favors her own two biological children, Fourth Brother and Little Sister. Denied love from her parents as well as most of her siblings, Adeline relies on the affections of her Aunt Baba, Grandfather Ye Ye, and Grandmother Nai Nai, all of whom live with the family. Beginning in her first week of kindergarten, Adeline proves herself to be a talented scholar, earning the honor of top student nearly every week.

Most of China is occupied by Japan, including Tianjin. Father, a businessman, faces increased pressure from the Japanese rulers to make them his business partners, something he does not wish to do. One day, Father disappears, having fled to Shanghai. Niang and her son, Fourth Brother, follow suit some months later, also disappearing without explanation. The stepchildren and Niang's infant daughter live under the care of their grandparents and thrive in the absence of Niang. However, Nai Nai dies of a stroke some months later. Six weeks after her death, Father arrives secretly in Tianjin (still fearing the Japanese) to take his children back to Shanghai with him, though Third Brother and Little Sister will remain for a few months in Tianjin with Ye Ye and Aunt Baba. When the children arrive in Shanghai and reach Father's new house, they are

shocked by its luxurious, expensive decorations. Immediately, Niang explains the new rules of the household to them: All of the stepchildren will share rooms on the third floor while Father and Niang, as well as Niang's favored children, will have their own luxurious rooms on the second floor; the stepchildren are not allowed to have friends over to their house nor go to friends' houses; the stepchildren must only use the backdoor by the servants' quarters. The stepchildren are embittered by this as they realize Niang has made them into second-class citizens in their own home.

On Adeline's first day at her new school, the family forgets to arrange for someone to bring her there. Fortunately, the cook takes pity on her and brings her on his bicycle. After school, no one in the family arrives to pick her up or even notices she has not come home. After waiting for hours, six-year-old Adeline wanders through the streets of Shanghai alone until dark, when she finally finds a phone to call Father. When this happens, Adeline realizes that, without Aunt Baba, no one in the family is looking out for her.

When Ye Ye, Aunt Baba, Third Brother, and Little Sister arrive some months later, Little Sister, now a toddler, does not recognize Niang as her own mother or want to be near her. Niang is enraged and beats her daughter. When none of the adults intervene, Adeline finally speaks up and tells Niang to stop hitting Little Sister, since she is still just a baby. This infuriates Niang and earns Adeline Niang's eternal wrath. Father and Niang find myriad ways to make the stepchildren suffer, such as refusing the stepchildren basic amenities, including fare to take the tram to and from school, and demanding that they walk several miles each direction unless they come begging to Niang.

The stepchildren are further humiliated during Chinese New Year when they are given outdated, shabby traditional outfits and Niang's own children are given high-quality, expensive, modern clothing to wear, becoming exceptionally conceited about their privilege. This prompts the stepchildren to attempt to organize a resistance to Niang, though she quickly discovers this and sabotages them by buying the loyalty of Big Sister, who was the group's leader. Big Sister becomes as conceited as Niang's children and spies on her own siblings for Niang, causing even more enmity and resentment in the family.

Despite her horrid life at home, Adeline excels in school and has many good friends there, the best of whom is Wu Chun-mei. Chun-mei loans Adeline books and walks with her to school when she realizes that Adeline will not accept rides from her chauffeur. After the Allies defeat Japan in World War II, Father, Niang, Big Sister, Fourth Brother, and Little Sister all leave Shanghai to return to newly-liberated Tianjin. The household in Shanghai once again becomes much more peaceful and pleasant, though Adeline is still occasionally bullied by her brothers. Adeline grows close to Ye Ye and Third Brother during this time. Several months later, shortly after Father and

Niang and the other children return, the children are each gifted with a pet duckling by family friends. Adeline names her duckling Precious Little Treasure, or **PLT** for short, and loves and cares for it with all her heart. However, one evening, Father decides that he wants to have fun with his German Shepherd by watching it attack one of the children's ducklings, and PLT is chosen. The duckling is killed in front of Adeline and she is horrified and heartbroken.

Two years later, Niang arranges for Big Sister to be married to a doctor who is twice her age, the thought of which frightens Adeline. Months after the wedding, Chun-mei wants to celebrate her birthday, but only if Adeline can attend the party. Adeline keeps refusing, since she is not allowed to visit friends' houses, but eventually relents and creates a scheme to go to the party while Niang believes her to be at school. Niang discovers the ploy and beats Adeline, also discovering pocket money that Aunt Baba illicitly gave her, with which she had meant to buy Chun-mei a gift. Father also beats Adeline with a dog whip when he arrives home and resolves that Aunt Baba is a bad influence on Adeline and the two must be separated.

A couple days later, Adeline is democratically elected class president and student leader of the school. She is thrilled, having forgotten the horrors of the past few days to some degree. However, Adeline's school friends secretly follow her home to throw her a surprise party, unaware of Adeline's bad home environment. Niang is enraged by this, screaming and beating Adeline within earshot of her friends, leaving visible marks and causing her to bleed. After Adeline tells her friends they must go home, Father and Niang force her to throw the congratulatory gifts her friends had given her in the trash. Father and Niang decide that they will no longer care for Adeline and tell her she will be given to an orphanage.

Within days, Father and Niang take Adeline to Tianjin, even though most people are fleeing the city because of the civil war and the approach of the Communist army. They leave Adeline at the boarding school where she had attended kindergarten and fly back to Shanghai, abandoning her. The school's enrollment swiftly dwindles as students flee the city with their families; eventually, Adeline is the only child left, kept company only by a few nuns. She spends Christmas and New Year's there before being rescued by Niang's sister, Aunt Reine, and her husband and two children, Claudine and Victor. The family takes Adeline with them and flees to Hong Kong via ship, where Adeline's parents have also fled after Shanghai was captured by the Communists.

Though Adeline is initially wary of Aunt Reine, assuming she will be like Niang, Aunt Reine accepts Adeline as one of her own children and is kind and generous to her. Adeline develops close relationships with Claudine and Victor as well, getting her first experience of living in a normal, healthy family. Their ship arrives in Hong Kong and Adeline is reunited with her family, though it is days before Father or Niang even acknowledge her

existence. Ye Ye is happy to see her, but he seems older and more defeated than last time Adeline had seen him. Aunt Reine's family stays to visit for a week, but as soon as they have left the city, Adeline is placed in another boarding school in Hong Kong.

Adeline excels in her academics once again and has a few close friends, but she never manages to confide in them about her abusive family life. She also feels rather pathetic, since Father and Niang refuse to buy her properly fitting clothes or anything that is not worn out. Despite her impressive intelligence, Adeline most often feels shabby and inadequate. During this time, she begs her parents to send her to study in England, where two of her brothers are already in college, but Father and Niang ignore her.

At the end of her first term, Adeline comes down with pneumonia and is hospitalized. She recovers after several weeks, taking a week to rest at home. During a conversation with Third Brother and Ye Ye, Adeline finally expresses how sad and frustrated she is, how she feels like she has no future, and how low her self-esteem is. Ye Ye rebukes her for this, telling her that only she can have control over who she will be and what she will achieve. Realizing that her own self-loathing and defeatism also hurts Ye Ye, Adeline promises him that she will make something of herself. Father and Niang send Adeline back to the boarding school a week before the next term starts. With nothing to do, Adeline decides to enter an international playwriting contest. She writes a play with a heroine who is similar to herself, and expresses all of the painful repressed feelings of her childhood through the character. She dedicates the play to Ye Ye and sends it to be judged, but does not hear anything about it for over six months.

Ye Ye dies that year and Adeline attends his funeral. She is the only member of the family who cries at the loss. Niang also announces that Father will no longer pay for Adeline's schooling after this term. Adeline falls into a heavy, anxious depression for several weeks. In the midst of this, however, Father's chauffeur takes her to discuss something with Father. She is initially fearful, but when she speaks with Father, he reveals that she has won the playwriting competition and brought Hong Kong and him great honor. As a reward, Father agrees to send Adeline to study in England with Third Brother, where she will study medicine.

The last chapter is a letter from Aunt Baba, responding to a letter Adeline had sent her from Singapore, on her voyage to England. Aunt Baba is proud of her for enduring her difficult childhood and compares her life to the story of Ye Xian, a character from Chinese folklore who seems to be the original version of the English fairytale of Cinderella.



## CHARACTERS

## MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Adeline Yen (Jun-Ling / Wu-Mei)Niang** – Adeline is the narrator and protagonist of the memoir, which describes her coming-of-age in an abusive home. Born the fifth child of a wealthy businessman in Tianjin, China, Adeline is blamed for the death of her mother, who died giving birth to her. This earns her the resentment of her siblings and Father. Father's second wife, , also hates Adeline and makes her the primary target of her fury. Altogether, Adeline's family life becomes defined by abuse and neglect, both from her siblings and her parents. Despite this, Adeline is a terrific writer and scholar, constantly winning awards for being the top student at every school she attends. Though she hopes to earn Father's love by bringing him honor in this way, Father pays her little attention. This leads Adeline to have a very low view of herself, despite her academic achievements and the clear intelligence that Aunt Baba, Grandfather Ye Ye, and school friends see in her. The primary arc of Adeline's character development is her journey to recognizing her own self-worth amidst the hardship she endures in the family home. She is aided in this by the shelter and love of Aunt Baba and Ye Ye, though they are unable to shield her from Father and Niang's abuse. Even so, both family members play a vital role in fostering Adeline's compassion and thoughtfulness in the face of her siblings' and parents' cruelty. Adeline makes a critical step towards believing in her own value when she realizes that her self-contempt hurts not only her, but also the people who love her and want to see her succeed, particularly Ye Ye. By realizing that Ye Ye's only hope in life is that she will overcome the difficulties of her childhood, Adeline's compassion and wish to honor her grandfather begin to supersede the negative messages she has absorbed from her parents. Emboldened by this, Adeline enters and wins an international playwriting competition, causing Father to recognize her potential and send her to college in England, offering a symbolic and literal escape from the oppression of her childhood.

**Niang (Jeanne Proserpi)** – Niang is Father's second wife and Adeline's abusive stepmother. She is the memoir's primary antagonist. Niang is a half-French, half-Chinese, and her European heritage contributes to her extreme vanity. She despises the five children of her husband's first marriage, favoring her own two biological children to an extreme degree by giving her children good food, fashionable modern clothing, and every luxury they desire, while denying the stepchildren any provision aside from the barest minimum. However, even towards her own children, Niang is occasionally psychotic and abusive: when Little Sister is reunited with Niang as a toddler, Niang beats her furiously for not wanting to be held by Niang and for accidentally breaking her necklace. Niang also demonstrates an extreme level of narcissism and is enraged

anytime that Adeline—whom she hates and regards as utterly worthless—has any sort of success or happiness, such as when her friends throw a surprise party to celebrate Adeline's election as class president. Though the youngest adult in the house by many years, Niang dominates the family, due in part to her control over Father and in part to her furious demeanor. She subjugates both Ye Ye and Aunt Baba, especially when they show compassion to the stepchildren—this causes Aunt Baba to go live in Communist-controlled Shanghai after Adeline has been sent away, rather than in the same house as Niang. Pointedly, Niang is never depicted as having any character development. She is depicted as evil and selfish throughout the length of the memoir until Adeline leaves for England.

**Father (Joseph Yen)** – Father is a wealthy businessman, husband of Niang, and father of Adeline and her siblings. Father is depicted as largely negligent of his own children, concerned more with his success as a businessman and his honor in the community. The rare occasions when he shows Adeline any affection are only when she brings him honor by winning academic awards. Aside from those instances, Father is either neglectful or abusive of Adeline: he forgets her own name, cruelly kills her pet duckling **PLT** for his own pleasure, beats her with a dog whip, and constantly tells her she will amount to nothing. Father's only loyalty is to Niang, even at the expense of his own children or his father, Ye Ye. He cooperates with Niang's various schemes to humiliate and oppress the five children of his first marriage, and, after the death of his mother Nai Nai, he orders all pictures of his first wife—the mother of his children—destroyed and forbids anyone from speaking about her. This indicates his desire to put his past life behind him and commit himself fully to Niang, even at the expense of his children. However, Father faces pressures of his own. When the Japanese occupy Tianjin, he is pressured to submit to making them his business partners. He resists this and, fearing for his life, flees to Shanghai and hides there for years, leaving most of his family behind for a significant portion of that time. Like Niang, Father is depicted as having little development over the course of the story. Though he does finally recognize Adeline's potential after she wins the playwriting contest, this seems to be less out of recognition of her value and more out of appreciation for the honor that he receives through her accomplishments.

**Grandfather Ye Ye** – Ye Ye is the father of Adeline's Father and Aunt Baba, husband of Grandmother Nai Nai, and thus the grandfather of all of the children. He lives with the family and is dependent on them to live. Although Ye Ye should be the patriarch of the family and play a role of authority, he is subjugated by Niang (and by Father's commitment to her), becoming over the course of the memoir a sad, defeated old man "imprisoned by his love for his only son." However, Ye Ye is compassionate toward his grandchildren, whom Niang and Father mistreat, secretly giving them money to pay the tram

fare and giving much-needed love and affirmation to Adeline. Ye Ye expresses that he is saddened by the way many of the children turned out, especially Big Sister, and he hopes that Adeline will rise to a better future through her intelligence and compassion. In this way, Ye Ye plays a vital role in Adeline's development and recognition of her own worth. He encourages Adeline to believe in her ability to shape her own destiny and to reject the messages she has received from Niang, Father, and her siblings, which ultimately gives her the necessary initiative to enter the playwriting competition (which becomes her way of escaping the abuse of her family). Ye Ye dies near the end of the story and is given a Buddhist funeral, of which he was a devout practitioner.

**Grandmother Nai Nai** – Nai Nai is the wife of Ye Ye, mother of Adeline's Father, and grandmother of all of the children. She lives with the family and is dependent on them to live. Nai Nai was born in a more traditional era of China, and thus had her feet bound as a young child to keep them small and feminine-looking, crushing the bones and permanently maiming her. Nai Nai resents this for the rest of her life, and she encourages Adeline multiple times to be thankful that times have changed and Adeline has healthy, regular feet that can run and jump and play. In this way, Nai Nai serves mainly to highlight the changing role of women in China as the country modernizes. Although Adeline still faces hardship and some limiting of possibilities as a girl, these obstacles are nothing compared to what Nai Nai experienced. Nai Nai dies of a stroke when Adeline is in primary school.

**Aunt Baba** – Aunt Baba is the sister of Adeline's Father, the daughter of Ye Ye, and the aunt of all of the children. Aunt Baba is unmarried, and so she lives with the family and is financially dependent on them, meaning that she is not in the position to defy Niang or Father when they are cruel and abusive. Although Aunt Baba was close friends with Adeline's mother and was grieved by her death, she does not share the family's resentment of Adeline. Rather, she is the most consistently loving and supportive figure in Adeline's life. When Adeline brings home her report cards and certificates that declare her to be a top student, Aunt Baba cherishes them so much that she keeps them locked in her personal safe next to her jewelry. Although Aunt Baba cannot compensate for the missing love from Adeline's parents, her support does soften the blow. Aunt Baba is the first person to tell Adeline that she is precious and smart enough to become anything she wants to be in life, as long as she is able to escape the trauma and negative messages of her childhood. This spurs Adeline's eventual development towards realizing her own self-worth. Unfortunately, Father and Niang despise Aunt Baba's love for Adeline—which contrasts with their own hatred of her—and view Aunt Baba as a "bad influence" on their daughter. The parents successfully separate Adeline and Aunt Baba and intercept any letters they try to send each other for several years, effectively ending Aunt

Baba's involvement halfway through the memoir, when Adeline is sent to boarding school in Tianjin.

**Third Brother (James)** – Third Brother is the youngest son of Father's first marriage, he is the stepson of Niang, and the second youngest of the stepchildren. Third Brother is the only sibling that Adeline has a fond relationship with. Although Third Brother shares some of Adeline's kindness and compassion, in the presence of his other siblings he adopts their cruelty to avoid standing out and becoming a target himself. This sometimes involves hurting Adeline—including one instance in which, at the urging of his brothers, he convinces Adeline to drink orange juice with urine in it, betraying her trust in him for the sake of a prank. In this way, Third Brother demonstrates the way that a toxic family can overwhelm a child's instinct towards kindness—although he desires to be kind, and is kind when he is away from the other siblings, he succumbs to the pressure to be ruthless in order to lessen his own suffering. Adeline recognizes this and grieves the slow loss of his integrity, seeing that in a better environment he could be a better person. Even so, Third Brother's compassion persists: he helps Adeline hold a funeral for her dead pet **PLT**, he tells her that life will not always be so grim, and he shows love and respect for Ye Ye. Adeline is sent with Third Brother to study in England and, though it is not delved into, the suggestion is that, removed from his family, he will grow into a better man.

**Wu Chun-mei** – Wu Chun-mei is the daughter of a wealthy merchant family and becomes Adeline's best friend during her years in Shanghai. Chun-mei is a remarkable athlete, initially catching Adeline's interest with her prowess in any sport or game. However, the two bond most over their love of reading, and Chun-mei often loans Adeline books to read in exchange for help with arithmetic. Although Chun-mei is unaware of Adeline's abusive home life, she seems to intuit that Adeline suffers in some way and responds by being a fiercely loyal friend, walking to and from school with Adeline for miles as an act of solidarity, even though her chauffeur is right behind them both. She also refuses to have her birthday party unless Adeline can attend—despite the fact that many other friends can attend—showing to Adeline that she is cherished by the people around her. In this way, Chun-mei demonstrates the ways in which good friends are invaluable to individuals enduring abusive or traumatic situations. Chun-mei inadvertently discovers the abuse that Adeline suffers from her parents when, after helping Adeline become the democratically-elected class president, she organizes a surprise party of friends who follow Adeline home and witness Niang screaming and beating Adeline until she bleeds from her face. As Chun-mei leaves, still loyal to Adeline, she shouts at Niang and Father that such treatment is cruel and unfair. Adeline is taken to Tianjin days later as result of this incident, and the two never see each other again.

**Big Sister (Lydia)** – Big Sister is the first daughter of Father's

first marriage, stepdaughter of Niang, and eldest of the stepchildren. Big Sister is cruel and manipulative, using her debilitated left arm as an excuse to bully her siblings into doing her chores. Early on, Big Sister is resentful of any time that Adeline earns Father's brief affection through her academic achievements, finding ways to make Adeline suffer for it and inspiring the other siblings to be similarly cruel. Although Big Sister is initially defiant of Niang's mistreatment and leads the stepchildren's short-lived resistance against her, Niang easily buys her off with favorable treatment and gifts. Big Sister flips on her siblings, spying on them for Niang and becoming similarly haughty and vicious, demonstrating herself to have virtually no moral character and effectively casting her as a younger version of Niang. When Big Sister is seventeen years old, Niang marries her off to a man twice her age. Though Big Sister seems happy about the arrangement, it disturbs Adeline and causes her to fear that the same fate will be thrust upon her. In this way, Big Sister represents an alternate fate for Adeline, the threat that comes with being a woman in Twentieth Century China. After the wedding, Big Sister departs and plays no further role in the story.

**Big Brother (Gregory)** – Big Brother is eldest son of Father's first marriage, stepson of Niang, and second eldest of the stepchildren. Though he is occasionally kind to Adeline, Big Brother is most often depicted as a mean and selfish prankster, though he does share some kinship with his own brothers. When Father decides that he wants to watch his dog kill one of the children's pet ducklings, Big Brother picks Adeline's since he knows she will not retaliate, demonstrating his cowardice and further showing how a toxic family can condition children to be cruel to each other. Big Brother is also initially the most defiant to Niang's mistreatment, though he is the first to be sent to study overseas, and so he receives the earliest escape, thus having less presence in the memoir.

**Second Brother (Edgar)** – Second Brother is the third child of Father's first marriage, stepson of Niang, and middle of the stepchildren. Though it is never fully revealed why, Second Brother is the cruelest sibling towards Adeline. He constantly blames her for their mother's death, demeans her, and physically assaults her (often punching her hard in the back of the head). Second Brother similarly despises Niang and the humiliation she puts them through, though his wanton cruelty echoes her own, demonstrating the way in which children often absorb the abusive, cruel behavior they see modeled by their parents. Second Brother also leaves to study in England fairly early, removing him from the memoir's second half.

**Fourth Brother (Franklin)** – Fourth Brother is the first child of Father's second marriage, and he is Niang's eldest and favorite child. As one of Niang's biological children, he is favored above the stepchildren and given every luxury that can be offered in the face of the stepchildren's comparative poverty. Although Adeline does not often describe her interactions with Fourth

Brother, he is depicted as haughty, enjoying his elevated position over his older stepsiblings. He panders to Niang's cruelty. When Little Sister, being reunited with Niang as a toddler, struggles against her mother, Fourth Brother screams at her to try to please Niang. As an older child, Fourth Brother tries to drop heavy encyclopedias on Ye Ye's frail head as a wicked prank, though it would certainly result in a serious injury. Furthermore, Fourth Brother knows that he is impervious to punishment since he is Niang's favorite, even after trying to assault Father's father. Fourth Brother's character develops little over the course of the story, but what little it does only shows him as becoming more and more vicious.

**Little Sister (Susan)** – Little Sister is the second child of Father's second marriage, the youngest of Niang's biological children, and youngest of all the children in the household. For much of the memoir, Little Sister is only a baby. Although Niang viciously beats her when she is a toddler, Little Sister otherwise seems to settle into her position as one of the privileged children, as she takes on Fourth Brother's haughtiness. However, when Fourth Brother tries to hurt Ye Ye with the encyclopedias, she chastises him for his cruelty, indicating that she bears at least some level of empathy and respect for her grandfather.

