

Counting by 7s Study Guide

Counting by 7s by Holly Goldberg Sloan

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Plot Summary

Losing one's parents is never easy, and for 12-year-old Willow Chance losing her adoptive parents in a car wreck is devastating. The book "Counting by 7s" charts Willow's journey through her grief to the realization that her life will go on. Although she had no relatives or close family friends, an unusual group of people steps forward to become a surrogate family to this unusual but highly intelligent girl. As they bond, those helping Willow realize their lives are enriched by her as much as her life is bettered by them.

Willow is an adopted, only child who has recently started classes at a new school. Both she and her parents hoped she'd have a better school experience at this new school but within days of the beginning of school she's referred to a counselor because a teacher believes she cheated in order to ace a standardized test. Her counselor, Dell Duke, realizes that Willow is of exceptional mental capacity; in fact, he labels her a genius.

Willow arrives early for a counseling session and meets Mai and Quang-ha Nguyen. Willow and Mai become friends. She learns Vietnamese so she can converse with Mai in her native tongue. In order to arrive at the counseling office more quickly, Willow takes a taxi one day. Her driver is Jairo Hernandez who quickly tags Willow as his angel after she first encourages him to pursue his dream of going back to school, then warns him of a dangerous mole on his neck.

One day before Willow's counseling session, Mai convinces the bumbling counselor Dell to take the two girls, along with her brother Quang-ha, who is also being counseled, for ice cream. After they finish and Dell takes Willow home, they are shocked to see a police car in Willow's driveway. Willow's parents have been killed in a car wreck, Dell learns. Mai sits on the steps with Willow as she cries until Willow is willing to go inside. Once inside, Mai finds the library book that Willow had checked out to learn Vietnamese. She decides the girl is coming with her and convinces her mother to let them keep Willow overnight.

The following day, Willow is forced to go to the Jamison Children's Center. She faints when she sees a picture of her parents' wreck on the front page of the newspaper. At the hospital where she has been taken for stitches, she runs away, calling Jairo to take her to the library. Hoping to be a hero, Dell enlists Mai to help him find Willow but Mai takes charge. When Willow is found, temporary custody is given to the Nguyens.

Because Pattie Nguyen and her family lives in a garage behind her nail salon, she put down Dell's address of her own. When social services calls to schedule a home visit, Pattie must scurry to convert Dell's messy bachelor apartment into one that looks like a family lives there. Once they've passed their first inspection, Pattie decides it would be easier for them just to stay there instead of moving back and forth. She sets Dell up with a man down the hall who wants a roommate.



Willow, whose parents had encouraged her to turn their backyard into a garden as a form of social interaction, soon misses that garden. She asks Dell to buy her a pack of sunflower seeds. These sunflowers are the beginning of a group project to turn the rock covered apartment courtyard into a garden. Along the way, Dell, Willow, Mai and Quang-ha experience annoyance when people fight over the rocks in the courtyard they have decided to give away and then frustration when wind blows dirt and debris over all of the first floor apartments. Use of a pressure washer not only cleans away the dirt but also removes the ugly pink paint and stucco covering the apartments to reveal an attractive exterior. Even Jairo lends a hand to wash windows that have been covered with grit.

After the sunflowers have been planted in the courtyard, Willow begins gathering clippings for the garden once the flowers have died. She believes it's a sign that she won't be living at the apartments much longer when a maintenance man goes to the roof to fix a leak and throws away all of the plants she'd been cultivating there. To her surprise, however, a nursery owner with whom she'd worked before steps in to provide plants and trees to fill the area.

Soon after the garden is finished, a custody hearing for Willow is set. Although Willow is told she will be sent to a group home she gets a surprise when she goes into the judge's chambers. Pattie, Jairo, Mai, Quang-ha and Dell are all waiting for her there. Pattie and Jairo have filed and have been approved for permanent custody of Willow. Willow is overjoyed. As she sits by herself near her new garden later that day, she pushes an acorn, which Mai had called her lucky acorn, into the dirt. She believes for the first time in a long time that her life will go on.



Chapters 1 - 4

Summary

Willow Chance's loving, protected life is destroyed when her parents are killed in a car wreck. With no close relatives or friends to take her in, social services workers search for a permanent home for her. As she bonds with a group of unusual friends, Willow works through her grief using the form of life of which she is most familiar, a garden. Willow improves the lives of those around her in unexpected ways and is rewarded with a surprise set of guardians.