**Aunt Reine** – Aunt Reine is Niang's older sister, mother of Claudine and Victor, and Adeline's aunt. Aunt Reine and her family rescues Adeline from Tianjin and the Communists by taking her with them aboard a ferry destined for Hong Kong. Although Adeline assumes that Aunt Reine will be just like Niang, she quickly discovers that her aunt is quite the opposite. Aunt Reine treats Adeline as if she were one of her own children, a stark contrast to Niang's blatant favoritism. When, aboard the ferry, it is clear that someone will have to sleep on a low cot instead of an uncomfortable bed, Aunt Reine determines that they will draw lots for it. Aunt Reine herself draws, opening the possibility that, even though she is an authority figure, she may be humbled to the least comfortable accommodation. This is a shock to Adeline, who is so accustomed to Niang's unbridled narcissism that she cannot fathom a mother figure who is not domineering and selfish. Aunt Reine and her family play the critical part of demonstrating to Adeline what a healthy, normally-functioning family can look. The days that Adeline spends aboard the ferry with Aunt Reine and her family are some of the happiest of her young life. However, in the presence of Niang, Aunt Reine does not object to the unequal treatment of Adeline, indicating that she, too, unfortunately falls subject to Niang's power. After arriving in Hong Kong and visiting for a week, Aunt Reine and her family travel on to Geneva.

**Victor** – Victor is the older brother of Claudine, son of Aunt Reine, and cousin of Adeline. Victor is the model brother to Claudine, being chivalrous, protective, and sensitive to her

feelings, even though he does occasionally tease her. He is good-humored and just as kind to Adeline as to Claudine, creating a sharp contrast to Adeline's own brothers. With Aunt Reine, Victor helps to demonstrate for Adeline what a healthy family can look like. However, when Victor sees that Niang treats Adeline unfairly, he shows more courage than his mother and openly defies Niang. Rather than going on a Sunday outing, Victor chooses to stay home to keep Adeline company. Adeline is overwhelmed by his chivalry, having never experienced anything close to it from her own brothers, and she gifts Victor a book of origami that he had enjoyed using with her. After their weeks together aboard the ferry and a week in Hong Kong, Victor travels away to Geneva.

**Claudine** – Claudine is the younger sister of Victor, daughter of Aunt Reine, and younger cousin of Adeline. Like her brother, Claudine helps to demonstrate what a healthy family can look like and shares the love that they all feel for each other with Adeline. Claudine's good character is highlighted when, having drawn the lot to sleep on the uncomfortable cot on the ferry, she does so happily, without complaint. This is an act of selflessness that Adeline has never seen from any of her siblings, and Claudine's contentedness makes a strong impression on Adeline. Claudine also leaves with her family for Geneva after their visit in Hong Kong.

**Rachel Yu** – Rachel is a close friend of Adeline during the years spent at the boarding school in Hong Kong. Rachel is kind and considerate, but Adeline is reticent to tell Rachel of her suffering, in part because Rachel suffers in her own way—her father has devoted his life to her success, but this leads her to feel smothered by his expectations. In an important moment for Adeline's development, Rachel and her friends invite Adeline to play a game in which each person compares what they like most about themselves with what the group believes are their best qualities. When Adeline admits that she like nothing about herself, Rachel counters her response, telling her that all of their friends believe Adeline is the “most likely to succeed,” bolstering her confidence.

**Mary Suen** – Mary is a close friend of Adeline during the years spent at boarding school. Mary is kind and considerate, visiting Adeline every day in the hospital when she is stricken with pneumonia one summer. Even so, Adeline cannot bring herself to share her own pain, knowing that Mary's home life is also difficult—Mary's father has a mistress and a second family whom he spends all of his time with, bringing much strife to the household and shame to her mother.

**Mother Marie** – Mother Marie is the nun who spends the most time with Adeline when she is abandoned by her parents at the boarding school in Tianjin. Although Mother Maria initially is harsh and makes fun of Adeline for her poor English, when she discovers that Adeline has a sense of humor even in difficult circumstances, her demeanor softens.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Miss Chien** – Miss Chien is a nanny hired by Niang when the family lives in Hong Kong, but whose real purpose seems to be to spy on the stepchildren. Although Big Sister initially despises Miss Chien as much as the other children, she befriends her once Niang buys her off.

**Monica Lim** – Monica is Adeline's rival at the boarding school in Hong Kong. In contrast to Adeline, Monica is stylish, elegant, and doted upon by her parents and the nuns who run the school. Though Monica is several years older, Adeline begins to surpass her in academics, earning Monica's callous resentment.

**Grand Aunt** – Grand Aunt is Father's sister who gifts the jade pendant to Big Sister for her wedding.



## 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.



### PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL ABUSE

In *Chinese Cinderella*, Adeline Yen Mah tells the story of her painful childhood in China as an unwanted daughter of cruel and abusive parents.

Although the physical abuse inflicted by her Father and her stepmother Niang is painful and frightening, it is their emotional abuse that ultimately does the most lasting harm and remains with Adeline even into adulthood. Her story demonstrates the way that the emotional trauma of abuse can be more damaging to children than physical trauma, lingering long after the scars of physical abuse have faded and often having a lifelong impact.

Both Father and Niang physically abuse Adeline multiple times, which is both painful and dangerous. However, this physical harm can only be inflicted while she is living under their roof, indicating that while physical abuse is very painful in the moment, it at least can be escaped from. Adeline is hit, beaten, and whipped, given meager food, and forced to walk to and from school as a very young child, even in cold weather and harsh storms. All of these cruelties pose considerable risks to her physical safety. However, when Adeline is away from her parents—either at a local school, away at boarding school, or traveling with another family—she is safe from their physical abuse. This is perhaps most evidenced by the fact that when Adeline learns she will be placed in another boarding school in Hong Kong rather than going to live with her family, she is actually thrilled by the distance it puts between her and her parents, keeping her out of arm's reach. In the same way, even when living under her parents' roof in Shanghai, school

becomes a place of safety where Niang cannot reach her. This shows that, while physical abuse is still terrible and harmful, it can be escaped by changes in environment or circumstance.

In contrast, the emotional abuse that Adeline suffers from being an unwanted—even hated—child follows her no matter where she is. Adeline's her parents' emotional abuse, though not as immediately dangerous as the physical abuse, is nonetheless severe: Adeline is constantly demeaned, told that she is stupid, ugly, and worthless. Niang tells Adeline that she hates her most of all and goes out of her way to prove it. Father forgets Adeline's given name, showing his neglect and apathy towards her. Both Father and Niang pay no regard to Adeline's welfare and rarely offer any words that are not intended to be hurtful or shaming. Even when Adeline lives in boarding schools and is safe from her parents' physical abuse, she is still tormented by the pain of their neglect and their refusal to love her. At night, she often reads under her covers to pass the hours because she is tormented by "terrifying thoughts" and "nameless monsters of the deep" which make it difficult to sleep. This ongoing struggle indicates that, although she is (for the moment) safe from being struck or whipped, the emotional trauma she has endured from her parents follows her wherever she goes.

Even as an adult, Adeline admits that she is still scarred by the emotional abuse and lack of acceptance from her parents, illustrating how the emotional wounds inflicted by childhood abuse can continue to bring pain long after the abused individual has found safety and shelter. Although Adeline goes on to study at Oxford and become both a doctor and a celebrated author, she describes her adult self as "the same little five-year-old yearning for the love of my parents." She has found success, freedom from her family, and safety, and yet the emotional wounds of childhood still remain with her. This underscores the manner in which the emotional trauma of childhood abuse may remain with someone for decades, perhaps even a lifetime, long after they have escaped the abusive situation and reckoned with their past.

Adeline's heartbreaking account of her childhood illuminates the ways in which different kinds of childhood abuse affect an individual. Although the pain of physical abuse is most frightening and immediately dangerous in the moment, it is also temporary. Adeline's story reveals that it is the emotional trauma of being unloved and unwanted that remains the longest.



### COMING OF AGE AND SELF-WORTH

Adeline Yen Mah's memoir is a coming-of-age story colored by her abusive childhood; it is an account of her journey of survival and overcoming trauma.

After being raised in such a demeaning environment, Adeline takes her first steps towards overcoming her childhood and entering adulthood when she begins to learn to base her self-

worth on her own abilities and her capacity to create a new future, rather than on the approval or acceptance of her parents. People thrive, the memoir suggests, when their self-worth comes from within themselves, rather than from others.

When she is a child, Adeline's self-esteem is constantly attacked by her parents and her siblings, leading her to have a very low opinion of herself. Since Adeline's biological mother died due to complications from Adeline's birth, the whole family—aside from Aunt Baba and Grandfather Ye Ye—considers her to be bad luck. Niang constantly tells Adeline that she has "bad blood" from her mother and will never amount to anything. These things are factually untrue, but Adeline comes to believe them anyway, showing how external judgment can impact the inner life of a young child. Although Adeline is constantly the top student in her classes and is often surrounded by good friends who truly care for her, she believes herself to be worthless. This is exemplified when, as a young teenager, Adeline and several friends are playing a game where they each compare what they think are their own best qualities against what their friends believe them to be. When it is Adeline's turn to compare, she claims that she has no good qualities. Her friends are shocked, as they all believe her to be the most intelligent and most likely to succeed. This highlights the disconnect between Adeline's beliefs about herself—which she has absorbed from her parents and siblings—and the reality of her true potential, which most other people recognize.

Adeline begins to rise above her childhood when Ye Ye helps her to realize that she does not have to see herself as the rest of her family sees her. Through this support, Adeline starts to recognize her own skills and abilities and realize that her self-worth can come from within. In a critical moment of her development, Adeline finally admits to Ye Ye all of the thoughts she has repressed for so long: that she will never succeed, that no one loves her, that she does not even love herself, that she has difficulty coping with the pain of her home life. This honest admission gives Ye Ye the opportunity to encourage Adeline to see herself for all her strengths, rather than whatever her parents or siblings may see. Ye Ye tells her, "You have your whole life ahead of you. Everything is possible! ... But you can only vanquish your demons when you yourself are convinced of your own worth." Adeline is further encouraged to see her own value when she realizes that her self-loathing and defeatism pains not only her, but Ye Ye as well, since her grandfather loves her most of all and wants to see her thrive. This realization taps into Adeline's compassion for others and helps her see that her struggle to recognize her own self-worth impacts not just her, but the people who love her, as well.

Adeline truly comes of age when she finally believes that, with hard work and determination, she can shape her future to be whatever she wants it to be. This suggests that a critical aspect of coming of age, especially in light of an abusive past, is discovering that one has control over one's own self and

destiny. Adeline's hard work pays off when she wins an international playwriting competition, prompting Father to finally recognize her potential and send her to study in England. This marks one of the first times in her life that Adeline has felt any sort of control over her future, and this development is critical in developing her confidence, self-reliance, and, in turn, her own worth in her mind. Sadly, this event does not mark any improvement in Father's character—he is mainly proud of Adeline because she has brought him honor. Furthermore, though she desires to study literature and creative writing, he still exercises his control over her, dictating that she will become a doctor. Even so, Adeline's hard work and talent has opened a door that was previously closed to her, giving her the chance to create a new life overseas. This marks a milestone in Adeline's growth as a person and also in her journey to be free of her parents' tyranny.

Although the story of *Chinese Cinderella* ends before Adeline has fully reached her adulthood, its narration's end marks the beginning of Adeline's new life in which she is no longer held down by the abuse of her parents, but rather paves her own path to the future. By finally recognizing the inherent value of her own intelligence and abilities—as opposed to believing the demeaning ideas about herself that she received from her parents—Adeline is able to make the first critical steps in leaving her childhood behind.



### THE POWER OF STORIES

Although young Adeline stumbles into writing stories “by accident,” she immediately falls in love with it. She is compelled by her newfound ability to reshape the world around her and to hear other people express many of the pained emotions she has long felt but been unable to voice. Story-writing, Adeline discovers, offers her a reprieve from the “horrors of [her] daily life,” allowing her mind to focus entirely on the process of crafting a new story. For Adeline, reading and writing stories becomes a way to escape from her dismal childhood, demonstrating the power of stories and how they can play an important role in helping individuals process and handle abuse or trauma.

As a young child, Adeline uses her written stories to reimagine herself as bold and powerful rather than powerless and afraid, showing how storytelling can help traumatized individuals counteract the negative messages they receive from others. Beyond just escaping her real life, Adeline discovers that she can use writing to re-envision herself. Though her parents and siblings demean her and make her feel powerless, Adeline writes stories about herself as the strong and courageous warrior, Mulan. These stories become a way for Adeline to help counteract the negative messages she hears about herself from her family. Adeline is able to share these stories—and their positive ideas about herself—with her friends, who love them and eagerly await each new episode. In this way, Adeline not

only mends her own self-image but also shares that strengthened identity with the people around her. This further suggests that Adeline, or any other traumatized individual, has the ability to reshape their perception of reality through storytelling and use that new reality to form positive connections with others.

Expressed in the stories of others, Adeline finds the secret pains that she herself has yet to voice. This suggests that reading literature can also offer a reprieve from the emotional isolation of trauma and help give voice to emotions that may seem too heavy to express. One of the most poignant examples of this is the sadness Adeline has for the defeat that Grandfather Ye Ye must feel. Ye Ye has been completely disempowered as the family's patriarch by Niang's dominance and viciousness and reduced to a sad, silent man waiting out the end of his days. Reading Shakespeare's [King Lear](#), Adeline cries with both sorrow and relief for how well it describes Ye Ye's pain and position within the family, feeling as if Shakespeare had written the story as an ode to her grandfather to give voice to Ye Ye's sorrow. The profound effect that [King Lear](#) has on Adeline illustrates the way in which, especially for people who have witnessed trauma and tragedy too great for them to yet express, literature and the stories of others can help to give voice to those feelings and offer solidarity with their pain.

Indeed, Adeline's own memoir is written for this very end. In the author's dedication, she expresses the hope that her story will encourage other children in a similarly difficult situations and show them that others have felt just as they do. The author writes in her preface that she has the “...fervent wish that [they] will persist in trying to do [their] best in the face of hopelessness...to transcend [their] abuse and transform it into a source of courage, creativity, and compassion.” Adeline's story of pain, perseverance, and eventual escape may give voice to unspoken pain for other children who feel such things but do not yet know how to express them.

Adeline eventually learns to tell her own story in the form of a play, *Gone with the Locusts*. The play expresses all of her life's pains and trials, and it both symbolically (by giving her an outlet) and literally (through the playwriting competition) helps her to escape the trauma of her home environment. When Adeline writes her play, she confronts her trauma head-on and uses her main character to finally voice all of the pain and fear and anger that she had been holding inside for so long. “Into her lips I injected my loneliness, isolation and feeling of being unwanted. To my heroine I gave everything of myself.” Through the mouth of a written character, Adeline discovers that she can finally describe her world and her family as they truly are, finding a symbolic escape from the secrecy of her abuse that she carried for so long. This suggests that, more than simply telling new tales, writing stories can also be a way to honestly and frankly tell the truth and find new freedom in it. *Gone with*

*the Locusts* wins an international competition and convinces Father to let Adeline study in England, thus escaping the abuse of the family home. In this way, Adeline's storytelling also brings her a literal escape from the trauma she has endured.

Able to finally speak the truth about what she feels—even if readers of the play do not surmise that the story is truly about her—Adeline symbolically releases herself from the hidden cruelty of her childhood through the power of story. Despite her traumatic childhood, Adeline's use of storytelling to escape and overcome her circumstances offers a compelling testimony to the power of stories to help someone cope with trauma and perhaps even escape from its overbearing grasp.



## TOXIC FAMILY

Although Adeline is abused most often, Father and Niang's cruelty affects everyone in the family. The life of the family entirely revolves around the parents' demands, desires, and preferences, creating a toxic family dynamic in which everyone is bent towards serving the whims of one or two people. Niang and Father's demand for total control and their utter selfishness has the greatest negative impact on their children, ultimately causing most of the children to become resentful of each other and similarly mean as individuals. The effects of Niang and Father's cruelty demonstrate the way in which wrathful, controlling leadership of a family can lead to an utterly toxic family dynamic, amplifying the misery of each individual and encouraging them to become similarly cruel.

Niang, with Father's cooperation, heavily favors her own biological children over the children of Father's first marriage, creating immediate division and resentment among the seven children of the household. This dynamic illustrates the way that favoritism and unequal treatment creates enmity among siblings and pits them against each other. Niang is resentful of her stepchildren's existence and goes out of her way to show that she despises them in comparison with her own biological children. Although the family is affluent and she spoils her own children with good food, new clothes, and luxurious rooms, she refuses her stepchildren even basic amenities like clothes that fit, their own rooms, and proper food. Niang even denies her stepchildren money to take the tram to school, forcing them to walk for miles through the cold winter.

This favoritism divides her children and her stepchildren. The stepchildren know that Niang hates them, and thus they view both her and her biological children as their enemies. The household fosters hatred and spite, demonstrating the terrible effects of such unjust and divisive parenting. Niang is also ruthlessly manipulative. Although Big Sister initially hates Niang since she is a stepchild, Niang buys her loyalty by treating her almost as well as her own children, turning Big Sister against the other stepchildren to break up their resistance. Big Sister becomes Niang's informant and betrays

her biological siblings with whom she was once close, earning them severe punishments from Niang. Niang's connivance and manipulation further demonstrate how a toxic parent can destroy even the relationships between siblings who may once have been united.

Almost all of the children learn to imitate the cruelty modeled by Niang and Father, demonstrating how such toxic and cruel behavior can be passed down generationally. Both the stepchildren and Niang's biological children gradually act more vicious towards Adeline, since she is the most hated by Niang, in order to curry favor from her and gain small benefits to relieve their own suffering, such as money to pay the tram fare to take them to school. This demonstrates the way in which such wretched behavior is often inherited by children from their parents. The only time that Father pays any positive attention to Adeline is when she brings him honor by excelling in school. However, this brief admiration from Father brings the hatred of the other siblings down upon Adeline, who are jealous of Father's rare praise and embarrassed that their young sister is outperforming them academically. For Adeline to even be briefly acknowledged by her Father, she must face the torment of her siblings, further demonstrating the manner in which cruel, toxic behavior may be passed down from parent to child, creating an utterly dysfunctional and malicious family dynamic.

The goodness of Ye Ye, Aunt Baba, Adeline, and even kind Third Brother are all suffocated whenever they are in Niang and Father's household. Their example shows how such a toxic family environment makes it difficult to cultivate any other personal qualities beyond cruelty or detachment. Both Ye Ye and Aunt Baba, seeing that the stepchildren are suffering, secretly give them money for basic necessities and occasional small gifts. However, this earns them the wrath of both Niang and Father, until they are dissuaded from offering the stepchildren any more aid. Ye Ye becomes defeated and resigned to the will of Niang and Father even though, as the family patriarch, he should be honored and respected. Similarly, Aunt Baba is separated from Adeline so that she cannot continue to influence Adeline with her kindness. Although Aunt Baba and Ye Ye desire to love and care for the stepchildren, Niang and Father's ruthless efforts make it clear that such an overwhelmingly toxic family environment tends to suffocate any good-natured individuals who live there. Third Brother is kind to Adeline when the others are not around, and he seems conflicted about the brutal way she is treated. However, in the presence of his older brothers or his parents, Third Brother succumbs to the pressure to be cruel to Adeline, suggesting that even for a child who wants to be kind and virtuous, the pressure to survive in such a family environment fosters cruelty and malice, rather than compassion. In light of these overall trends, it is rather extraordinary that Adeline does not succumb to such wickedness and self-serving cruelty herself.

Adeline's resilience is proof that, even in the most toxic of family environments, a kind-hearted individual may still survive, though not without experiencing extraordinary pain.



## FRIENDSHIP

Although her home life is abysmal, Adeline's childhood is full of genuine and affectionate friends.

Though they do not realize it at the time, these friends and the love they show to Adeline are critical in keeping her from utter despair. The power of Adeline's friendships suggests that a strong network of friends is crucial to enduring a traumatic situation and can even compensate for a lack of family support.

Adeline's primary school friends offer her the loyalty and love that she never receives from her siblings or parents. Adeline's close primary school friend Wu Chun-mei cherishes Adeline in a way that Niang and Father never do. When it is time for Chun-mei's birthday party, she refuses to have it until Adeline will be able to attend, even though it is less convenient for others, demonstrating that she believes Adeline to be her most precious friend and more important than her party. In this way, it is shown that the love and affection that should come from one's parents may be at least partially substituted by one's friends. While Adeline's parents refuse to ever celebrate her achievements, Adeline's school friends go out of their way to do so. When Adeline is elected class president, her friends follow her home to throw her a surprise party. Niang, enraged that Adeline is being celebrated, screams and beats her within earshot of Adeline's friends. They are shocked and saddened, but nevertheless remain loyal to Adeline, now even more determined to love and celebrate her. The commitment of Adeline's friends demonstrates how good friends may offer the affirmation and loyalty that one's family may lack.

Adeline's cousins Claudine and Victor, and their mother Aunt Reine, are an example of how a healthy family ought to interact with each other. Victor and Claudine have an affectionate relationship as brother and sister, contrasting sharply with Adeline's own relationships with her brothers. While Victor does like to tease Claudine, he is sensitive to her feelings and very careful not to take a jest too far. While they are aboard a ferry, Adeline is shocked to see Victor gently teach his sister how to equip a life-vest, an act of kindness and protectiveness that her own brothers would never do for her. Aunt Reine, in contrast to Niang, is not demanding or controlling but kind and self-sacrificing, demonstrating the way a mother ought to act towards her children. Aboard the ferry, Adeline, Aunt Reine, and Claudine are to sleep together in a small room with two beds and one cot on the floor. Adeline, conditioned to be self-deprecating by Niang, assumes that she will take the cot. Aunt Reine instead decides that the three of them will draw lots for it, meaning that it is possible Aunt Reine will take the worst sleeping arrangement even though she is the matriarch. Aunt

Reine's willingness to be uncomfortable for the sake of treating Adeline fairly paints a vivid contrast with Niang and becomes an important point of reference for Adeline to see how a loving mother should act. Aunt Reine, Claudine, and Victor are simply a normal, healthy family—and yet, to Adeline, they seem saintly. Critically, Adeline's cousins demonstrate to her how pleasant and loving a properly functioning family can be. In this way, Adeline's cousins illustrate the importance of good friends—including extended family—to help a traumatized individual maintain a connection with reality and understand that their own dismal circumstances are not the way that life has to be.

Adeline's friends become a source of hope, a light in a dark time, effectively demonstrating how, even when family has become a wretched and fearful thing, the love and kindness of others can help to carry one through difficult times.



## SYMBOLS

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



## THE HOLY OF HOLIES

The Holy of Holies is the nickname that the stepchildren give to Niang and Father's room, which becomes a representation of Niang's unlimited power over the family, wielded with Father's complicity. The name itself is telling: in the Hebrew Bible, the Holy of Holies is a room in the Jewish temple where God's physical presence literally dwells. This bitterly mocks the god-like power that Niang has ascribed to herself. The parallel is apt: In the traditional Holy of Holies, entrants would either have the opportunity to communicate directly with God or they would be struck dead, depending on their worthiness. In the same way, when the stepchildren are called into Niang's room, they are made to reckon with her on her own turf and may receive either ruthless punishment or some small reward, depending on their stepmother's mood and whether she desires to see them fearful or loyal on that day. The emotionally abusive mixture of fear and loyalty that Niang instills in the stepchildren typifies the way in which Niang wields power and instills herself as a constant, dominating force in the children's minds, even when she is not present. Niang's power—the persistent fear of her that the stepchildren carry with them, as well as the desire to appease her—is centralized in her room, the Holy of Holies, the dwelling place of the household's God.



## PLT

PLT, an acronym for Precious Little Treasure, is Adeline's pet duckling given to her by a family

friend. PLT is a symbolic parallel to Adeline herself, particularly showing her emotions and her need for love. Adeline cherishes her pet, giving it all the love she has to offer and exulting in the feeling of being needed by another. This partially echoes the love that Aunt Baba and Ye Ye have for her—particularly in the designation, “precious,” which they often use for her—but even more so demonstrates the love that Adeline should have received from Father and Niang. Adeline exhibits courage when she digs in the garden for worms to feed PLT even though Father’s dog is threatening her—just as Father should have had the courage to protect his original children from his new wife. In contrast to Niang, Adeline feels guilty when she tries to feed PLT a worm but has not brought such a treat for all the other ducklings, intuiting that such favoritism is unhealthy and unjust. The way in which Father brings about PLT’s death highlights his abject cruelty and parallels his utter disregard for Adeline’s emotional well-being and need for love: One evening, Father decides that he want to watch his dog kill one of the children’s ducklings for his own amusement, even though the family knows that Adeline loves PLT more than anything in the world. This highlights Father’s near-psychopathic level of cruelty and apathy towards his daughter. Like Adeline’s wellbeing, PLT does not die immediately, but slowly succumbs to its wounds overnight as Adeline grieves it and wishes the world could be a different place.

that pervades Adeline’s family is also a deep-seated resentment. For the stepchildren (and presumably also for Father), hating Adeline provides a way to express their pain and the trauma of losing their mother at such a young age. For such young children—they ranged between three and six years old at the time of their mother’s death—such intense trauma and grief would most likely have been too complex to express, especially with Father being as neglectful as he is and not emotionally supportive. Adeline unfortunately is made into a target for the family’s pain, a way for them to act out their grief and frustration. This indicates that, even before Niang’s arrival and subsequent abuse, the family already was mired in toxic behavior, specifically in the way that they worked out their feelings about their mother’s death.

### Chapter 3: Nai Nai’s Bound Feet Quotes

“I had a pair of perfectly normal feet when I was born, but they maimed me on purpose and gave me arthritis so I would be attractive.”

**Related Characters:** Grandmother Nai Nai (speaker), Adeline Yen (Jun-Ling / Wu-Mei)Niang, Father (Joseph Yen)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 8

#### Explanation and Analysis

Nai Nai explains to Adeline why her feet are so small: they were bound and crushed, her bones broken, when she was three years old so that her feet would stay small and feminine. Back then, no man would marry a woman with “large, unbound feet.”

Nai Nai is obviously bitter about having to be maimed and reshaped to be acceptable to society as a woman. Nai Nai’s plight presents an interesting parallel to Adeline’s own life, specifically to her hope of winning Father’s acceptance. Just as Nai Nai’s unbound feet were not good enough for society to accept her as a woman, Adeline, as a daughter, is not enough on her own to merit Father’s acceptance. The only opportunity for Adeline to receive his love is to struggle and earn as many academic accomplishments as she can in the hope that, if she brings him enough honor, he will someday love her. And even this, most often, does not prove to be enough.

In the brief time that she is a part of Adeline’s life, Nai Nai also highlights the shifting role of women in twentieth-



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Ember edition of *Chinese Cinderella* published in 2010.

### Chapter 1: Top of the Class Quotes

“But then Mama died giving birth to you. If you had not been born, Mama would still be alive. She died because of you. You are bad luck.”

**Related Characters:** Big Sister (Lydia) (speaker), Adeline Yen (Jun-Ling / Wu-Mei)Niang, Niang (Jeanne Prosperi), Third Brother (James), Second Brother (Edgar), Big Brother (Gregory), Father (Joseph Yen)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 3

#### Explanation and Analysis

When Adeline is only four years old, Big Sister explains why the family resents her, blaming Adeline for her mother’s death. This sets up the cruelty and abuse Adeline will receive, not only from her parents, but also from her siblings. Hidden below the general anger and selfishness

century China. Adeline is given far more freedom and opportunities than Nai Nai was ever afforded, and though she does face some obstacles as a woman, Adeline's gender plays far less of a role in the memoir than it would have if Adeline had grown up in Nai Nai's generation.

☞ While I was basking in Third Brother's praise, I suddenly felt a hard blow across the back of my head. I turned around to see Second Brother glowering at me.

"What did you do that for?" I asked angrily ...

"Because I feel like it! That's why, you ugly little squirt! This'll teach you to show off your medal!"

**Related Characters:** Adeline Yen (Jun-Ling / Wu-Mei)Niang, Second Brother (Edgar) (speaker), Third Brother (James)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 9

### Explanation and Analysis

Adeline wears to dinner the medal she has received for being at the top of her kindergarten class. Although Third Brother initially praises her achievement, once Second Brother bullies her, Third Brother pretends not to notice, refusing to get involved.

This interaction demonstrates several aspects of the toxic family dynamic. First, Adeline wears the medal in the hope that Father will finally pay attention to her—and he does, showing her rare affection. This, however, enrages Adeline's siblings who are also starved for attention, earning her their hatred and abuse. Thus, Adeline is forced to choose between neglect by Father or punishment by the other siblings, highlighting the way in which such a toxic family pits the children against each other.

Third Brother, too, who congratulates Adeline on her accomplishments and shows her kindness, is silent when she is beaten by Second Brother. What kindness he possesses is quashed by his desire to hide and direct the family's anger away from himself.

☞ "Is this medal for leading your class?" he asked.

I nodded eagerly, too excited to speak. A hush fell upon the table. This was the first time anyone could remember Father singling me out or saying anything to me...

"Continue studying hard and bring honor to our Yen family name so we can be proud of you."

**Related Characters:** Adeline Yen (Jun-Ling / Wu-Mei)Niang, Father (Joseph Yen) (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 11

### Explanation and Analysis

Father notices the medal that Adeline is wearing and expresses his pride, even playfully teasing her a bit, which brings her great joy. This introduces Adeline's twisted relationship with Father. Adeline spends her entire childhood yearning for the love and affirmation of Father, which he should give her simply for the fact that she is his daughter. However, Father is so preoccupied with his own honor and standing in the community that Adeline is raised to believe she must buy his love, earning it with her accomplishments. This is a horrible idea for a four-year-old to internalize, since it essentially puts the weight of being unloved by her parents on Adeline's own shoulders. If Father neglects her, it must be because she is not a good enough daughter to have earned his love—even despite the fact that everyone outside of the family recognizes that she excels academically. This forms the basis for Adeline's low sense of self-worth, which will plague her throughout her childhood and become a primary personal hurdle that she will have to overcome in her coming-of-age journey.

## Chapter 5: Arrival in Shanghai Quotes

☞ As we climbed the stairs, Big Brother muttered, "To her, we are not separate people. Here we have become one single unit known as *all of you*. Seems like this is how it's going to be from now on."

**Related Characters:** Big Brother (Gregory) (speaker), Adeline Yen (Jun-Ling / Wu-Mei)Niang, Niang (Jeanne Prosperi), Second Brother (Edgar), Father (Joseph Yen), Big Sister (Lydia)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 25

**Explanation and Analysis**

The stepchildren have just arrived at their new home in Shanghai and Niang has laid down the new and far more oppressive rules of the household, which favor her own children and pointedly treat the stepchildren as second-class citizens.

Niang's rules and demeanor towards her stepchildren are ultimately all designed to dehumanize them. Rather than seeing them as individuals, each deserving of fair treatment, she has made them into a monolith, a single group that she can easily hate and discriminate against. Even without the presence of physical abuse, this constitutes heavy-handed emotional abuse in that Niang is teaching both her stepchildren and her favored children that the stepchildren are less-valued and less-loved. This once again demonstrates and emphasizes the toxic family dynamic: rather than making sure all of her children know they are loved, Niang carefully divides them into two groups, thus pitting them against each other and creating even more enmity in the house, which seems to be her purpose. For Adeline specifically, this creates yet another attack on her own quickly-dwindling sense of self-worth.

**Chapter 6: First Day at School Quotes**

“Next time you go anywhere for the first time,” he admonished as he handed me a map of Shanghai from the glove compartment of his car, “read this map and find where you are and where you wish to go. This way you’ll never get lost again.”

**Related Characters:** Father (Joseph Yen) (speaker), Adeline Yen (Jun-Ling / Wu-Mei)Niang

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 31

**Explanation and Analysis**

After six-year-old Adeline is forgotten at school, she wanders through the streets of Shanghai until dark, when a shopkeeper finally helps her phone Father to come pick her up. As they are driving home, Father never apologizes for abandoning her; he simply hands her a map.

This shows Father to be not only a neglectful man, but also one with utterly unrealistic expectations of his young children. Though Adeline is obviously frightened and hurt by being left to fend for herself in a new and massive city, Father is unwilling to apologize or even recognize his own error in this. It seems that his ego will not allow it. That he believes that a six-year-old should be able to navigate a

foreign city on her own, or be safe doing so, paints Father as a man who is, in a way, severely out of touch with reality. Rather than recognizing the naturally limited capabilities of a young child, he seems to place the blame on Adeline for not managing to find her own way home, rather than accepting that he messed up. This is, however, consistent with the family practice of blaming Adeline for things beyond her control, specifically in the way that she is blamed for her mother's death, as if she could have done anything to prevent it.

**Chapter 7: Family Reunion Quotes**

“In those few moments, we had understood everything. Not only about Niang, but also about all the grown-ups. Now that Nai Nai was dead, there was no doubt about who was in charge.”

**Related Characters:** Adeline Yen (Jun-Ling / Wu-Mei)Niang (speaker), Little Sister (Susan), Grandfather Ye Ye, Grandmother Nai Nai, Niang (Jeanne Prosperi)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 35

**Explanation and Analysis**

Niang beats Little Sister, who is only a toddler, for accidentally breaking Niang's necklace. When none of the adults watching intervene, Adeline finally confronts her, earning her Niang's permanent wrath.

This event sets the tone of the Shanghai house, which is the most abusive and demeaning place that Adeline lives in during her childhood. For Adeline, the beating is a shock, but even more shocking is the fact that none of the other adults in the house, all of whom are much older than Niang, are willing to defy her. Niang's power in this new order of the household is confirmed to be nearly absolute now that none dare defy her. For Adeline, this also represents a tragic loss of innocence. Not only is Niang ruthless and cruel, but none of the adults that Adeline had once thought could protect her, namely Grandfather Ye Ye and Aunt Baba, have the courage to stand against Niang's evil. Without the love of her parents or the protection of her grandfather or aunt, Adeline is becoming more and more alone in the world, left to face and endure it unprotected despite her young age. This sudden, early loss of innocence is yet another marker of the abuse that she suffers.

## Chapter 9: Chinese New Year Quotes

☝ We began to question Third Brother's sanity—had he imagined that Niang overheard us?—but he stuck to his story. "Perhaps," he suggested darkly, "we're being kept deliberately in a state of uncertainty because that's what Niang most enjoys. The cat-and-mouse game."

**Related Characters:** Third Brother (James) (speaker), Adeline Yen (Jun-Ling / Wu-Mei) Niang, Niang (Jeanne Prosper), Second Brother (Edgar), Big Brother (Gregory), Big Sister (Lydia)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 48

### Explanation and Analysis

While the stepchildren are planning their resistance to Niang, Third Brother discovers that Niang has been listening to their entire conversation with her ear to the door. Though the stepchildren are terrified and expect swift retribution from Niang, it never comes.

Third Brother, it turns out, is right. Niang prefers to let the stepchildren stew in their anxiety and fear, exerting her control through subtler means, effectively getting in their heads. This furthers the characterization of Niang as a thoroughly evil and cruel figure, almost resembling a predator toying with its prey. More than just simple mistreatment or favoritism, it seems that Niang sadistically enjoys inflicting psychological suffering on her stepchildren. As yet another form of emotional abuse, this makes the house even less of a place of safety, as the stepchildren are constantly waiting for her to exact her revenge, fostering a general sense of distrust and enhancing the toxic family dynamic, which Niang seems almost to thrive on.

☝ I was no longer the lonely little girl bullied by her siblings. Instead, I was the female warrior Mulan, who would rescue her aunt and Ye Ye from harm.

**Related Characters:** Adeline Yen (Jun-Ling / Wu-Mei) Niang (speaker), Aunt Baba, Niang (Jeanne Prosper), Grandfather Ye Ye

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 53

### Explanation and Analysis

During her years in Shanghai, Adeline discovers that she is a

gifted and passionate storyteller, creating episodic tales for which her friends eagerly await each installment.

Story-writing becomes a critical outlet for Adeline, helping her to cope with the traumas of home in different ways throughout her childhood. In this early stage, telling stories becomes a way to combat the negative messages about herself that Niang drills into her. Rather than powerless and worthless, Adeline can envision herself as a fierce warrior, giving her the opportunity to practice seeing herself as valuable through the lens of fiction. It is revealing that, in her fantasies, Adeline has the power to protect Aunt Baba and Ye Ye. This indicates the pain she feels also on their behalf, trapped and powerless as they are under the dominion of Niang. Although they do not suffer physically as the stepchildren do, Adeline is able to recognize the emotional and psychological pain that Niang has inflicted on them by stripping them of any power or agency in the family, preventing even their ability to give gifts to the children. This also helps to further Adeline's characterization as a compassionate figure, one who sees beyond herself and wants to protect others, as well.

## Chapter 10: Shanghai School Days Quotes

☝ Though [Wu Chun-mei's] chauffeured car invariably awaited her when school finished, she often chose to walk with me until we reached her house, with her driver trailing behind at a snail's pace. In the morning, if she happened upon me trudging along, she would order her driver to stop and would hop out and accompany me all the way.

**Related Characters:** Adeline Yen (Jun-Ling / Wu-Mei) Niang (speaker), Wu Chun-mei

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 59

### Explanation and Analysis

After Wu Chun-mei realizes that Adeline will not accept rides, Chun-mei decides that she will walk to and from school with Adeline. It is notable that Adeline is almost always surrounded with excellent friends who help her to persevere. Chun-mei's small act of solidarity with Adeline characterizes her as someone of particularly good character and extreme loyalty, both characteristics which Adeline's family noticeably lacks. In her willingness to suffer alongside her friend, Chun-mei models an admirable approach to supporting someone in hardship. Where most children would have either chastised Adeline for not accepting the

ride and continued on with her or pried overly hard, Chun-mei elects to simply trudge along with her friend, demonstrating both wisdom and empathy beyond her years. For Adeline, this allows her companionship without forcing issues that she is not ready to discuss.

Chun-mei's loyalty, friendship, and love are a critical support for Adeline, especially since her years in Shanghai are the most physically abusive and psychologically oppressive of her childhood.

☞ Did Third Brother truly understand what he was up against? By wanting to have things both ways and straddling the fence, was he aware that each compromise would chip away at his integrity? ... It was the loss of the nicest parts of Third Brother that saddened me.

**Related Characters:** Adeline Yen (Jun-Ling / Wu-Mei)Niang (speaker), Big Brother (Gregory), Second Brother (Edgar), Third Brother (James)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 69

### Explanation and Analysis

Third Brother has just betrayed Adeline's trust and convinced her to drink from a glass of orange juice laced with urine. Although Third Brother is kind and supportive of Adeline when they are alone, in the presence of his Second Brother and Big Brother, he falls in line with their cruelty. Thus, since he has a kind nature but is persuaded to malice, Third Brother provides the best example of a child whose goodness is suffocated by a toxic family.

The difference between Third Brother and Adeline is primarily one of courage. Although Third Brother tries to be compassionate, he is unable to summon the courage to defy the family's toxicity—say, by refusing to participate in his brother's schemes to bully Adeline—for fear of turning any of that malice towards himself. Adeline's conviction and consistency is, if anything, an anomaly within such a toxic family and Third Brother models a more typical reaction. The real tragedy, then, is that the quality of person that Third Brother will turn out to be is left to fate and the people whom he is surrounded by. Adeline recognizes that each day he spends with his older brothers and each bad act he plays along with out of fear will wear away more of Third Brother's goodness. With enough time, he could turn out to be just as toxic or foul as the rest of his family, one more sibling inheriting their parents' bad behavior.

## Chapter 11: PLT Quotes

☞ I felt quite guilty about my favoritism and couldn't help blaming myself for not having gotten more worms that each duckling could have its own.

**Related Characters:** Adeline Yen (Jun-Ling / Wu-Mei)Niang (speaker), Niang (Jeanne Prosperi)

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 76

### Explanation and Analysis

After bringing a worm to feed to her pet duckling, PLT, Adeline bemoans the fact that she has not gathered more worms to share with all of her siblings' ducklings, as well, who are in the same shared pen.

In this scene, Adeline's relationship with PLT symbolically contrasts Niang's own conduct as a mother. Although Adeline only has the one worm, and although she is not charged with caring for the other ducklings, she still feels guilt over her favoritism of her own duckling. This obviously contrasts quite sharply with Niang's practice—although Niang has plenty of money and is responsible for being a mother to all her children, she dotes on her biological children and ruthlessly discriminates against the others. Adeline's guilt over her favoritism is even more significant considering that PLT is a symbolic parallel to Adeline herself—she gives PLT the love that she should have received from her parents, nourishing PLT, spending time with her, and rejoicing in the feeling of being needed by someone. Within this frame, then, Adeline does not even desire special treatment or the extra privileges of Niang's children at all. She simply wants to be an equal.

☞ “Since it's so hot tonight,” Father suggested, “why don't we all cool off in the garden after dinner? It will also give us a chance to test Jackie's obedience.” He turned to Big Brother. “Go fetch one of those ducklings...We'll have some fun tonight!”

**Related Characters:** Father (Joseph Yen) (speaker), Adeline Yen (Jun-Ling / Wu-Mei)Niang, Big Brother (Gregory)

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 81

### Explanation and Analysis

While the family is eating, Father decides that he wants to see his dog kill one of the children's pet ducklings. As everyone expects, Adeline's duckling is chosen and killed.

Even without considering the symbolic significance of PLT (who is a symbolic parallel to Adeline herself), this is one of the strongest portrayals of Father's wanton cruelty and indifference towards his children. This is even more notable considering that, other than this, there are no particular times when Father is depicted as desiring to spend time with his family—he is most often working or in his room and often does not even speak to the children during dinner at all. Considering that PLT is a symbol for Adeline and her wellbeing, Father's thoughtless killing of PLT for his own brief amusement is even more horrific. Like PLT, Adeline is often hurt for no apparent reason other than her parents' own enjoyment, the limp corpse of her emotional wellbeing simply tossed aside. At best, Father has zero regard for the pain he is inflicting on Adeline; more likely, he seems to enjoy it, whether for the feeling of power (akin to watching his animal kill another animal) or just a pure sadism. This darkens the characterization of Father, who though neglectful and cruel, had yet to appear as truly malicious and evil as his second wife.

## Chapter 13: A Birthday Party Quotes

☝️ Finally, I sat there with my eyes tightly shut, wishing with all my heart that when I opened them again, I would be Jackie and Jackie would be me.

**Related Characters:** Adeline Yen (Jun-Ling / Wu-Mei)Niang (speaker), Niang (Jeanne Prosperi), Father (Joseph Yen)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 104

### Explanation and Analysis

While waiting for Father to come home and punish her for going to a birthday party, Adeline watches as Father's dog Jackie catches and eats the leftover snacks given to Niang's children. She finds herself wishing, both out of hunger and fear of Father, that she were the dog.

This tragic statement is revealing both of how low Adeline's self-worth has been driven and how low her parents see her. Years of humiliation, neglect, and physical abuse have

led Adeline to see the family dog as more valued and loved by her parents than herself, which is indeed true. In Adeline's memoir, this is one of the defining moments of her years in Shanghai, which, although tempered by memories of good and loving friends, constitute the harshest period of physical abuse and some of the worst emotional abuse she will experience. In the coming-of-age journey, in which Adeline must learn to recognize her own worth, this is the moment in which that self-worth reaches its lowest point. It is certainly not the end of the abuse, but it is the floor from which she will have to rise, slowly and painfully. Narratively, it is the darkest moment.

## Chapter 14: Class President Quotes

☝️ “When you've reached my age, you know which children are weak and which are strong. Don't ask her too many questions. Don't criticize her or tear her down. I don't want her to grow up like Big Sister. She is going to be different!”

**Related Characters:** Grandfather Ye Ye (speaker), Big Sister (Lydia), Adeline Yen (Jun-Ling / Wu-Mei)Niang, Aunt Baba

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 110

### Explanation and Analysis

The day after Father has told Adeline that she will be separated from Aunt Baba, Adeline sits with her and Grandfather Ye Ye in their room. She has just had an uncharacteristically angry outburst, which Grandfather Ye Ye understands to have been a result of the stress of it all.

Though he never says it outright, it is often implied that Ye Ye is heartbroken to see the toxicity that has overtaken the family. Ye Ye can see what a trap that becomes for the children, how it shapes them to be as cruel and wicked and selfish as their parents. This is an early indication of the hopes that Ye Ye has placed on Adeline, which will be more fully revealed in the final chapters in Hong Kong, a foreshadowing of a conversation that will be critical to Adeline's recognition of her own self-worth. In terms of the narrative, this foreshadowing acts as a light at the end of the tunnel, a clue that things may work out. In such a dark time as the Shanghai years, Ye Ye's belief that Adeline can not only succeed but even break free of the toxic family environment—not being warped and twisted by it—provides just a shred of hope in what is otherwise a series of successively more horrific events of physical and emotional

abuse.

●● Though my parents tell me I'm worthless I've proved them wrong! Of all the girls in my class, my classmates chose *me* to be their class president. I must forget about my home. In my other life—my real life—I'm not worthless. They respect me.

**Related Characters:** Adeline Yen (Jun-Ling / Wu-Mei)Niang (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 112

### Explanation and Analysis

After having been beaten, punished, and demeaned by her parents over the past few days, Adeline wins her class's first democratic election for class president, bolstering her spirit for a brief time.

This once again typifies the sharp contrast between Adeline's life at home and life at school. At home, she is hated and told she is worthless; at school she is loved and made a leader. The conflicting messages Adeline constantly receives about herself and the interspersing of horrors at home and victories in her public life create an ongoing tension in her own mind and in the narrative. Arguably, the success she has in school and the love she receives from her peers plays a critical role in buoying her spirit and her fading concept of her own self-worth. Although she does come to consider herself to be rather worthless and even comes to loathe herself, the affirmation that she receives from others, such as being elected class president, seems to play a vital role in keeping Adeline from becoming entirely dispirited. Though her peers do not yet know what kind of abuse she is subject to at home, as her friends they give her an invaluable gift with their support, lending their strength and their joy to her in the face of a joyless existence and demonstrating what an asset friendship and a network of support can be.

●● "It's because we won the election today. I'm now class president. We worked hard at it—"

Niang interrupted me in the middle of my explanation. "Stop bragging!" she screamed. "Who do you think you are? ... You are getting altogether too proud and conceited! No matter what you consider yourself to be, you are nothing without your father. Nothing! Nothing! Nothing!"

**Related Characters:** Adeline Yen (Jun-Ling / Wu-Mei)Niang (speaker), Father (Joseph Yen), Niang (Jeanne Prosperi)

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 117

### Explanation and Analysis

After winning the election, Adeline's classmates surreptitiously followed her home to throw a surprise party. Niang has called Adeline into the Holy of Holies, enraged.

Beyond being yet another piece of evidence of Niang's absolute viciousness, this is again revealing of her need for control. Niang seems to be particularly enraged by the fact that Adeline had success at school and her friends desire to celebrate her accomplishments. Niang has spent years grooming Adeline to believe she is worthless, taking every opportunity to crush her self-esteem. When that perception is contradicted by the reality that Adeline is intelligent and well-liked by her peers, Niang's control is compromised. It is further revealing that Niang claims that Adeline is "nothing without [her] father," indicating that, beyond simply demeaning her, she seeks to keep Adeline dependent upon her parents, defining her value solely on her proximity to and approval of her parents. Since they outright deny Adeline that love, this is particularly vicious.

Though Niang also beats Adeline in this confrontation, this is a clear depiction of her emotional abuse and the ways that it damages Adeline's self-worth, which will become a major hindrance to her throughout the memoir—and, by the author's own admission, will remain with her in some form for the rest of her life.

## Chapter 16: Hong Kong Quotes

●● Claudine became alarmed. "Mama, how often does a ship sink?" she asked.

Before Aunt Reine had time to reply, Victor quipped with a straight face, "Only once!"

...then Victor did something my brothers would never have done. How took off his life jacket, slipped it on his sister, and showed her how to adjust the straps.

**Related Characters:** Victor, Claudine (speaker), Adeline Yen (Jun-Ling / Wu-Mei)Niang, Third Brother (James), Aunt Reine

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 141

### Explanation and Analysis

Adeline has been rescued from Tianjin by Niang's sister, Aunt Reine, and her family. As they are unpacking their belongings aboard the ferry that will take them to Hong Kong, Victor appears wearing a life jacket and claiming (jokingly) that the ship might sink at any time.

Aunt Reine's family plays a critical role in Adeline's childhood development by modeling for her what a healthy family can look like, and even inviting her to participate in it. Victor is perhaps the most important figure in this regard—while Adeline has had many female friends at school and her aunt plays something of a mothering role in her life, Adeline has never experienced a healthy relationship with any of her brothers or even a boy of her age. The contrast between Victor and Adeline's brothers is obvious and impactful. Although Victor likes to tease Claudine, he is not cruel. Instead he is thoughtful and protective, demonstrated in the way that he makes sure to teach his younger sister how to use a life jacket properly. This is a far cry from Adeline's brothers, who are principally selfish (or cowardly, in the case of Third Brother) and are never seen going out of their way to help Adeline. Aunt Reine and her family teach Adeline the way that families should operate, in contrast to the abuse and neglect of her own. This parallels how Adeline's friends in Shanghai affirm her own value with their loyalty and remind of her worth in the face of her parents' humiliation and cruelty.

☞ That was how [Aunt Reine's] family treated me throughout the time I spent with them. They made me feel as if I were their third child. For the first time in my life, I did not automatically get the short end of the stick but was given an equal share, just like Victor and Claudine.

**Related Characters:** Adeline Yen (Jun-Ling / Wu-Mei)Niang, Victor (speaker), Niang (Jeanne Prospero), Aunt Reine, Claudine

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 142

### Explanation and Analysis

During her time with Aunt Reine's family aboard the ship

headed for Hong Kong, Adeline finds that she feels as if she is living in a normal family for the first time in her life.

Aunt Reine is a foil to Niang's toxic leadership of her family. Where Niang ruthlessly discriminates amongst her own children and heavily privileges those she favors, Aunt Reine cheerfully refuses to do anything of the sort. Adeline is treated just as well as Claudine, Victor, or even Aunt Reine herself. Once again, for Adeline this is critical in not only modeling how a family ought to function, but in giving her such an example that she might carry with her into her own future family. One of the worst aspects of a toxic family is the way in which the children adopt the parents' foul behavior, essentially inheriting it and passing it onto their own children and families in the future. Although Adeline is resilient and determined not to adopt Niang's own meanness, she has never before had the chance to see what a loving mother could be like. Through Aunt Reine, Adeline is given an alternative example of motherhood that she will be able to carry with her into the future, hopefully breaking the cycle of toxic families.

☞ "It's so unfair," Victor continued. "Why doesn't [Adeline] get to go anywhere with us?"

"That's just the way it is!" Niang exclaimed sharply. "You either get in now and come with us, or you can stay home with her. Suit yourself!"

"In that case," Victor replied gallantly, "I think I'll stay and keep Adeline company."

**Related Characters:** Adeline Yen (Jun-Ling / Wu-Mei)Niang, Victor (speaker), Adeline Yen (Jun-Ling / Wu-Mei)Niang, Wu Chun-mei, Aunt Reine

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 156

### Explanation and Analysis

While Aunt Reine's family is visiting Adeline's family in Hong Kong for a week, Niang pointedly leaves Adeline behind every time they go for an outing. After several days, Victor takes a stand on the matter.

Although Aunt Reine has treated Adeline with love and fairness for their entire voyage, and although the unequal treatment of Adeline is apparent, Aunt Reine does not stand up to Niang, her younger sister. Victor, however, does stand up to her—making him possibly the most courageous figure in the entire memoir and the only person to actively defy Niang for Adeline's sake (other than Wu Chun-mei, who

once yelled at Niang for her mistreatment of Adeline as she left their house). This is both a strong development in the character of Victor and a critical moment in Adeline's childhood. Another person has seen her as being valuable enough to face the anger of Niang, something not even Adeline's aunt or grandfather ever bring themselves to do. This once again demonstrates the way in which the support of friends can play such a critical role in an individual's capacity to endure hardships and abuse.

It is worth pointing out that, in his bravery, Victor also points out the baselessness of Niang's mistreatment of Adeline. When he asks Niang why she should be so mistreated, the best answer Niang can give is, "That's just the way it is." By standing up to the abuser, Victor reveals just how baseless abuse truly is.

## Chapter 17: Boarding School in Hong Kong Quotes

☝☝ Afterward, Ye Ye and I sat by ourselves on the long couch, not saying a word. I looked at my grandfather defeated and resigned with a blanket around his drooping shoulders in the blistering heat, his face contorted with sadness and anguish. A tired old man with no one to turn to, imprisoned by his love for his only son.

**Related Characters:** Adeline Yen (Jun-Ling / Wu-Mei)Niang (speaker), Niang (Jeanne Prosperi), Father (Joseph Yen), Fourth Brother (Franklin), Grandfather Ye Ye

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 159

### Explanation and Analysis

Fourth Brother has just unsuccessfully tried to play a prank on Ye Ye in which he hoped to drop several heavy encyclopedias on his head, and Father has failed to punish him for the attack.

This episode explores several aspects of the toxic family dynamic at once. Most obvious is the stunning wickedness of Fourth Brother, which he has adopted from Father and Niang—dropping heavy objects on Ye Ye's frail old head and neck could have resulted in a very serious injury. In this manner, Fourth Brother's cruelty for his own amusement is reminiscent of Father's killing of PLT in Shanghai, once more indicating the way that such vile behavior is passed down from parent to child within the toxic family.

Set against this cruelty is Ye Ye himself, powerless and alone, having been cast aside as the family patriarch by

Niang, and now not even receiving protection for his physical safety from his own son, who dares not defy Niang by punishing her favorite child. Although he sees the family ruining itself due to the grotesqueness that has overtaken it, spread by Niang and Father, any power he had to speak or decide was gradually taken from him by Niang. Ye Ye has not been made cruel or wicked by the toxic family environment, but he is caged by it and has been utterly silenced, demonstrating the way in which such a toxic family can suffocate any good presence one may have. In an environment defined by meanness and cruelty, there is no place for a figure such as Ye Ye to exist and thrive or share his wisdom with others.

## Chapter 20: Pneumonia Quotes

☝☝ "Don't talk like that! ... You mustn't talk like that! You have your whole life ahead of you. Everything is possible! I've tried to tell you over and over that far from being garbage, you are precious and special. Being on top of your class merely confirms this. But you can vanquish the demons only when you yourself are convinced of your own worth."

**Related Characters:** Grandfather Ye Ye (speaker), Adeline Yen (Jun-Ling / Wu-Mei)Niang, Niang (Jeanne Prosperi), Father (Joseph Yen), Third Brother (James)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 181

### Explanation and Analysis

When Adeline is home from boarding school, recovering from pneumonia, she, Third Brother, and Grandfather Ye Ye are sitting together when suddenly, Adeline finally lets everything out—all the pain and neglect, the way her parents have made her feel, how hopeless she believes her future to be, and how much she loathes herself. Grandfather Ye Ye strongly rebukes her.

This is one of the most important scenes in the entire memoir, as it marks a turning point for Adeline's understanding of her own self-worth and her coming-of-age journey. Ye Ye's strong admonition, which seems nearly angry in its conviction, impresses upon Adeline that her life, though it may not mean much to her parents, means very much to Ye Ye. Although Ye Ye's diatribe does not instantly cure Adeline's self-contempt and low view of herself, it shows her that such self-loathing is harmful not only to herself, but also to others. Ye Ye's encouragement to Adeline to believe in her own value directly contradicts Niang and Father's messages that they have imprinted upon

her. For a sad, powerless old man who has been dethroned by his son's wife, this belief in Adeline's worth and encouragement for her to believe in herself, as well, becomes his last act of defiance and agency against Niang, making this moment not only critical to Adeline's development, but also to Ye Ye's character arc.

## Chapter 21: Playwriting Competition Quotes

☞ Into her lips I injected my loneliness, isolation, and feeling of being unwanted. To my heroine I gave everything of myself.

**Related Characters:** Adeline Yen (Jun-Ling / Wu-Mei)Niang (speaker), Grandfather Ye Ye, Father (Joseph Yen)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 184

### Explanation and Analysis

Emboldened by Ye Ye's affirmation and determined to succeed in life not only for her sake, but also for his, Adeline enters a playwriting competition. Although her story is fictional, Adeline uses her own story to flesh it out, creating a heroine that is like her and suffers the same rejection, isolation, and pain as she does. In this way, Adeline finally manages to express to herself and to the world all of the feelings she has for so long kept repressed from her friends and the people who love her. This is the final development in Adeline's realization of the power of stories to cope with and process trauma and pain. Where once Adeline used stories merely to escape the pain she felt or reimagine herself as powerful rather than powerless, she has now found a way to use storytelling to confront the pain itself, rather than run from it.

The telling of her own story through her play precedes and almost foreshadows the writing of the memoir itself. If the author had not discovered her power to confront her pain by writing about as fiction, it is unlikely that she would have had the wherewithal to tell the full truth of her childhood as memoir, without even the protective cover of fiction to protect herself. The power of storytelling is thus a key factor in helping Adeline the child become Adeline Yen Mah, the author who shares her experiences of childhood abuse and

hardship to let others undergoing similar pain know that they are not alone.

☞ Father looked radiant. For once, he was proud of me. In front of his revered colleague...I had given him face.

**Related Characters:** Adeline Yen (Jun-Ling / Wu-Mei)Niang (speaker), Father (Joseph Yen)

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 192

### Explanation and Analysis

After over six months of waiting, Adeline is taken home from school and called to her Father's room where he announces to her that she has won the playwriting competition and brought him much honor, prompting him to send her to college in England.

This final scene of the memoir is a bittersweet affair. On the one hand, this is the first time that Adeline has been called to Father's room (what used to be called the Holy of Holies) and not been beaten or shamed, signaling a symbolic victory over the former icon of fear. Similarly, this is one of a very few instances that he is pleased with Adeline or proud of her. On the other hand, Father's character has not actually changed. His pride in Adeline is entirely tied to the fact that she has brought him great honor in front of his colleagues and even the whole city. Father still does not love Adeline for being his daughter; he merely appreciates the fame that she has brought him. He is still fundamentally a selfish individual, even though his cruelty has abated. Either way, Adeline is overjoyed and her success affords her the opportunity to study overseas, which is her greatest dream.

The memoir's lack of a clean ending or any true resolution between Adeline and her parents makes it ring true, as reality is never so clean as the reader might wish it to be. Although she is given the opportunity to set off on a new life, Adeline will still carry the burden of a stepmother who hates her and a father who "loves" her only as long as she brings him honor.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

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

## CHAPTER 1: TOP OF THE CLASS

In her first week of kindergarten, Adeline comes home with a shiny medal pinned to her dress: an award for being the top of the class. She shows her award and the certificate to Aunt Baba, who is thrilled. Aunt Baba cannot read the certificate since it is written in French, but she opens up her locked safe to store the certificate with her jewelry.

*This opening immediately casts Adeline as an achiever and Aunt Baba as a loving mentor who considers Adeline's success as precious as any jewelry or money. The love shown in this opening creates a tonal contrast to the abuse and cruelty depicted throughout the rest of the memoir.*



A picture of Adeline's Father and stepmother falls out. Adeline asks Aunt Baba if she has any pictures of her "dead mama," but Aunt Baba seems pained by this and says she does not. She offers to show Adeline wedding pictures of Father's marriage to her stepmother, since Adeline was only a year old at the time. Adeline is uninterested in this, asking when her real mother died. She had died of a fever two weeks after Adeline was born, Aunt Baba explains. Adeline, though she is only four years old, intuitively feels that it is a painful subject. Big Sister had once told Adeline that her mother and Aunt Baba were best friends, and that her death after giving birth to Adeline means that Adeline is to blame for it; she is "bad luck."

*Contrasted against the love that was just shown to Adeline by Aunt Baba, Big Sister's labeling of Adeline as "bad luck" seems particularly wanton. The contrast between Aunt Baba's love and pride for Adeline's achievements and Big Sister's meanness establishes the overall tone of the memoir: unwarranted and undeserved cruelty and abuse, broken up by glimmers of hope, scholastic success, and love from people other than Adeline's parents.*



## CHAPTER 2: A TIANJIN FAMILY

When Adeline was born, her three older brothers and Big Sister were between the ages of three and six. They all blamed Adeline for killing their mother and continue to hold it against her. Father married a seventeen-year-old half-Chinese, half-French woman whom the children call Niang, which is Chinese for "mother." Together they had two more children: Fourth Brother and Little Sister.

*The fact that Adeline's family unjustifiably blames her for her mother's death sets up the toxic family dynamic—rather than finding a healthy way to express their grief, it becomes anger aimed at Adeline. Father's marriage to a woman only eleven years older than his oldest child also indicates an unhealthy family dynamic—how can one expect to mother someone who is only a decade younger than she is?*



The parents, children, Grandfather Ye Ye, Grandmother Nai Nai, and Aunt Baba live together in one house in Tianjin, a port city on China's northeastern coastline. Adeline's family lives in the French concession of the city, which is under the jurisdiction of France and governed by French soldiers, rulers, and laws, even though greater Tianjin is occupied by the Japanese. The children are taught to count and read in French by French Catholic nuns.

*The oppressive presence of the Japanese in China is loosely reflective of the oppressive presence of Father and especially Niang over the household. Although China undergoes several major cultural upsets and revolutions throughout Adeline's childhood, these events only ever form a backdrop. As a child, her perception is mostly bound to the chaos of her own family.*



## CHAPTER 3: NAI NAI'S BOUND FEET

At dinner, the same day that Adeline showed Aunt Baba her school medal, the family is sitting down to dinner. Grandmother Nai Nai walks slowly because her feet are bound, so Adeline runs ahead and pulls Nai Nai's chair out for her. Adeline asks her grandmother why her feet are so small, and Nai Nai explains that it has been the custom to bind women's feet for over a thousand years. She is bitter about having had her feet bound and "maimed," and she tells Adeline that she is fortunate the custom is no longer practiced so she can run and jump.

Adeline takes her seat between Second Brother and Third Brother. Third Brother notices her school medal and congratulates her on being so honored after just one week. Second Brother, however, strikes Adeline hard in the back of the head and painfully twists her arm, angry at her for showing off her achievement. Third Brother pointedly does not intervene. Niang, Father, and Big Sister all enter the dining room and Second Brother instantly leaves Adeline alone. The family eats dinner. For dessert, each child gets a bowl of Adeline's favorite fruit. She laughs with joy, but does not yet eat them.

Although Niang's two children are still too young even to eat with the family, everyone knows they are "special," naturally considered smarter, prettier, and more valuable than the five stepchildren. Despite this, Father notices Adeline's medal and is proud of her, a rare show of affection from him. As the adults leave the room, Father encourages Adeline to keep studying hard and honoring the family. She is thrilled. However, after the adults have left, all of the other stepchildren scowl at Adeline and take all the fruit from their little sister's bowl, leaving her with nothing.

## CHAPTER 4: LIFE IN TIANJIN

A few months later, Grandmother Nai Nai orders her rickshaw puller to start taking Big Sister and Adeline to and from school so they do not have to walk. Adeline is always excited when they approach her school and loves everything about it. Most importantly, her classmates treat her as an equal.

*Nai Nai plays a relatively small part in the story—the author mainly uses her to comment on the quickly-changing role of women in modern China. While Adeline's gender certainly plays a part in the story and limits her in some ways, Nai Nai's commentary suggests that Adeline is far less restricted by being a woman than she would have been two generations prior, and gender inequality is much less an obstacle than familial abuse, at least in this depiction of Adeline's childhood.*



*This introduces both Third Brother's kindness and Second Brother's abject cruelty, providing a stark contrast between the two. That Third Brother does not intervene when he sees Second Brother hurting his four-year-old sister is an early indicator of the way in which a toxic family dynamic can suffocate the goodness of its members. Rather than having courage and standing up for Adeline, Third Brother gives in to his fear and lets the abuse persist.*



*The toxic and foul family dynamic is on full display here. Since Father is so neglectful of all, one child earning his brief affection immediately provokes the jealousy of the other children. Thus, Adeline is caught in the unenviable position of choosing between being utterly ignored by Father and safe from her siblings, or recognized by Father and abused by her siblings. This is a tragic no-win position to be caught in, especially for such a young child.*



*The contrast introduced here between Adeline's life at home and at school is a consistent subtheme that persists throughout the memoir. In school, without the blame of her mother's death hanging over her, Adeline is able to be a normal child and be valued for the merits of her own achievements.*



On the way home from school, Big Sister “imperiously” begins quizzing Adeline on what she learned at school that day. Adeline replies that she learned that God made her, but did not yet know why God had done so, since the nuns hadn’t taught that yet. Big Sister begins screaming that Adeline does not know the answer because she was stupid and did not deserve her school medal. Big Sister strikes Adeline hard. The rickshaw puller looks back, but does not intervene, and takes them both home.

Adeline continues to win the school medal every single week, which angers her siblings but is the only way to make Father pay attention to her. At the end of the school term, Adeline wins an award at a large assembly for being the top student. The audience applauds, but Adeline notices that she is the only award-winner there without any family present to celebrate her, not even Aunt Baba.

Japan has conquered much of China and now the Japanese want to force themselves on Father as business partners. Father is terribly stressed—Japanese businessmen often arrive suddenly at the house. One day, Father simply disappears. Although Ye Ye tells the police, no one knows anything of what happened to him. A few months later, Niang takes Fourth Brother and also disappears very suddenly and mysteriously. Although it is strange, the next few months are very pleasant. Ye Ye and Nai Nai treat the children well, they get to see movies and have friends over to play and eat at fancy restaurants on the weekends.

One evening, Adeline sits with Aunt Baba and watches Nai Nai soak her unwrapped feet in hot water. Aunt Baba explains to Adeline how fortunate she is, not having bound feet and even being allowed to attend school with her brothers. Adeline falls asleep and wakes to find Aunt Baba crying—Nai Nai has just died of a stroke. The family gives Nai Nai a proper Buddhist burial, sleeping in the same room as the body to keep Nai Nai company, having a funeral procession, and burning sacrifices so that Nai Nai would have everything she needs in heaven.

*Big Sister here reflects a quality that Father will later display, as well: having completely unrealistic expectations for Adeline. This scene once again demonstrates the way in which the leader of a toxic family can pass on those despicable characteristics to their own children, as well as the manner in which children are pitted against each other.*



*Once again, the toxic family dynamic is on full display. Since the children are all starved of Father’s attention, rather than celebrating each others’ achievements, they are so competitive for recognition that they despise each other when Father shows any one of them affection, especially Adeline.*



*This episode furthers the characterization of Father as utterly self-absorbed and neglectful of his children. Father has gone into hiding to save himself from the Japanese, but for all his children know, he has been kidnapped or murdered. Though Niang goes to join him, she does not reveal anything either. There seems to be no consideration of the emotional impact this could have on the children, who may have initially thought they had lost their second parent. Father seems far more concerned with his own wellbeing than his children’s, a quality which he will consistently exhibit.*



*The suddenness of Nai Nai’s death seems to reflect Adeline’s own limited perception and understanding of death as such a young child, being only five or six years old. The scene also nods to the clash of cultures in China as it became more Westernized—although the children attend Catholic schools, suggesting that they are at least associated with Christianity, they participate in the Buddhist funeral procession, even burning sacrifices for her.*



## CHAPTER 5: ARRIVAL IN SHANGHAI

Six weeks later, Father arrives suddenly and secretly in Tianjin to take his children south with him to Shanghai, where he has been in hiding in fear of the Japanese. The children receive no warning of their departure, taking only the clothes on their backs. Aunt Baba and Ye Ye will follow after they have finished mourning Nai Nai in the Buddhist tradition, along with Little Sister, who is still too young, and Third Brother, who is recovering from measles.

The family's Shanghai home is also in a French concession. The house is impressive, with a gated garden guarded by a frightening German Shepherd named Jackie. Inside the house is a formal living room, lavishly and expensively decorated, that shocks the children in its luxury. Niang greets her stepchildren there.

Niang explains that the stepchildren are only allowed to enter and exit through the back door of the house, near the servants' quarters. Father, Niang, and her two children live on the second floor, each with their own rooms. The stepchildren are forbidden from entering any of the rooms on the second floor. The stepchildren will share rooms on the third floor. They are not allowed to invite friends to their house or visit anyone else's house. The stepchildren are bitter at this new standard of living and Big Brother remarks that Niang does not even see the them as individual people, but merely as "all of you."

## CHAPTER 6: FIRST DAY AT SCHOOL

On the first day of her new school, Adeline is unsure of who is supposed to take her there. The house seems empty and the chauffeur has already left with her brothers. The cook takes pity on her and brings her to school on his way to market. When school is let out, Adeline waits by the gate for someone to arrive to take her home, but no one comes. She waits until the school has emptied and the gate is locked, and then nervously walks into the streets of the city, trying to find her way home.

*Although Father fears for his safety amid the Japanese, his handling of the situation once again shows very little regard for the emotional wellbeing of his children, typifying his own narcissism and lack of consideration for them. The children are simply yanked here or there, depending on Father's whims. For such young children, such strange and rapid transitions must certainly exert quite a mental and emotional strain.*



*Although Adeline has mentioned that her family has wealth, it has never truly been on display in the story. This demonstration of luxury is important in that it reinforces Father and Niang's wealth to the reader, which will be sharply contrasted against the austere lifestyle the stepchildren will soon have to endure.*



*This begins the most painful and physically abusive period of Adeline's life, as well as the first major show of favoritism and discrimination from Niang, beginning her characterization as an utterly cruel and irredeemable figure. By making her stepchildren into second-class citizens, by treating them as "all of you" rather than as individuals, Niang begins her dehumanization of the stepchildren.*



*Within the new family hierarchy and as the youngest of the already hated stepchildren, Adeline is completely disregarded. For such a young child, this is a terrible realization to make and contributes to her loss of self-worth. If her parents or family cannot even consider her long enough to remember to pick her up from school, will anyone ever care for her at all?*



Adeline walks through the streets for miles until the evening light begins to fade. She is very hungry. A shopkeeper sees the terrified little girl wandering outside and brings her in the shop to wait for her parents. Adeline finds a telephone and, having memorized her home phone number through a game she played with Big Brother, calls Father. Father picks up, seemingly unworried, and Adeline's heart sinks as she realizes no one even noticed that she had not come home. When Father picks her up in his car, he hands Adeline a map of Shanghai and tells her that now she will never be lost again. Adeline is determined to learn to read it, for she realizes that without Aunt Baba, no one else is looking out for her.

*Not only has Father and Niang's neglect wounded Adeline emotionally, it has also placed her in considerable danger as well—the streets of a foreign city are not a safe place for such a young girl to be so late in the evening. It is noteworthy that Father never takes any responsibility for what has happened, never apologizes or even tries to calm Adeline's nerves. Furthermore, expecting that by handing his six-year-old daughter a map she will be fine once again demonstrates his utterly unrealistic expectations of Adeline, expecting her to have the same capacities as an adult. This furthers Father's characterization as an inconsiderate, narcissistic person who is hardly a father-figure at all.*



## CHAPTER 7: FAMILY REUNION

Ye Ye, Aunt Baba, Third Brother, and Little Sister arrive in Shanghai. Little Sister, nearly two years old now, has not seen Niang in a year and a half. The toddler has started walking and talking, running around the living room as the family catches up. Though Niang tries to get Little Sister to come to her arms, Little Sister refuses and instead keeps going to Aunt Baba, saying that she doesn't want or like Niang. After Little Sister tips a candy bowl over, both Fourth Brother and Big Sister scream at her, trying to earn goodwill from Niang by being cruel.

*Fourth Brother and Big Sister's screaming at a toddler is telling, once again indicating the way in which children in a toxic family can inherit the wicked behavior and unrealistic expectations of their parents. More than being merely mean, both children hope that by their viciousness, they will earn the love of Niang, indicating how truly warped their young minds are already becoming.*



Niang forcibly picks up Little Sister, loudly screaming at her to keep still as the infant struggles and kicks. In the struggle, Little Sister breaks a valuable pearl necklace Niang is wearing. Niang explodes, slapping and beating her daughter on the head who now only struggles and makes more noise. All of the adults in the room are pointedly silent, not making eye contact. This confuses Adeline. Little Sister's screams become unbearable to the point where Adeline tells Niang not to beat her daughter anymore since she is just a baby.

*This is a prime example of Niang's need for control, an aspect of her character that will resurface constantly and contribute to much of her abusive behavior. For Adeline, this moment represents a tragic loss of innocence—even in the presence of Aunt Baba and Ye Ye, it seems there is no protection from Niang's fury. Adeline's confrontation of Niang also indicates her compassion, a highly unusual trait within her family.*



Aunt Baba gives Adeline a warning glance not to speak anymore, but Niang is already enraged. She fumes at Adeline, pointing a finger at her and telling her that she shall never be forgiven for her arrogance. Her words are cold and full of malice. In that instant, the whole family understands the new dynamic: now that Nai Nai is dead, Niang rules the household.

*Niang's dominance over the household suggests a powerful personality and sway over Father, since she is the youngest adult in the home by at least 15 years. Her position of dominance over Aunt Baba and especially Ye Ye, as the patriarch, is an inversion of the the normal structure of authority and further represents a wildly distorted family dynamic.*



## CHAPTER 8: TRAM FARE

Despite the family's obvious wealth, Father and Niang set up an "austerity program to teach us the value of money." The stepchildren are not allowed to have pocket money; they are not given any clothes to wear other than their school uniforms. The girls' hair is cut short, plain and old-fashioned; the boys heads are shaved like monks, for which they are ruthlessly teased at school.

For the first two months, Ye Ye gives the stepchildren money to take the tram to and from school, since each of their schools is several miles away. However, when Ye Ye runs out of money and insists to Father that the stepchildren need an allowance for the tram fare, Niang is enraged that they dare take the tram at all. She demands that they must walk to and from school each day, unless they come to Niang and Father, admit that they were wrong to take money from Ye Ye, and beg for the fare. Furthermore, Ye Ye and Aunt Baba are forbidden from giving the stepchildren any more money. Adeline feels sure that Ye Ye will put up a fight to this policy, but he does not.

The stepchildren are all initially furious and determined to resist, but within ten days, Big Sister caves and begs Niang for the tram fare. The three brothers, who have the longest distance to walk, endure for weeks but eventually all give in as well. Only Adeline persists, out of some sense of loyalty to Ye Ye and Aunt Baba, even in the midst of rainstorms and cold weather. Each week, the other stepchildren enter Niang's room, nicknamed the **Holy of Holies**, and beg for their fare. Big Sister even starts to brag about her coins in front of Adeline.

## CHAPTER 9: CHINESE NEW YEAR

Chinese New Year is one of the most anticipated times of the year, enjoyed by both children and adults. The most important tradition of the holiday is the gifting of a new set of clothes, which symbolizes "a new beginning." Although Niang's own children received fancy, Western-style clothing in the latest fashion, the stepchildren are all given traditional, outdated robes. Adeline simply receives a brown smock.

*Every aspect of this "austerity program" is angled around giving Niang and Father control while wresting any sort of autonomy or budding independence from the stepchildren. Especially for Niang, this need for dominance over every aspect of the stepchildren's lives suggests a pathological desire for power.*



*This further demonstrates Niang's desire for absolute power and control, as well as her unrealistic expectations of the stepchildren. To be enraged at something so minor as taking the tram, especially when it cost her no money at all, betrays an absurd obsession with controlling the minutiae of her stepchildren's lives and making them as difficult as possible. Once again, Adeline suffers a loss of innocence as she is forced to watch Ye Ye be continually demeaned and disempowered by Niang.*



*Though not the cruelest, Big Sister is perhaps the most detestable of all the stepchildren. Her quick capitulation to Niang and her boasting about the coins she is given demonstrates an utter lack of shame. Like Niang, Big Sister is more interested in power (or placing herself in proximity to power) than in loyalty to Aunt Baba or Ye Ye, making her quite the opposite of Adeline, who suffers hardship for the sake of maintaining her loyalty to her aunt and grandfather. Nicknaming Father and Niang's room the Holy of Holies seems to be a jab at the god-like power Niang has afforded herself within the household.*



*The quality of clothing Niang and Father give the children directly correlates with their valuation of each child. Niang's own children are highly-valued and receive beautiful, fashionable clothing; the stepchildren are given clothing that is fine, but seems intended to humiliate them with its antiquated style; Adeline, the most hated child, is given the plainest thing Father and Niang can think of while still technically fulfilling their parental responsibility.*



The stepchildren are enraged at the inequality, complaining amongst each other that they are only allowed a couple meals a day of cheap food, while Niang's children are given all sorts of snacks whenever they want and constantly are seen throwing their leftovers to Father's German Shepherd. Niang has also hired a nanny, Miss Chien, who seems to be spying on the stepchildren and blaming them for things they have not done. As a result, Father whips his children, even though they are innocent.

In one of the third-floor rooms, Big Sister insists that they should organize a resistance. The stepchildren fight over how to go about this, finally settling on the idea that Big Sister will write Father an anonymous letter in Chinese—which Niang cannot read—to explain their grievances.

As they are doing this, Third Brother opens the door and steps outside, finding Niang with her ear pressed against the door, listening to the conspiracy. Third Brother is too terrified to make a sound, and Niang threatens him to keep quiet. Third Brother continues to the bathroom, so terrified that he vomits multiple times. When he returns, Niang is no longer at the door, listening. He tells his siblings what happened, and they all expect retribution. However, Niang seems even more polite that evening at dinner, seemingly enjoying the “cat-and-mouse game” and the dread her stepchildren feel.

Rather than strike back, Niang breaks up the resistance by bribing Big Sister into aligning with her, offering her a luxurious room on the second floor. Big Sister distances herself from the other stepchildren and begins spying on her siblings like Miss Chien, with whom she becomes friends. Soon, she is acting much like Niang, condescending and cruel. The other stepchildren despise Big Sister for this and immediately distrust her. However, with their leader having defected to Niang's side of the struggle, their resistance falls apart.

Adeline grows closer to Aunt Baba and their shared room becomes a place of safety for her. She knows that Niang hates both of them and that Aunt Baba is in a strange and terrible position, having to always be weary and submissive, despite being much older than Niang. Though this pains Adeline, she is unable to speak about it—it is too painful and she lacks the words.

*Beyond its general unfairness, Niang's favoritism naturally creates an “us versus them” environment within the household, clearly demonstrating the way in which a toxic family dynamic sets the children against each other. Niang's use of a hired spy and Father's abuse further makes the home a threatening, dangerous place rather than one of safety.*



*This once again demonstrates the effect of abusive parents and a toxic family dynamic. Rather than loving or trusting their mother figure, the stepchildren are conspiring to overthrow her, illustrating just how distorted their family environment has become.*



*The idea that Niang enjoys the “cat-and-mouse game” of her abuse of her stepchildren is chilling. This furthers her characterization as an utterly evil, and in this case even predatory, figure. More than simply demanding total control—which is despicable enough—Niang seems to sadistically enjoy psychologically oppressing the stepchildren, as well. Her depiction seems almost unrealistically evil, a figure absolutely beyond redemption.*



*This is one of the most poignant examples of a toxic family dynamic in the entire memoir. Big Sister once again capitulates to Niang as a way to find relief from her own suffering. Where once the stepchildren at least had each other to depend on—even if those relationships were somewhat fraught—now even the stepchildren are set against each other, meaning that each of them is more alone than ever, unable to trust even each other. This suggests that the behavior of toxic parents can disrupt every aspect of a family and any support the members might have offered to each other.*



*Although Adeline can recognize the pain she sees, much of it is too complex for her to truly understand at such a young age. These inexpressible emotions will contribute to the repression she will struggle with throughout her childhood, the inability to share the truth of the pain that she feels, even with her friends whom she dearly loves.*



Adeline strives to please Aunt Baba through excelling in her academics. By the time she is seven and in second grade, her classmates nickname her “Genius.” After Adeline’s teacher praises an essay she writes about her friendship with Aunt Baba, Adeline becomes enamored with story-writing. She discovers that she can rewrite herself as a courageous warrior, rather than a “lonely little girl bullied by her siblings.”

Adeline suspects that, despite her academic prowess and skill as a storyteller, her classmates think she is “pathetic” in some way. Her clothing is old and never fits, her haircut is archaic, and no family members ever visit to support her when she wins awards. Adeline is “desperate” to appear normal and convince everyone else that she has a loving family rather than reveal the truth: her family resents her and Niang makes her feel worthless and ugly. This becomes a great burden for Adeline, filling her with self-loathing and anxiety. She can see no way out, except for the dim hope that if she studies as hard as possible and tries to act right, her parents might someday love her.

## CHAPTER 10: SHANGHAI SCHOOL DAYS

The most athletic girl in Adeline’s school is Wu Chun-mei, the daughter of one of Shanghai’s wealthiest families. Although Adeline considers herself quite skilled in badminton, Chun-mei handily beats her. Over time, Adeline gradually becomes more and more impressed by Chun-mei’s athleticism. Chun-mei also shares Adeline’s passion for reading and she often brings many children’s books to school and loans them to other students.

Wu Chun-mei sees Adeline walking to school one morning and asks her driver to offer Adeline a ride. Adeline refuses, fearful of Niang’s wrath. However, two weeks later in the onset of a typhoon, Chun-mei and her father again see Adeline trekking through the storm. Adeline tries to refuse a ride again, although she is soaked and freezing, but as she is speaking a strong blast of wind knocks her into a lamppost. Chun-mei’s father is nearly angry that Adeline is so exposed and puts her in his car. As they drive, Adeline tries to play it off as if she loves the storm and makes them drop her off a block away from her house so that Niang will not see that she has been given a ride home.

*This introduces the power of storytelling to cope with abuse and trauma as a major theme of the memoir. Although Adeline’s use of stories will develop as she grows older, in this instance, storytelling becomes an important way for her to reimagine herself and practice countering all of the negative ideas she has been given by her family about her self-worth.*



*Although Adeline’s wish to appear normal in front of her peers is certainly understandable, especially for a young child, this ultimately leads her to further repress the pain she experiences at home. Even when she is surrounded by loyal friends, Adeline’s inability to be honest about her abuse and ask for help means that the support that they are able to give her is limited. Though it is impossible to say, it seems feasible that had Adeline learned to share her pain, she may have found help and relief from the abuse much earlier.*



*This is the introduction of Wu Chun-mei, Adeline’s closest friend described in the memoir. Chun-mei will be critical to the memoir’s exploration of friendship and the way in which it can be a vital support to someone enduring trauma or abuse. Her entrance into the story thus initiates friendship as a major theme.*



*The anger of Wu Chun-mei’s father creates an interesting contrast to Niang’s anger. Chun-mei’s father is not angered at Adeline, per se, but that her safety and well-being are put at risk by the apparent neglect of her parents. This is a direct contradiction to Niang’s own anger, so often directed at Adeline for defying Niang’s absolute control, which often puts Adeline at considerable risk. Chun-mei’s father is angry that Adeline may be in a dangerous situation; Niang is often angered when Adeline avoids physical danger.*



Wu Chun-mei and Adeline become close friends. Chun-mei gives Adeline books to read and Adeline helps Chun-mei with her math, and they partner with each other for sports. Though Chun-mei has a driver to bring her to school, whenever she sees Adeline walking, Chun-mei gets out of the car and walks the whole distance to school with her friend, her driver following slowly behind them.

When Adeline is nearly eight years old, the United States ends World War II by dropping the atomic bomb on Japan, thus ending the Japanese occupation of China. Shanghai becomes enamored with American culture and the U.S. marines become national heroes.

Wu Chun-mei loans Adeline an English book, *The Little Princess*, in which a seven-year-old heiress loses her father, becomes destitute, and eventually retakes control of her own future through grit and determination. Adeline falls in love with the book, seeing herself in its main character and reading it over and over again until Chun-mei starts growing impatient to have it back. Adeline copies the entire book word for word into a journal and memorizes portions of the manuscript before returning the book. Although Adeline and Chun-mei spend hours in each other's company, Adeline never reveals how close her own life is to the *Little Princess*, keeping up her pretense of a normal life, afraid to "admit the truth because then the dream world would vanish forever."

In the spring of 1946, Father, Niang, Big Sister, Fourth Brother, and Little Sister all leave Shanghai for several months to take care of Father's house in Tianjin now that the Japanese have been run out of the country. For Adeline and her three brothers, now relieved of Niang and Father's presence, it is like "stepp[ing] back through through time into a cheerful, buoyant and lighthearted era that we had almost forgotten." The stepchildren play with their friends, eat whenever they please, and the brothers start taking an interest in girls. Big Brother feels so emboldened that he steals sixteen eggs from the cook (which Niang has forbidden the stepchildren from eating) and makes himself a "king-size" omelet.

*Wu Chun-mei's loyalty to Adeline, to the point that she is willing to suffer the long walks with Adeline as an act of solidarity, is something that should have come from Adeline's siblings. This loyalty demonstrates one of the ways in which friends may offer a valuable support, even compensating for the deficiency of family to some degree.*



*The author's recollection of such events is childlike—while she is aware the the world around her is changing and that various forces are at play, the only effects that she recognizes are those that are immediately in front of her, such as the sudden popularity of American culture.*



*This once again demonstrates the power of stories, further developing this theme by demonstrating another value that stories may offer an individual suffering an abusive or traumatic situation. Adeline spends most of her childhood keeping her experiences a secret and believing that she is the only one who suffers in such a way. In reading the story, Adeline discovers that she is not quite so alone as she thought, that the heroine of the story has experienced much of the grief and loss that she has. Most importantly, the story has a happy ending, suggesting to Adeline that some good may someday come out of all of this pain.*



*Adeline's life has several periods without the oppressive presence of Father and Niang where life is able to be simpler and happier, something near a normal life. These periods are vital, reminding her, in the same way that her friends often do, that the environment created by Niang and Father and the way that they treat her are not normal. The end of the oppression of Japanese occupation forms a notable parallel to the brief end of the oppressive occupation of Niang. For a short time, both China and the stepchildren are able to live free.*



Aunt Baba returns to work and spends her evenings with friends. Ye Ye grows much closer to Third Brother and Adeline, taking them on picnics and teaching Third Brother Tai Chi. Adeline and Third Brother also spend much time together, and Adeline remarks that he is much kinder when he is not with the other brothers; he does not bully Adeline.

Third Brother and Adeline talk about their dead mama, with Third Brother telling her how much safer everything felt before she died. Adeline tells Third Brother that he can visit their mother in his mind if he just closes his eyes and imagines where she might live. When Adeline remarks that she once told Big Sister about these thoughts, Third Brother is angry at her for trusting Big Sister, saying, “Don’t trust anyone! Be a cold fish, just like me. Never get involved.” Later that evening, Adeline asks Aunt Baba for a photograph of her mother, but Aunt Baba tells her that once he remarried, Father demanded that all pictures of her be destroyed and forbade Aunt Baba from speaking about her again.

A week later, Shanghai is in the midst of a heat wave. Home from school, Adeline lies on her bed, happily reflecting on the fact that she has just won a city-wide writing competition and Wu Chun-mei has won an award for athletics and been commended for her improvement in arithmetic. The maid announces that that Adeline’s brothers want her to join them in the living room and she is overjoyed, since her brothers never request her presence. The three brothers present her with a glass of orange juice, supposedly as a reward for winning the writing competition. Adeline is suspicious, but when Third Brother assures there is nothing wrong with it, she takes a drink, tasting urine.

Adeline races to the bathroom, washes her mouth, and cries. She is not crying because of her brothers’ meanness—she is used to that by now. Rather, she is crying because Third Brother’s constant bending to his other brothers’ cruelty “chip[s] away at his integrity,” destroying his kindness.

*Third Brother’s character continues to develop as a person who is kind when not in the presence of his other, meaner siblings. This demonstrates his potential to grow into a good man if properly fostered, as well as indicating the way that such a toxic family can suffocate a child’s goodness.*



*Third Brother’s admonishment to “be a cold fish” is incredibly revealing of his character. Rather than insist on maintaining his integrity, Third Brother is primarily motivated by his desire to minimize his suffering in the midst of a cruel family. This contrasts with Adeline’s own resolution not succumb to the meanness of the others, and it further demonstrates the way in which a toxic family environment can subvert the goodness of someone like Third Brother, who wants to be kind but is also weak-willed to the point that he allows himself to stoop to cruel behavior.*



*Despite his kindness and affection towards Adeline, Third Brother capitulates to the power of his older brothers—much like Big Sister capitulates to Niang—even at the cost of betraying Adeline’s trust. This clearly demonstrates the tragedy of toxic families in the way they push even those members who are gentle-hearted to be malicious and cruel. It should be pointed out that Third Brother’s betrayal of Adeline is an act of self-protection, a way to avoid the ire and hatred of his older brothers. Though not malicious himself, his capitulation to them leads him to commit a malicious act.*



*In such a toxic family, it seems that Third Brother’s hope to “be a cold fish” may be impossible. By trying to cause as little disruption as possible, he is coaxed into being cruel. However, were he to be as morally consistent as Adeline or stand up for her, he would almost certainly face the wrath of his older brothers. This yet again reinforces the manner in which a toxic family can wreak havoc on a child’s moral development, placing them in no-win situations.*



The next morning, as Wu Chun-mei and Adeline are walking to school together, American sailors ask them for directions. Wu Chun-mei helps them, and in return they give both girls a large basket of persimmons. At school, the girls distribute the fruit to their friends and Adeline is thrilled at the rare chance to give gifts to others. That day at school is filled with laughter and jokes, with Wu Chun-mei playing a jest to convince her friends to bite into the tart, unripe fruits.

*Wu Chun-mei's jest parallels Adeline's brothers', except that it is done in good fun rather than malice, and is a prank on the whole group rather than singling out one person (and it involves no bodily fluids). The similarity and contrast between the two jests suggests that the cruel behavior adopted by Adeline's brothers distorts their innocent, childish impulses towards pranks and jokes into something malicious and hurtful.*



## CHAPTER 11: PLT

Niang, Father, and the other children eventually return. Shortly after, some family friends come with a gift of pet ducklings for all seven children. (It is unusual that these friends knew of all seven children, since Niang often hides the fact of her husband's first marriage and five original children.) Adeline, picking last, gets the smallest, weakest bird, but she cherishes her new pet and names it **PLT**, short for Precious Little Treasure.

*PLT is a brief symbolic parallel to Adeline, specifically mirroring her emotional wellbeing and the manner in which she is treated by her Father. Though brief, this parallel between the two heightens the emotional intensity of the story and even causes horror at Father's abject cruelty, as will be seen.*



Adeline speaks to **PLT** as if she were a baby sister and loves having another creature be dependent on her. She spends a lot of time digging up worms to feed PLT. On one occasion, when Adeline tries to feed PLT a worm while she is in their rooftop pen with the other ducklings, she feels privately guilty about favoring her own duckling and not having enough worms to feed to all seven of them. While she is doing this, Second Brother sneaks up and strikes Adeline hard in the back of the head, steals the worm, and feeds it to his own duckling instead. Adeline takes PLT with her to her room, determined that she will have to find another worm.

*Adeline's behavior toward PLT demonstrates the way in which Father and Niang should behave towards Adeline herself. Adeline enjoys PLT's dependence on her and loves to care for the duckling and give it gifts. In an obvious contrast to Niang, Adeline feels guilt over her favoritism of her own duckling, even though she does not have enough worms to go around. This directly contradicts Niang's favoring of her own children and discrimination against the stepchildren, even though she has more than enough money. This passage is an indirect but obvious condemnation of Niang's behavior*



Adeline returns to the garden to find another worm, but Father's dog, Jackie, is now acting very aggressive. As Adeline nervously digs, Jackie lunges at her, biting her hard in the forearm. She runs back to her room, blood running down her arm and tears down her face, and finds Aunt Baba who has just returned home from work. Aunt Baba bandages Adeline and cradles her, but also warns her not to mention that Jackie attacked her, since he is Father and Niang's pet.

*More than just loving PLT, Adeline demonstrates great courage in her commitment to caring for the duckling. This once again paints the ideal image of a parent, depicting the way in which Adeline's parents should love her. Instead, Adeline's courage is a sharp contrast to Father's distance and neglect, requiring no courage or commitment on his part.*



To cheer up, Aunt Baba gets Adeline's early report cards out of her safe and they look through them together. Aunt Baba tells Adeline that, with her intelligence, she can be anything she wants to be and Adeline is comforted to know that at least one person loves her and believes in her.

*Aunt Baba's answer to pain and fear foreshadows Adeline's eventual escape from her abusive childhood through her skill as a writer and her excellent scholarship.*



During dinner that night, the family is having stewed duck, which Adeline and Third Brother now find revolting since they have pet ducklings. Both children smuggle their food off the table to avoid eating it. Niang makes a remark about Jackie's obedience lessons, which are taught by a high-end German trainer. Father declares that he wants to "have some fun" with Jackie in the garden this evening, and orders Big Brother to go select one of the pet ducklings. The stepchildren are horrified, but Big Brother obeys and returns carrying **PLT**. Father brings the duckling to the garden and releases it, ordering Jackie to hold still and await his command. However, Jackie lunges and bites PLT in its jaws. Father beats Jackie for attacking too early, and Adeline takes the critically-wounded animal up to her room.

Adeline wraps **PLT** in scarf and lays next to her for the entire night, hoping and wishing that, come morning, everything will be fine. When she wakes up, however, PLT is dead. Aunt Baba tells Adeline to bury PLT in the garden while Father is walking Jackie for the morning. On her way out, Adeline stumbles into Big Brother who gives a vague half-apology, saying that he picked PLT because Adeline wouldn't enact retribution. Third Brother joins Adeline in the garden and together they bury PLT, leaving rice and worms as offerings and bowing to pay respect. As they stand there, mourning, Adeline remarks that she feels as if it is the two of them against the world, and that they must never give in.

## CHAPTER 12: BIG SISTER'S WEDDING

Father and Niang, who often travel to Tianjin for business meetings, begin taking Big Sister with them. In the midst of Chinese New Year, 1948, Big Sister announces to Adeline, Aunt Baba, and Ye Ye that Niang has arranged for her to be married to a doctor. Big Sister seems thrilled, but Adeline is "sad and frightened for her." The doctor is thirty-one years old, and Big Sister is only seventeen.

As wedding gifts are sent to the house for Big Sister, Niang sorts through them and takes all of the best items for herself. Grand Aunt delivers a gift to Aunt Baba and asks her to hand-deliver it to Big Sister. Aunt Baba does so and lets Big Sister open it in her room, in the company only of Aunt Baba and Adeline, discovering the gift to be a beautiful jade pendant. Big Sister does not want to give the pendant to Niang and begs Aunt Baba and Adeline to keep the gift a secret.

*This is arguably the strongest demonstration of Father's abject and wanton cruelty towards his own children, specifically towards Adeline. Considering PLT as a symbol of Adeline's own emotional wellbeing, Father's thoughtless killing of it for his own amusement is chilling. By letting Jackie kill PLT for sport, Father mercilessly crushes his own daughter's heart underfoot in a horrific instance of emotional abuse. It is telling that when Jackie attacks too early, killing PLT, Father is simply infuriated that his dog has disobeyed him. This suggests that his desire to be respected, even by his pet, completely supersedes any sympathy he might possibly have felt for Adeline's obvious pain, further characterizing him as a ruthless and heartless individual, on par with Niang.*



*Despite Third Brother's capitulation to the cruelty of his brothers, this scene confirms that he is truly compassionate and loves Adeline despite his weakness. Big Brother's admission that he chose PLT to die because Adeline would not take revenge displays a weakness similar to that of Third Brother. Big Brother, too, is simply trying to minimize his own suffering within the family, further reiterating the way in which a toxic family makes victims of everyone involved, even those who may seem most heartless and cruel.*



*As a character, Big Sister represents a possible future for Adeline, one which she desperately wishes to avoid. Though women in China are gaining more freedoms—especially from practices such as foot binding—the possibility of Adeline's parents arranging a marriage against her will is a real threat, particularly as a way to be rid of the burden of financially supporting her.*



*Once again, Niang is further characterized as utterly selfish. It is telling that Big Sister, who pretends to be Niang's loyal acolyte, still feels the need for secrecy and thus still feels the oppression of Niang. This indicates that, within such a toxic family led by such vile people, even those who shamelessly capitulate are not entirely spared their suffering. It is simply minimized.*



The wedding is lavish and expensive, though Adeline is given only an old hand-me-down from Big Sister to wear. Even worse, her brothers are shaven bald and humiliatingly dressed in ancient traditional robes, causing them to be mercilessly mocked by their classmates. All the other male guests, including Fourth Brother, are wearing fashionable modern Western clothing. The guests notice the unequal treatment of the children and stepchildren.

Near the end of the celebration, Adeline is in a bathroom stall when she hears Grand Aunt enter, followed by Niang. They are unaware that Adeline is in the stall. Grand Aunt makes a casual remark about the jade pendant she gave to Big Sister, unknowingly tipping Niang off that a gift had been withheld from her. Adeline warns Big Sister as soon as she is able, and Big Sister thanks her, saying, "I'll never forget this kindness on your part...You're the best sister in the world and I'll always be indebted to you." Third Brother later overhears Big Sister and Niang's conversation, in which Big Sister claims that Aunt Baba forced her to keep the jade pendant a secret from Niang, but that Big Sister's own love for Niang had overwhelmed Aunt Baba's insistence, thus "...endear[ing] herself to Niang while simultaneously denouncing Aunt Baba."

## CHAPTER 13: A BIRTHDAY PARTY

In September 1948, after summer recess, Wu Chun-mei starts "begging" Adeline to come over to her house for her birthday party. Adeline keeps refusing, since Niang has forbade her from going to any friends' houses. Chun-mei persists, insisting that it doesn't even have to be on her actual birthday, simply any day that is convenient for Adeline. When Adeline's teacher tells their class that they will have a special holiday next week, even though all the other students in Shanghai will still be in school, Adeline suggests that they have the party on the upcoming holiday. Although she immediately regrets the suggestion, Chun-mei is instantly thrilled, and six other friends want to go specifically because Adeline will be there.

Planning out their day, the girls determine that they will all wear their school uniforms and meet at the school, then proceed to Wu Chun-mei's house. None of the others know that Adeline is going in secret, hiding the fact from her parents. The next day, they all go to Chun-mei's house and spend the morning having a wonderful time together. However, at noon Adeline realizes that her family will be expecting her home for lunch. Chun-Mei is disappointed but Adeline is insistent, fearing that Niang will discover the ruse. As Adeline is hastily leaving, she thoughtlessly gives Chun-mei her phone number and promises she will be back soon.

*This further demonstrates the lengths Niang goes to humiliate the stepchildren even in public, proving that her mistreatment of them has nothing to do with finances and everything to do with dehumanizing them every chance she gets. As a character, the spite that she exhibits is unparalleled.*



*In contrast to Adeline's strong character and in spite of the benevolence of her warning, Big Sister is once again shameless in her manipulation and lies. This continues Big Sister's characterization as a completely shameless, conniving individual, making her something of a protégé of Niang. This once again demonstrates the way in which an individual raised in a toxic family under narcissistic parents will often take on the same qualities that they see modeled for them. Big Sister is set up to become just as foul of an individual as Niang, prodded and provoked to become that way by Niang's abuse.*



*Wu Chun-mei exhibits a powerful affection for Adeline and shows her the love that Adeline's family does not. That Chun-mei does not care what day they celebrate her birthday as long as Adeline can join in indicates that she cherishes Adeline more than the party itself. This is a love that none of Adeline's sibling or parents have ever shown. This again demonstrates the way in which good friends are a vital resource for people in difficult situations, in this case partially compensating for the lost love and affirmation of parents and siblings.*



*The stress and secrecy that Adeline feels the need to constantly endure is an indicator of the emotional trauma of abuse. Even if Niang or Father is not striking her, Niang has taken dominion over her mind, invading each thought and making something so innocent as a childhood birthday party a source of terror and fear. This strongly suggests that the emotional aspect of abuse has a longer reach than the physical aspect of it. Even when not in Niang's presence, the threat of her wrath is a constant burden for Adeline.*



Adeline arrives home earlier than she would have on a normal school day and Niang is instantly suspicious. Adeline also has a silver dollar in her pocket that Aunt Baba had secretly given her, with which she meant to buy a present for Wu Chun-mei. However, Niang notices that there is something in her pocket and demands to know where the money came from, accusing Adeline of thievery and beating her when she will not give up Aunt Baba. As this is happening, the maid arrives to tell Niang that there is a telephone call for Adeline, and Adeline realizes with horror that Chun-mei has grown impatient and called to check on her. Niang answers the phone and discovers Adeline's ruse, telling Chun-mei on the phone that Adeline won't be returning.

*Niang's instant suspicion of Adeline arriving home early and further accusations that she is a thief are themselves emotionally abusive. Adeline has not behaved in a way to merit such immediate skepticism, and yet she is immediately put on trial. Home is thus never a safe place for Adeline but a place of fear, whether she has anything to hide or not. Also, Niang's fury that Adeline might possess something as innocuous as a silver dollar further demonstrates her desire for absolute control and absolute oppression over every aspect of Adeline's life.*



Niang confines Adeline to her room until Father gets home, telling her that she has her dead mother's "bad blood" and will never amount to anything, nor even does she deserve to be fed and housed by Father. As Adeline waits, she can hear Fourth Brother and Little Sister feeding Jackie their unwanted food and finds herself with eyes shut, "wishing with all my heart that when I opened them again, I would be Jackie and Jackie would be me." Father later arrives, furious, and beats her with a dog whip as she lays facedown on her bed. Father announces that Aunt Baba is obviously a "bad influence" and thus Adeline must be separated from her. Adeline is crushed.

*The emotional abuse that Niang inflicts is horrific. Although the beatings are bad and painful, more destructive still is Niang constantly demeaning Adeline and teaching her that she is worthless, ripping apart her sense of self-worth. As will be seen throughout the memoir, this low view of herself will plague Adeline throughout her childhood and prove to be the greatest wound that she receives from her parents. That she finds herself wishing that she were Father's dog—since Jackie is well-fed and receives affection—is a tragic indication of how little Adeline has come to think of herself.*



## CHAPTER 14: CLASS PRESIDENT

At school the next day, Wu Chun-mei is curious about what happened to Adeline the day before, and Adeline wonders if Niang left any visible marks on her face when she beat her. However, they are both distracted from this when the headmistress announces that, for sixth grade, the class president will be democratically elected in the manner of the United States. The election will be tomorrow, and they are allowed to spend part of the day campaigning. Although Chun-mei had earlier decided that she would be Adeline's campaign manager, when Adeline makes her speech after school, she declares that her classmates should elect Chun-mei instead. Chun-mei is surprised by this, but Adeline insists that it is the right thing and that she must hurry home.

*Once again, the contrast between Adeline's life at home and life at school is stark, not the least because Wu Chun-mei and others actually care about Adeline's well-being. Adeline is thus caught cycling between two worlds, one in which she is safe, successful, and cared for, and the other in which she is demeaned, despised, and always in danger of physical and emotional abuse. This duality adds to the strain of Adeline's life, adding yet another level of turbulence on top of the hardships of home. Especially for a child, such a chaotic life is very damaging indeed, obliterating any sense of safety or dependability.*



Adeline runs home and finds Aunt Baba sitting in an armchair, saying that she had just been talking about Adeline with Ye Ye. Aunt Baba tries to get Adeline to talk about what Father told her after he whipped her, but Adeline becomes unusually angry and insists that she only wants to do her homework and think about school, since at least there she is happy. Ye Ye enters and Adeline expects she will be reprimanded for her anger, but Ye Ye simply insists that Aunt Baba let her study, since she is strong and will turn out differently than Big Sister.

The next day, Adeline wins the class election with the help of Wu Chun-mei, whose popularity helps sway many students. Adeline is thrilled, feeling that they have both won it together. The teacher and her classmates are very proud of her. As she walks home that afternoon, Adeline reflects on how this proves Niang and Father wrong. How can she be worthless or have bad blood if she has been democratically elected to lead her peers?

Adeline arrives home and goes up to her room, her happiness beginning to fade. The house feels tense, and she knows she is on thin ice after the birthday party. The maid comes up to Adeline's room, looking worried, and announces that a group of Adeline's friends have arrived and are waiting in the living room with gifts to throw a surprise party for her. Adeline is terrified but goes downstairs to meet her friends, who are "drunk with excitement," chanting, singing, not realizing that Adeline is fearfully silent. The maid soon tells Adeline that Niang is demanding to see her in her room, and Adeline momentarily excuses herself from the group.

Niang and Father are sitting together in **the Holy of Holies**, furious. Niang accuses Adeline of planning the party herself to show off their luxurious house and strikes her in the face so hard that Adeline nearly falls. Although Adeline insists she did not invite them, Niang strikes her again and demands that Adeline get rid of her guests, screaming. The house is silent and Adeline realizes her friends must have heard Niang screaming and beating her through the open door of the Holy of Holies. She returns to her friends, faced smeared with blood, and tells them that Father wants them to leave, feeling as if she is dying of shame. Wu Chun-mei offers Adeline a handkerchief, and as she leaves with the others, she shouts at Niang and Father's doorway that they are "barbaric" and that she will inform her own father of their cruelty.

*Adeline's outburst of anger towards Aunt Baba is not due to anything Aunt Baba has done, but simply due to Adeline being overwhelmed by the emotional trauma of their looming separation. In this way, Adeline's angry outburst is a microcosm of the anger that Father and the stepchildren have directed at her regarding their mother's death. While this in no way excuses Adeline's meanness towards Aunt Baba, it does shed some light on this odd behavior.*



*This again highlights the contrast between Adeline's life at school and life at home. At school, Adeline is a success and surrounded by friends who love her, while at home she is demeaned and called worthless. Although these conflicting messages create confusion for Adeline, they are critical in helping her to realize that she does not have to be what Father and Niang say she is, which is a critical step in her coming-of-age journey.*



*Although Adeline has thus far carefully managed to keep her private life separate from her public life, here they come face to face. Once again, the contrast between Adeline's friends' perception and treatment of her and Niang and Father's perception and treatment of her are painfully apparent. This demonstrates the baselessness of Niang and Father's cruelty towards Adeline, despite their claims that she deserves it, suggesting that such abuse is based in delusion.*



*Niang's carefully-controlled dominion over the household, in which Adeline is regarded as utterly worthless, is disrupted by the entrance of friends who love Adeline and see that she is intelligent, compassionate, and good. Niang's fury and delusions that their arrival is some plot of Adeline's thus seems to stem from the fact that her carefully-managed perception of Adeline has been contradicted. Since Niang believes Adeline to be worthless, any success that Adeline has seems a direct affront to Niang's view of the world. This further indicates the way in which abuse, while stemming from a number of different factors, at least rests on delusional premises—in this case, that Adeline is worthless and unlovable.*



When the friends have gone, Father and Niang order Adeline to throw all the gifts that were brought for her in the trash. Although Adeline tries to explain that these were merely congratulatory gifts for winning, Niang is enraged and accuses Adeline of believing she is some sort of conceited princess. Father tells Adeline that she has breached the family's trust, since "family ugliness should never be revealed in public." He tells Adeline that she can no longer live with them, though he does not know where she will go. Father declares that Adeline must never see Aunt Baba again and that she will be given to an orphanage as soon as possible.

Adeline returns to school the next day filled with shame, but to her surprise all her classmates salute her and no one brings up what happened the day before. The pain of yesterday fades as Adeline spends a happy day at school, and she reflects on the dichotomy between the version of herself that her classmates recognize and the version of herself that Father and Niang see, wondering also if Father will love her again if she can bring him just "a few more honors."

However, when Adeline returns home she discovers the maid packing her clothes in a suitcase. Ye Ye looks saddened and the maid informs Adeline that tomorrow Father and Niang will fly with her to Tianjin, where they will leave her in an orphanage. Adeline, heartbroken, waits for Aunt Baba to return from work and despairs at the thought of never seeing her friends from school again. Aunt Baba returns and as they spend their last moments together, Aunt Baba reflects on how exceptional a student Adeline is and how that will give her the power to do anything she wants in life. They promise to write each other twice a week and Aunt Baba promises Adeline that she will always be there to support her for as long as she is alive. She makes Adeline promise that she will prove Niang and Father wrong, and she affirms that Adeline is special and valuable.

## CHAPTER 15: BOARDING SCHOOL IN TIANJIN

The airport is crowded the next day, but to Adeline's surprise, their flight from Shanghai to Tianjin is nearly empty. Although Adeline is unaware at the time, China is undergoing a major revolution: Mao Zedong and the Communists have initiated a civil war with Chiang Kai-shek and the Nationalists. The Communists, with their People's Liberation Army, are conquering many provinces, moving from north to south, and have nearly arrived in Tianjin and Beijing, which most people assume they will swiftly take control of.

*Father's statement that "family ugliness should never be revealed in public" is particularly despicable. Once again, Father places the blame for their abuse of Adeline on Adeline herself, mirroring the way that she is blamed for getting lost in Shanghai and for the death of her mother. Father's inability to accept responsibility for his failures and his penchant for cruelly using Adeline as a scapegoat for all of his problems furthers his characterization as a cruel, ruthlessly narcissistic figure.*



*The loyalty of Adeline's friends once again compensates for the lack of love and loyalty she receives from her parents—Adeline's family should be the source of comfort, the individuals who accept and support her regardless of what happens. The fact that, despite their horrific physical and emotional abuse, Adeline wonders if she can earn Father's love with "honors" suggests that a child's need for love from their parents is implicit, independent of whether those parents are worth loving themselves.*



*It is telling of both Niang's power and the powerlessness of Aunt Baba and Ye Ye that, even now, they will not put up resistance to Father and Niang's intention to abandon Adeline. The financial dependency of Aunt Baba and Ye Ye on Father and Niang seems to put them in a position in which they are unable to fight the decision, and yet, at the same time, their silence almost suggests a level of cowardice. This complicates the characters of both adults, who, though they dearly love Adeline, also demonstrate a confusing level of impotence, even when Adeline's safety is at risk.*



*The fact that Father and Niang elect to leave Adeline in the path of the Communists is particularly grim, almost as if they hope she will be captured or killed. Taking Adeline from the relative safety of Shanghai to the danger of Tianjin seems akin to a parent abandoning their child in the middle of a busy highway when they could have left them on the side of the road. This is a supreme example of emotional abuse, an apparent death wish from one's parents, and further contributes to Adeline's loss of self-worth.*



A flight stewardess gives Adeline and her parents landing cards to fill out, during which Father reveals to Adeline that he does not even remember her given Chinese name since it is never used in the household, and he doesn't know her birthday since it is never celebrated; he doesn't even know how old she is. This wounds Adeline, knowing that she means so little to him. However, she does not even know her own birthday, so Father offers to give her his. Despite her pain, she finds the thought of sharing Father's birthday "wonderful." And thus, November 30th becomes Adeline's legal birthday.

Niang's brother meets them at the airport in Tianjin with his chauffeur and they all drive together for hours, arriving at a large, familiar-looking building sometime at night. Niang gets out of the car with Adeline while Father remains in the vehicle. The two of them stride to the gate and are met by two foreign nuns. With only a few brief words to the nuns, Niang turns and re-enters the vehicle. The car pulls away. Adeline has been abandoned, "tossed aside...like a piece of garbage." Father did not so much as look up or wave.

The nuns, Mother Marie and Mother Natalie, inform Adeline that she is no longer allowed to speak Mandarin, only English (which Adeline knows very little of) or French. The nuns show Adeline to the sleeping quarter, a massive room filled with empty beds and only 3 girls besides herself. When Adeline asks where she is, the nuns are surprised, answering that she is in the same school where she had attended kindergarten so many years ago. Adeline is crushed, but decides that at least a boarding school is better than an orphanage.

Adeline wakes the next morning to find a girl her age sitting on the next bed, talking with her mother. When Adeline admits that her English is poor, the girl happily switches to Mandarin. The girl's mother is shocked that Adeline's parents have sent her from the safety of Shanghai to the danger of Tianjin (since her family has been trying to get a flight out of Tianjin for months). In Tianjin, they are at risk of being persecuted by the Communists. The girl's mother asks what Adeline could have done to merit such punishment.

*Father's forgetting of Adeline's given name reiterates his utter apathy towards his own daughter, further characterizing him as a callous and self-absorbed figure. It is tragic then, that even in the face of such disregard, Adeline thinks it "wonderful" to share the same birthday as Father. This nods to the way in which children naturally idolize their parents, even in the face of abuse or neglect, making childhood abuse a particularly grim occurrence.*



*Adeline's abandonment in Tianjin constitutes an emotional abuse as great as anything she has suffered thus far, which once again crushes her self-esteem. Although she is now out of arm's reach and safe from the beatings of Niang, Father, or even Second Brother, the emotional trauma of abandonment will be with her for as long as she stays in Tianjin. This demonstrates the way in which the emotional trauma of abuse, especially childhood abuse, can have a far greater impact than physical harm.*



*The nuns' forbidding of Chinese language reiterates the recurrent tension between Adeline's traditional Chinese culture that she is raised with and the modern, Western values being thrust upon her. On the one hand, such Western values are necessary to succeed in the Twentieth century. This will become a consistent tension throughout the author's entire life, and much of her later writing and work as an author is dedicated to sharing and preserving traditional Chinese values and culture.*



*Once again, a third party enters the story briefly to show how cruel Niang and Father are. While any decent parent knows they should be taking their children out of the danger of Tianjin, Adeline's parents seem to intentionally put her in harm's way. That the other girl's mother recognizes that Adeline is being punished is also revealing, suggesting that, regardless of the cruelty of Adeline's situation, there is at least some cultural precedent for it.*



The school is split into six classes and students are placed based on their fluency in English. Adeline, to her shame, is placed in the beginners' class, akin to a kindergarten class. She is years older than any of her classmates and they are working on basic addition and subtraction, rather than the algebra she had previously studied. During class, Mother Marie initially mocks Adeline's limited English but, once Adeline proves to be quick-witted and humorous even in a language she speaks poorly, Mother Marie lets off.

The girl that Adeline met at boarding school escapes Tianjin in November 1948. There are so few students left in the entire school that they are all put into one classroom. Students leave every day until, by mid-December, Adeline is the only student left. Mother Marie makes an effort to keep teaching Adeline, but she is not sure what to teach anymore. All of the nuns seem to avoid eye contact with her, pitying her, and Adeline spends her days wandering from empty room to empty room. One day, Adeline discovers the chapel filled with nuns in prayer and hears one of them at the organ. The music brings her back to evenings with Aunt Baba and Ye Ye, snuggling into her blankets and listening to them play cards.

For Christmas Day, Adeline eats dinner all alone in the refectory while one of the nuns occasionally wanders in and out with food. Adeline places her head on the table and falls asleep. Later that evening, she writes a letter to Aunt Baba, telling her she misses her and asking why she doesn't write back, since Adeline has sent so many letters.

New Year's Day and 1949 arrives without fanfare. Adeline spends time making origami out of a book that Mother Marie gave her. She tries not to ask whether she has received mail too often, since she never gets anything. Though she does not know it at the time, Niang ordered all incoming and outgoing mail to be intercepted and forwarded to her in Shanghai.

*This is yet another humiliation that will contribute to Adeline's extremely low sense of self-worth, contrasting heavily with her school life in Shanghai—where once she had many friends, now she is alone; where once she was the top of her class, now she is studying next to kindergartners and suffering through learning English. Even so, Adeline's sense of humor despite her humiliation suggests a particular ability to persevere*



*The peace of the prayer chapel and the memories of safety that Adeline recalls after hearing the organ music contrasts with the looming threat of Communist occupation. Especially for the nuns—and Adeline by extension, since she is living with them—this would have been a particularly dangerous time. Mao Zedong's Communism is known for being militantly atheist and hostile towards religion and capitalism. As a French school, the nuns are representatives of both religion and Western capitalism, making them as likely targets for persecution.*



*Though Adeline, still quite young, does not yet seem to assume that Niang is interfering here, the reader naturally intuits this. Aunt Baba's commitment to Adeline is too strong to simply ignore her like the rest of the family. Adeline's belief that Aunt Baba has simply neglected to write back indicates the childlike nature of Adeline's perception and the psychological control Niang has over her.*



*Niang's obsession with control over Adeline's life, even when she has left the house and is completely out of sight, once again reinforces her own near-psychotic obsession with power and demonstrates yet another method of emotional abuse. For Niang, it is not enough to be rid of Adeline, she must also make her feel as alone as possible. This demonstrates the way in which emotional abuse can be far more powerful and wider-reaching than physical abuse.*



One day, Mother Marie comes running up to Adeline and announces that her aunt has arrived to take her to Hong Kong by ship. Adeline is flushed with joy, knowing that Aunt Baba has come to rescue her. She races to the visiting area but stops short, seeing not Aunt Baba but a foreign-looking woman in a Western suit who tells Adeline that she is Aunt Reine Schilling, Niang's older sister. Aunt Baba remains in Tianjin. According to Aunt Reine, she has not seen Adeline since Adeline was in kindergarten. Adeline is crushed, and despite her best efforts to thank Aunt Reine for coming to take her, she begins to weep.

Aunt Reine strokes Adeline's hair and tries to comfort her, telling Adeline that she will join Aunt Reine's family and share a cabin on the ship with her and her daughter Claudine, who is nine. They will also be traveling with Aunt Reine's husband and their son, Victor, who is ten. They will meet Adeline's family, whom Aunt Reine assumes will be thrilled to see her, in Hong Kong where they have fled.

They leave the school, seeing the city streets deserted except for young Communist soldiers. Aunt Reine explains that Chiang Kai-shek's army simply gave up the city and fled southward. Big Sister had also been living in Tianjin but fled more recently, and Aunt Reine is surprised to hear that she never visited Adeline. Although Adeline begs to go to Shanghai instead of Hong Kong, Aunt Reine thinks this is madness since the Communists will most likely capture Shanghai soon, as well. Aunt Reine believes the best thing for Adeline is to be with her family in Hong Kong; to Adeline, this seems the worst thing.

## CHAPTER 16: HONG KONG

Adeline walks up the gangway of the ship that will sail for Hong Kong with Victor and Claudine. She is still nervous, since she has only known them for three days, but already Victor can make her laugh and they both set Adeline at ease. As they are unpacking in their cabins, Victor appears in the doorway wearing a life jacket, joking that the ship may sink at any moment. Claudine is somewhat alarmed by this joke, though Adeline and Aunt Reine laugh. Victor surprises Adeline by taking the life jacket off and teaching Claudine how to wear it and tighten the straps—an act that Adeline's own brothers “would never have done.”

*This introduces Aunt Reine, who will play an important role in showing Adeline what a healthy, normal family can look like and demonstrating the manner in which friends (or extended family, functioning as friends) can help to keep one grounded. The contrast between Aunt Reine and her sister Niang is immediate: Niang has abandoned Adeline; Aunt Reine has come to rescue her from the Communists.*



*Aunt Reine shows physical affection to Adeline to try to calm her, stroking her hair, which is something that Niang has never done. This is another indicator that Adeline's relationship with Aunt Reine will be fundamentally different than her relationship with Niang.*



*Aunt Reine seems strangely unaware of her sister Niang's cruelty and the state in which her family lives, otherwise she would not be so surprised that Adeline wants to avoid her family or that Big Sister has not visited. This once again highlights the fundamental difference between Niang and Aunt Reine, raising the question of how, being sisters, they turned out so completely different in temperament and demeanor. This question is never explored (although clearly Adeline turns out to be very different from her siblings, as well).*



*Aunt Reine, Victor, and Claudine together function to show Adeline what a healthy, functional family can look like and how pleasant and safe it can be. Victor, particularly, strongly contrasts against Adeline's depictions of her brothers. Though Victor likes to tease Claudine, his teaching her how to use a life jacket demonstrates a level of care and protectiveness not even shown by Third Brother, who is the most decent of Adeline's siblings.*



The room shared by Adeline, Claudine, and Aunt Reine only has two beds until a ship steward finds a thin cot to lay on the floor. Adeline assumes that she will take the cot, but Aunt Reine interjects, saying that no one will be treated differently from anyone else in their family. Instead, they draw lots for the cot, with Aunt Reine herself drawing, too. Claudine draws the cot and sleeps on it without complaint for the whole voyage. Aunt Reine and her family treat Adeline as an equal among them for the entire trip, as if she is one of their own children. This is the first time in her life that Adeline is treated as an equal.

As the ship sails south, the air warms considerably and the seas are calm. Adeline, Victor, and Claudine spend many hours playing together on the deck or reading in the ship's library, which is full of English novels and travel books, as well as a stack of games. Adeline is constantly struck by how kind Victor is to Claudine. Though he likes to joke with his sister, he is also "gentle and protective at the same time," and quite sensitive to her feelings.

Adeline is happy on the ship, traveling with the family. For lengthy periods of time, she feels that she truly is a member of their family and not the unwanted daughter of her own vicious parents and siblings. She daydreams about Aunt Reine adopting her and living with them forever, never having to see Niang again. "Then I...remember my true status and my heart [is] touched by ice."

Though Adeline dreads it, they finally arrive in Hong Kong, but Father and Niang are not at the dock to meet them. Aunt Reine's family and Adeline pile into a cab with their belongings and drive through the city, the children marveling at the sights and noticing that everything is written in English rather than French as it was in Tianjin. Victor talks excitedly about all the fun things they will do when they reach Adeline's family's home, not knowing that the friendly version of Niang Adeline had told him about does not exist.

*This is a landmark occasion for Adeline, being the first time that she has participated in a family without being actively discriminated against. Once more, Aunt Reine's behavior is a stark contrast to, and thus a criticism of, Niang's own behavior. Aunt Reine unknowingly demonstrates to Adeline that a proper, loving mother is self-sacrificing, as well as fair and kind and loving, without favoritism. This is particularly significant for Adeline, who never had the chance to meet her own mother and whose only model is Niang. This once again demonstrates the value of friends—or extended family—to keep one connected to normality in spite of their traumatic circumstances.*



*Once again, Victor models for Adeline what an older brother ought to be, which is entirely different from the ways her brothers have acted her entire life, demonstrating yet again the value of friends to model normal, healthy relationships. Victor's protectiveness of Claudine is especially poignant, since Third Brother's chief failing—although he is the only brother not to be consistently cruel to her—has been his unwillingness to stand up to his older brothers to protect Adeline.*



*It is both tragic and telling that Adeline's great wish is to simply be part of a normal family. Though Aunt Reine's family seems saintly to her, they simply practice healthy relationships, a far cry from the family led by Father and Niang. This demonstrates the critical role that Aunt Reine's family plays in keeping Adeline grounded and giving her a picture of what family should be.*



*Sadly, Adeline has felt the need to keep up the pretense of a safe and happy home life even to Aunt Reine's family, whom she loves and trusts otherwise. This is once again demonstrative of the repression that such abusive control (as exerted by Niang and Father) encourages, preventing those who suffer from sharing their feelings or the reality of their situation, even with good friends.*



The cab arrives at a Catholic school and the driver tells them that Adeline's family lives in an apartment across the street. Father, Niang, Fourth Brother, Little Sister, and several maids appear in a flurry of activity. None of Adeline's family acknowledges her, but Aunt Reine's family does not notice in the commotion. Taking her suitcase into the apartment, Adeline finds Grandfather Ye Ye and runs to him. He is older now, she realizes, and there is something slightly different and unsettling, but Adeline cannot pinpoint what it may be.

Ye Ye and Adeline rejoin the rest of the family in the living room, where Aunt Reine is revealing all of the diamonds she had smuggled out of Tianjin in the lining of her coat. Niang is thrilled, "clapping her hands like a child." Aunt Reine remarks that better than Niang's gems, her family has also smuggled their daughter away from the Communists which should be twice as much celebration. Neither Father nor Niang looks at Adeline or acknowledges her presence in any way.

As the families are celebrating, Ye Ye tells Adeline that he has had a cot placed in his room and that she should move her things there while Niang is distracted. As Adeline unpacks her belongings into the room, she realizes that the undefinable quality she had heard earlier in Ye Ye's voice was the sound of defeat. "Ye Ye had given up."

The next day, Aunt Reine's family walks from their hotel to Adeline's family's house for breakfast and to make plans for the day to go shopping together. Ye Ye insists that he stay home, since his neck is bothering him. Niang looks to Adeline and tells her that she will stay behind, as well, to massage Ye Ye's neck for him. Although Victor is disappointed that Adeline will not be joining the rest of the group, Adeline is thrilled—Niang has acknowledged her for the first time since her arrival and has given her a job to do, causing Adeline to wonder if Niang has forgiven her. After the family leaves, Adeline reads the newspaper to Ye Ye, most of which describes the continued victories of the Communists over Chiang Kai-shek and his government.

*It is notable that, in the way that Adeline feels compelled to keep up the illusion that her family is perfect and healthy, so too does Adeline's family. While Aunt Reine's family is present, Niang and Father will be extremely pleasant—though not necessarily to Adeline herself. This once again indicates the secrecy and false pretense that abuse seems to thrive on, harkening back to Father's cruel admonition that "family ugliness should never be revealed in public."*



*Though not at all surprising, it is revealing of the shallowness of Niang's character that a few diamonds make her as giddy and stupidly happy as a child, while the return of her own child provokes absolutely no reaction at all. Adeline notices this, as well, and it is safe to assume that it once again chips away at her own self-worth.*



*Ye Ye's defeat is a tragic representation of the power of a toxic family to completely subjugate the kindness of the people in it. Ye Ye is himself a living figure, but he has been entirely overpowered by Niang's domineering cruelty, now passed on to her children.*



*Victor's reaction to Niang's leaving Adeline behind contrasts firmly against Adeline's reaction. While Victor seems to recognize it as a disappointment and perhaps even a slight, Adeline is so starved for recognition from her parents that she is overjoyed simply to be recognized and given a task. This is revealing of the effects of child abuse, where a child so bereft of the love of their parents may interpret any extra attention, even negative attention, as a benefit and a mark of good standing, even a cause for false hope.*



While she is reading, Ye Ye hears that Adeline's grasp of Chinese is languishing and he orders her to copy down the words she struggled with. Adeline complains that she is tired of studying Chinese, especially since the nuns in Tianjin told her that English will be the most important language in the Twentieth Century. This pains Ye Ye's heart and he reminds Adeline that, regardless of what she learns, she will always be Chinese and should protect its culture. Ye Ye also explains that since China is the oldest civilization on Earth, its legacy is the most useful for understanding how history progresses and what the future may hold. He then goes on to explain the relationships between various characters in the Chinese. For example, the Chinese word for "business" literally means "buy-sell" and contains the root word for "land," indicating the manner in which land is the most valuable commodity in business since it is limited and it cannot be manufactured.

Each day for the rest of the week, Niang takes Aunt Reine's family on outings into the city, always inviting Ye Ye but never inviting Adeline. Ye Ye politely declines each day, and so he spends each day with his granddaughter alone in the house. To Adeline, the days feel wonderful, peaceful, and intimate, as they spend their time chatting, reading the newspaper, or playing Chinese checkers. She does not mind being left out of the family outings.

On Sunday, Niang organizes a long scenic drive for everyone to go on, and Ye Ye decides that he will come along. Adeline is not sure if she will be allowed to join this time and when Victor asks, Niang insists that there is no room in the car. Victor claims that Niang is being unfair leaving Adeline behind every day, and that today she will be home alone. Aunt Reine pointedly does not take a side. Niang angrily tells Victor that he can get in and leave Adeline or stay behind, as well. Victor nobly declares that he will stay with Adeline. Adeline is "overwhelmed" by his "chivalry" and gives him her origami book as a thank-you gift. Victor is stunned.

## CHAPTER 17: BOARDING SCHOOL IN HONG KONG

Though Adeline had hoped that she might get to see Aunt Reine's family off when they left for Geneva, Father is in such a rush to pick them up and bring them to the pier that he leaves Adeline behind, and she misses her chance to wish them farewell.

*This once again brings up the tension between traditional Chinese culture and the modernizing influence of the West, made most apparent to Adeline by the nuns in Tianjin's refusal to let her speak Mandarin. One of Ye Ye's functions as a character and a figure in the author's life is to pass on the wisdom of Chinese tradition and expound on the significance of its rich history. As noted earlier, this obviously had an impact on the author, as she committed much of her later years to preserving and promoting Chinese tradition. It is also worth noting that Ye Ye's embrace of Chinese tradition is an affront to Niang's character, who is preoccupied with presenting herself as fashionable, French, and modern.*



*It is revealing that while Niang and the family are on outings, Adeline is happy with the simplicity of spending her time with Ye Ye doing very little. This is indicative of Adeline's virtuous simplicity—although the rest of the family lives with Ye Ye everyday and ignores him, Adeline is able to see the gift of his presence and enjoy his company.*



*Despite Aunt Reine's previous insistence on fairness and her self-sacrificing nature, she notably does not react to the unfairness of Niang's treatment of Adeline, suggesting that Niang's dominating presence even overpowers her older sister. Victor, perhaps because he is younger and does not know of Niang's fury, shows far more courage than his mother, calling out Niang's injustice. Once again, Victor models the way in which loving brothers should act for Adeline, demonstrating the way in which friends may offer a point of reference for the love and loyalty that has long been absent.*



*Father's ignorance of Adeline's feelings suggests that life in their household will return to its normal, mean-spirited rhythm now that the visitors have left, with Adeline being completely neglected by her parents.*



Two days after, the maid tells Adeline to pack her bags quickly, as she is being “taken away” again. Ye Ye is sleeping, so the only people to go wherever Adeline will be taken are Niang, Fourth Brother, and herself. Fourth Brother is still furious with her, since earlier in the day he had tried to play a prank on Ye Ye that would have dropped several weighty encyclopedias on top of the frail old man’s head. Adeline had thwarted the plan, sending Fourth Brother into a screaming rage. Little Sister, however, chastised him for his meanness. Father, when he saw that his son had tried to injure his own grandfather, did not punish Fourth Brother, but simply yelled at the children for making too much noise. Sitting with Ye Ye after the event, Adeline’s heart broke for the way that her grandfather was “imprisoned by his love for his only son.”

As they are driving, they pass a destitute, broken-looking man and his daughter. The daughter has a sign around her neck announcing that she is for sale. Adeline is filled with fear at where this car ride may take her.

Fourth Brother demands that they stop for tea at a luxury hotel. When the concierge tells them that it will be a long wait, Niang insists in her best heavy European accent that they be seated, and gives her French maiden name. This, combined with her expensive Western clothing, convinces the concierge to move them to the front of the reservation queue, since in Hong Kong, a British colony, white people and Europeans always get special treatment.

After tea, Adeline is taken to a combination orphanage and Catholic boarding school. While Niang is meeting with the administrators, Adeline is fearful that she is being abandoned to the orphanage. However, when two nuns come to meet her, she realizes that she has been enrolled in the boarding school and is relieved and even thrilled.

*Fourth Brother’s prank is a major indication that he has become as vicious as Niang. That Father is unwilling to discipline him even when Fourth Brother’s pranks could have resulted in a very serious injury for Ye Ye additionally indicates how truly toxic the family has become. Niang rules with such impunity that her favorite son is similarly untouchable, even after committing an egregious crime. This instance helps to explain Ye Ye’s defeatism—even his own son no longer ascribes any value to his life or has any impulse to protect him, making Ye Ye similar to Adeline in their victimhood.*



*The girl being sold, like Big Sister getting married, allows Adeline to glimpse a possible future, one that she understands to be bleak. With parents that care for her as little as Father and Niang, seemingly nothing is off the table and being sold seems a real possibility.*



*The racial hierarchy in Hong Kong reflects the hierarchy of Adeline’s family, as well. Niang, being half-French, has passed her French blood onto Fourth Brother and Little Sister. As mentioned earlier, in her eyes this makes them of a higher class, and justifies—in her mind—the entirely unequal treatment and privileges afforded them. The oppressive realities of Chinese society are mirrored within the family structure.*



*This is the second time that Adeline has believed and feared that she was being abandoned to an orphanage and instead placed in a boarding school. While still emotionally abusive, this seems almost a restraint on Niang’s part, which is curious since her cruelty so often seems uninhibited.*



## CHAPTER 18: MISERABLE SUNDAY

Two years later, in 1951, Adeline sits in Catholic mass reflecting on how much she despises Sundays. After mass, all the students go to the dining hall for breakfast. On Sundays, students' families may bring a fresh egg for them to eat for breakfast as a special treat since eggs are unavailable otherwise. Adeline's family has never brought her an egg, but on this particular Sunday, the nun calls out her student number, telling her that there is an egg that has been delivered for her. Adeline assumes it must be a mistake, and even when she receives the egg with her number written on it, she gives it back, explaining that it could not possibly be for her.

The leading student at Adeline's school is Monica Lim, the daughter of Hong Kong's wealthiest businessman. She is tall, beautiful, stylish, and doted upon by her parents and the nuns. Although Monica is three years older than Adeline, Adeline begins to surpass her as a writer and a student. Monica resents her for this, chastising Adeline for her shabby clothing, since Adeline has only worn-out sneakers and an old, ill-fitting dress to wear. Adeline is ashamed about her appearance, but feels powerless to do anything about it.

The nuns announce that this Sunday, being the last of the term, visiting hours will be extended. All of the boarders except for Adeline are happy about this, but Adeline is embarrassed to never have visitors and hides in the library instead. As Adeline is waiting out the visiting hours by reading *King Lear*, another boarder enters the library with her mother, giving her a tour of the place. The girl's mother is impressed that Adeline is studying on a Sunday, though Adeline insists that she is only reading for pleasure. She is ashamed by how odd she must look, and even more ashamed when the other girl mentions that Adeline had burst out crying when they had studied *King Lear* in class, having been so overwhelmed by the "poetry and pathos" of it and the way it astutely described Ye Ye's imprisonment in Father and Niang's house. Adeline makes a false pretense to escape the library and the conversation.

Adeline retreats to a bathroom stall to read in privacy. However, while she is in there, two girls enter and Adeline overhears them discussing how one of the girls had repainted Adeline's number on her own egg that morning, since she was sick of eating them. They continue to discuss what they think of Adeline—not knowing that she is eavesdropping. They say that she is a little pathetic, since she never gets visitors or letters and wears shabby clothing, but she is also obviously brilliant, even more so than Monica. Because of this, both girls think that Adeline will turn out okay, despite her pitiable demeanor.

*Adeline has become so accustomed to neglect that she cannot even consider the possibility that someone would have brought an egg for her. Although it will be revealed that she is right, this demonstrates the tragic way that such long-standing emotional abuse and neglect can have a powerful impact on one's self-conception and view of reality: Adeline has only ever been devalued by her parents and never given a gift, thus, even if a gift comes, it seems inconceivable to her. Rather than accept the anomaly and receive the gift, she rejects it, believing she is not someone who could ever receive an egg.*



*As Adeline's main rival, Monica is an obvious foil to Adeline and a representative of most of the things that Adeline is not: stylish, pretty, and well-cared for. However, Adeline possesses several qualities that Monica does not: kindness, compassion, and simplicity. This suggests that, though Adeline may wish to be doted on as Monica is, the strength of her character has been better developed in the absence of Monica's privilege.*



*This is another strong development of the power of stories, demonstrating another potent way in which stories, both told and read, can provide hope and comfort to people in traumatic or overwhelming situations. Adeline has watched the pain of Ye Ye for years as his position in the family has been reduced further and further until he is nothing—his own son does not even appear concerned for his safety or wellbeing. Through Shakespeare's words, Adeline finds an outlet to feel the pain she has so far repressed, unable to express the complexity of it herself. *King Lear* provides a valuable cipher through which Adeline can feel her grief, since it has already been put to words by someone else.*



*Although Adeline turns out to be right about no one having delivered an egg for her, for the reader, the scene is nonetheless tragic. The indication is that, although much of Adeline's lack of self-esteem, especially as it has been shaped by Niang, is based on false premises (that she is stupid, ugly, and worthless) her feelings of being unloved are accurate. Even the brief ray of hope—that someone cared enough to bring her an egg—turns out to only be a mistake.*



Adeline emerges once the girls have left, feeling a strange mix of emotions. She is saddened to think that she is an object of other's pity, but at the same time recognizes the "hint of respect in their sentiments" and knows that she has made an impression with her intelligence. She returns to her bed and pulls the curtain around it for privacy, wondering if her peers also know that she reads under her covers many nights because she cannot bear the terrifying thoughts and sleepless hours that often stalk her in the darkness.

*Beyond her struggle with self-worth, which is apparent, the fact that Adeline is haunted by Niang and Father's abuse even after two years of being away from them demonstrates the long reach of emotional abuse and trauma. Though Adeline is safe from beatings and is well-fed by the boarding school, the emotional trauma she has endured still haunts her.*



## CHAPTER 19: END OF TERM

On the last day of the school term, after classes have all been completed, the boarding students prepare to be picked up by their parents and chat amongst themselves about fond memories of the year. Most of the other boarders are retrieved by their parents and filter out until only Adeline and her two best friends are left, Rachel Yu and Mary Suen. Although Adeline loves her friends, she can never bring herself to tell them the truth about her family, since she has spent so long repressing those thoughts. Adeline reasons that both Mary and Rachel have their own problems as it is: Mary's father is an adulterer who rarely spends time with his own family and Rachel's father orients his whole life around her, causing her to feel "smothered by his expectations."

*Though it appears that Adeline is now able to recognize the value of sharing her pain with her close friends, she has practiced repressing those emotions for so long that it seems impossible to resurface them. Also, now older and more aware of the problems of other children, Adeline's compassion becomes a way to justify her secrecy; she does not want to burden Rachel or Mary on top of their own problems, which they have obviously shared. Even so, the author implies that she wishes she were able to share the truth of her family, suggesting that sharing one's struggles with close friends is an important and valuable practice.*



Adeline is struck by a growing headache. Although she never admits it, everyone knows that she is the only student who remains at the school all summer rather than going home to her family, and she suspects that her friends have stayed behind as long as possible to keep her company. As they stand on a balcony together overlooking a harbor, Adeline expresses that her greatest desire is to grow up, be independent, and travel away to "see the world." The three girls make a pact together to "always be there for each other, wherever we may be."

*Adeline's yearning for independence is another sign that she is growing up. Though she has not yet realized that she alone can define her self-worth, this move towards independence—and thus away from the governance of Father and Niang—is critical step towards becoming her own person and will ultimately help her to see herself in light of her own qualities and abilities, rather than by what she has been told by Niang and Father her whole life.*



## CHAPTER 20: PNEUMONIA

After Rachel and Mary leave, Adeline's headache grows much worse, developing into a high fever, and the next morning she coughs up blood. Adeline is hospitalized and Mary, whose family lives close to the hospital, visits her every day. Adeline's Father visits once while Mary is there, disproving the common theory between Mary and her other friends that Adeline is an orphan. After Adeline is given penicillin and begins to recover, Father's chauffeur takes Adeline back to the family home to rest for one week.

*Father's regard for Adeline often seems inconsistent. Though he is consistently cruel and seems to have no problem with leaving her in the path of the Communists in Tianjin, he checks on her in the hospital and allows her to rest at home for a week. This suggests, perhaps, that Father may be rather more conflicted by his treatment of Adeline than Niang is. It seems that some part of him may just barely value Adeline as his daughter after all.*



Third Brother, visiting from school in Shanghai (where he has been living with Aunt Baba), and Ye Ye are the only other people home, and the house seems calm and peaceful. The three catch up on the last years of their lives. Ye Ye is stricken with diabetes and has been placed on a very restrictive diet, which he hates. Third Brother loves his life in Shanghai, where the Communists have not yet been as cruel as everyone feared. Second Brother and Big Brother have both gone to college in England, which Adeline wishes she could do, as well, but knows she cannot, since she is a girl. Big Sister and her husband have returned to Tianjin, despite the family's warnings, and now have a daughter.

When Third Brother asks Adeline about her own plans for the future, Ye Ye interjects to proudly describe how well she is performing in school, now several grades ahead of her peers, despite being only thirteen years old. Adeline responds rather dejectedly, ranting that none of her success matters since her parents hate her and she is a girl, so she will never be sent abroad to study like Third Brother will. Father treats her like trash, Niang treats like a "leper," and they hide her away in boarding schools. After all these years, Adeline does not even like herself.

Ye Ye responds angrily that Adeline must not speak about herself in such a manner, that she is indeed special, saying, "...You can vanquish the demons only when you yourself are convinced of your own worth." Ye Ye continues to explain that Adeline needs to learn to depend on herself and trust in her ability to shape her own future, rather than simply being "married off like Big Sister." Ye Ye has placed his own hopes in Adeline, he explains, implying that he has nothing left in the world to look forward to. The pain in his voice hurts Adeline and she promises that she will fight to succeed in life for both their sakes.

## CHAPTER 21: PLAYWRITING COMPETITION

Adeline returns to school a week before anyone else, spending her time reading and chatting with the school librarian. When she finds an announcement for an international English playwriting contest in a magazine, Adeline remembers Ye Ye's encouragement and wish for her to succeed. The librarian encourages Adeline to send for more information and use the time before school begins to make an entry.

*In this conversation, the two alternatives for Adeline's future are laid out: college in England or an arranged marriage to someone whom she does not know and is likely much older than her. This is one of the few times in book that the difficulty of being a woman plays an overt part in the story, though the underlying implication is always there. Adeline fears an arranged marriage, though Big Sister, Niang, and presumably Nai Nai were all placed in arranged marriages. This, too, has an unavoidable impact on Adeline's view of her own self-worth, as it seems to limit her future possibilities.*



*Although Adeline speaks very critically of herself, this is an important moment in her coming-of-age journey in that she is finally able to speak many of the painful feelings and ideas that she has repressed for so long, seemingly for the first time. Admitting the truth about how she feels about herself is a vital step in being able to address and overcome it with the help of others.*



*Ye Ye's admonition that she can triumph over the abuse of her childhood once she is "convinced of [her] own worth" is a critical realization for Adeline, reinforced by the understanding that her own self-loathing also hurts the people around her. Seeing that Ye Ye—who has admitted defeat in the rest of life—has his final hopes placed on her future taps into her sense of compassion and desire to love and honor him. This powerfully suggests that, for Adeline, taking account of the well-being of the people that she loves becomes a powerful incentive for her to succeed and recognize her own value, though this will not happen instantaneously.*



*It is implied that Adeline would not have had the self-confidence or initiative to enter the playwriting contest without Ye Ye's affirmation of her and his hope that she will make something of herself. This further suggests that Adeline has reached an important milestone in her coming-of-age; she is developing the boldness and confidence to truly extend herself and take risks in a way that she has been unable to before.*



Adeline writes a play entitled *Gone with the Locusts* about a young African girl who is kidnapped by bandits, using her heroine to express her own grief built up through her childhood. "Into her lips I injected my loneliness, isolation and feelings of being unwanted. To my heroine I gave everything of myself." When the play is complete, she dedicates it to Ye Ye and sends it to be judged.

School resumes. Adeline writes several petitions to Father and Niang to send her to study in England, but they never reply. During the year, her parents move house but do not tell her and Adeline only discovers the move by chancing upon the change of address form Father filed with the school. Six months pass without Adeline hearing any news about the playwriting competition.

That March, in 1952, Adeline receives word that Ye Ye has died and she is taken by Father's chauffer to attend his funeral at the Buddhist temple. Though Adeline is sobbing throughout the funeral, no one else in the family shows any emotion. She is grieved that Ye Ye never got the opportunity to see her succeed, not even in the playwriting competition, which he had inspired her to enter. As the family leaves the funeral, Niang remarks that Adeline is looking uglier than ever the older she gets. Niang also informs Adeline that she must find a job for the summer since Father will no longer be paying her tuition and board for school. Adeline is crushed.

When the chauffer brings Adeline back to school, she finds Rachel, Mary, and her friends playing a game in which they each compare what they believe are their own best attributes with what everyone else believes their best attribute to be. They invite Adeline to join, but when it is Adeline's turn to name what she likes best about herself, she answers that she has no good attributes whatsoever. Rachel is surprised by this, and responds that, on the contrary, the whole group believes Adeline will be the most successful in life out of any of them.

The death of Adeline's grandfather and Niang's declaration that her school would no longer be paid for sends Adeline into an anxious depression for weeks. She still dreams of going to college and sends her parents a number of petitioning letters to send her to college with Third Brother in England, describing her list of academic achievements, but receives no reply.

*This is perhaps the most powerful demonstration of the power of stories to overcome hardship. Adeline's heroine becomes a cipher for herself, a way to tell her own long-repressed story under the protective blanket of fiction, offering her a symbolic escape from the repression and secrecy of the traumas of her childhood.*



*Despite the gains that Adeline has made in her coming-of-age journey and her ability to express her grief through story, the realities of her family life remain and her parents are as neglectful as ever. This demonstrates the manner in which overcoming such trials is a long and difficult process.*



*That none of the family except for Adeline seems grieved by Ye Ye's loss is revealing of how little they cared for him and how toxic the family has become. Even Father does not seem able to mourn the loss of his father. Ye Ye's apparent defeat, which Adeline noticed as soon as she arrived in Hong Kong, thus seems merited. This reinforces how toxic the family has become, as well as demonstrating the way in which such a toxic family seems to stifle any emotions other than anger.*



*The game reveals that, although Adeline is making some progress in building confidence and understanding her own self-worth, Niang's demeaning messages still exert a powerful influence over her. Adeline's friends thus play the critical role of contradicting those ideas and sharing with Adeline what the rest of the world sees: that she is powerfully intelligent and has a bright future ahead of her. This once again demonstrates the value of friends in helping one maintain contact with reality in the face of traumatic or demeaning experiences.*



*Although she is depressed and although Father and Niang give no reply, the fact that Adeline continues to ask to be sent to England suggests that she recognizes her own intelligence—and value, at least in that regard—and has developed the boldness to state her desires. Though painful and, for the moment, unsuccessful, this still represents growth in her coming-of-age journey.*



One afternoon, while Adeline and her friends are playing Monopoly, one of the nuns calls for her and announces that Father's chauffeur has arrived to take her home. Adeline is filled with fear, unsure of what this could possibly mean. Arriving for the first time at her parents' new home, Adeline is directed to see Father in his room. The rest of the family is away and the house is empty. When she enters **his room**, Father is sitting at his desk, seemingly happy, which fills Adeline with a mixture of relief and suspicion. Father shows her a city newspaper headline announcing that she has won the international playwriting competition and brought great honor to Hong Kong and to Father.

Adeline once more asks if she can be sent to England to study, and this time Father obliges. However, when she says that she would perhaps like to study literature, Father scoffs at this and insists she will become a medical doctor instead, a "foolproof profession" and guarantor of success. Adeline is happy to accept this fate, as it still means she gets to study in England. She thanks Father.

*Although Father's room is not the same Holy of Holies as in Shanghai, it has the same symbolic significance for Adeline, for whom it has only even been a place of fear and punishment. That Father seems happy to see her marks a major development and even a symbolic victory over the fear associated with that room. Adeline has moved, in her Father's eyes, from a subject of punishment to a subject of praise. However, consistent with his character, Father's pride in Adeline and his kind words to her are directly the result of her bringing him honor, feeding his own ego.*



*Demonstrating the power of stories, Adeline's play now offers a literal escape from the abuse of her childhood as well as a symbolic one. She has been able to express her own feelings under the cover of fiction, and she will now be saved from the physical abuse of Father and Niang or the fate of an arranged marriage to a stranger. It is notable that, even here, Father exerts his control—however, this demonstrates the way in which real life rarely fits a perfect ending.*



## CHAPTER 22: LETTER FROM AUNT BABA

Aunt Baba has written a letter to Adeline to respond to the letter that Adeline sent her from Singapore, on her way to England with Third Brother. Aunt Baba is immensely proud of Adeline and tells her that she will always treasure Adeline no matter where she may be. She reminds Adeline of how, when Adeline would be overwhelmed by the hardship of their family life as a little girl, she would tell her stories to calm Adeline and help her sleep. Aunt Baba expresses that she has one more story that she hopes Adeline will remember always, an heirloom of Chinese folklore.

The story tells of a young girl named Ye Xian whose mother died, leaving her to the care of her stepmother. Her stepmother was cruel and favored her own biological daughter over Ye Xian. Ye Xian was a talented potter, but her stepmother impeded her success. A large banquet was to be held, but Ye Xian's stepmother forbade her from attending. However, after her stepmother and stepsister left, Ye Xian put on a beautiful dress and striking gold shoes that she had traded for one of her pots. She attended the festival and caught the eye of the local warlord, but in doing so was also spotted by her stepmother. She fled, leaving one of her gold shoes behind. The warlord searched for the woman who had left behind her shoe, but could not find her until the cobbler who had traded the golden shoes for one of Ye Xian's pots revealed who she was. The warlord found and married Ye Xian, who succeeded due to her own hard work and skill as a potter.

*Although the narration of Adeline's life has ended, the fact that Adeline sent a letter from Singapore confirms that she has left for England to study in college, meaning she has achieved her goal and triumphed over her childhood, becoming something when she had been told for so long she was nothing. Aunt Baba's letter helps to confirm the power of stories to endure and overcome, providing both an escape and an inspiration in hard times.*



*Though the European version of the Cinderella story was written in the late Seventeenth Century, the tale of Ye Xian dates back at least to the Tenth Century and a Greek version of the story existed over a thousand years before that. Though unconfirmed, it seems probable that the story of Cinderella has migrated from civilization to civilization over millennia. The Chinese tale of Ye Xian seems to fit Adeline's own life somewhat better, since Ye Xian's happy fate was due in large part to her skill as a potter, mirroring Adeline's hard study and capacity as a writer.*



Aunt Baba tells Adeline that there is a similar story in English folklore called “Cinderella,” and that both of them seem very similar to Adeline’s own life. Like Ye Xian or Cinderella, Adeline suffered a cold, cruel stepmother and the loss of her own mother. However, through hard work and determination, Adeline has taken one step closer to a happy and successful life. Aunt Baba ends by telling Adeline, “...Your future is limitless, and I shall always be proud of you, my Chinese Cinderella.”

*Chinese Cinderella* is an abridged version of Adeline’s full memoir *Falling Leaves*, and it’s aimed at a slightly younger audience. *Falling Leaves* not only covers Adeline’s childhood but also her time in England studying, and her life and medical practice in America. One of the most significant moments of her life as an adult was the discovery that Father had written her out of his will, disinheriting her as a child and indicating that her pained relationship with her parents continued into her adulthood, as well.





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