In Chapter 1, Willow eats an ice cream cone with her new friend Mai, Mai's brother Quang-ha and Dell Duke, the adult who brought them to the restaurant. After they finish their treat, Dell grudgingly drives the three past the park, Hagen Oaks, as Mai suggested, but they don't get out of the car. Willow has called both her mother and father to let them know she'll be late but neither has called her back, which is unusual. When Willow and her companions get to Willow's house, there is a police car in the driveway. The police talk to Dell and assume because he's a school counselor, Willow knows what has happened. When Dell indicates she doesn't, they ask to speak to him alone. Willow can hear them talking and learns her parents have been killed in an accident. She wants to go back in time and asks if anyone wants to go with her.

In Chapter 2, Willow describes herself as being an adopted, only child who is about to start a new school. She calls herself strange. She loves the number 7. Willow says she is of color while her parents are so white they are almost blue. She has an obsession with medical diseases and likes to sit at shopping malls where she can observe people and their difficulties. Her other obsession is plants.

Willow was first titled as "weird" in kindergarten when she told the teacher a book made her feel bad, then went on to talk about the germs on the floor. An educational consultant told Willow's parents that she was highly gifted. For this reason, her parents helped her cultivate a garden to stimulate her mind and give her a hobby.

In Chapter 3, Willow's garden became a family project. The garden gave her a window into different forms of companionship. At age eight, she rescued and nursed back to health a baby green rumped parrot that fell from the nest. Up to this point in her life, Willow's had only one close human friend, a girl named Margaret whose family moved to Canada. Willow and her parents hoped that her move to Sequoia Middle School would signal a change for her. She studied up on teenage relationships and decided she would wear her gardening outfit on her first day of school. She suspected one of her parents put a magazine on her bed with an article about what a person's clothes say about them even though neither of them would take responsibility for it.

In Chapter 4, Willow thought she was ready for middle school because she was prepared on an academic level. When she got there, she realized she wasn't. Girls were



screaming, boys seemed to be attacking each other. One girl even thought Willow was a janitor because of the way she was dressed. After three hours she called her mom to pick her up. On the seventh day of middle school, Willow aced a standardized test. She was called to the office and told she would be required to see a behavioral counselor because the teacher thought she cheated. Her counselor's name was Dell Duke.

Analysis

In these first four chapters, the framework for the novel is laid. Willow Chance is an adopted girl who has just learned that her adoptive parents have been killed. Willow gives the reader a bit of her background in these chapters. She describes herself as being "of color" probably meaning she is of African American heritage but her parents are white. Family is important in this novel, particularly the idea that a group of people doesn't have to be the traditional mom, dad and kids all of the same race, to be a family.

Willow is also highly intelligent. She likes to study other peoples' medical conditions, diagnose them and suggest treatments. She enjoys conducting experiments. Because she spends so much time doing brain activity, and not much cultivating relationships, she and her parents transform their yard into a garden. The project is meant to give Willow an outlet to experience different types of companionship. Willow's closeness to her garden is displayed by the way she often describes things in terms of gardens and nature. For instance, when she is sent to the principal's office after making a perfect score on a standardized test, she describes the other students as buzzing like "pollen soaked worker bees" in Chapter 4. She also tries to make a joke as she tells them the "human corpse flower has blossomed." She is right when she assumes no one gets the correlation she has made between herself and the unique flower that has just bloomed in her garden. This reference to her garden and her description of the way her garden is her refuge sets the stage for the theme of plants which will appear throughout the novel. Because plants are the things with which Willow has learned to socialize, she interprets her life and the things around her in terms of nature.

Several themes are introduced in this section of the novel. Since Willow's parents have just been killed, grief and the stages one goes through while grieving are important. This theme is introduced by Willow's desire to go back in time once she'd learned her parents were gone. Another theme that is introduced is that of the frustration that comes with being put in a category. Willow has been categorized since she was in kindergarten when the other children called her a weirdo. At the suggestion of her teacher, Willow's parents take her to an educational consultant. This consultant tells Willow's parents that Willow is highly gifted. Willow believes it is bad to see a person as just one thing. She believes each person is made of many characteristics that make them who they are.

Note also Willow's obsession with certain things, like the number 7. This number is her favorite number. One of her escape techniques is to count by sevens. Her parents adopted her on the 7th day of the 7th month making seven is an important number in Willow's life. Also important to her is the color red. She indicates she likes this color



because it is important in nature. The color red will continue to be seen throughout the novel.

Notice that although Willow is only a child, she has a very realistic grip of her own affect on people. She knows she's strange. She seems okay with it. She's searching for people who will accept her for who she is instead of trying to change to fit the world's expectations of her. While her adoptive parents seem to want to cultivate her intelligence and give her other means of companionship, the garden for instance, they seem to prod her a bit to outwardly be more normal. For instance, they don't make any comment to Willow when she announces she plans to wear her gardening outfit on the first day of school but their behavior indicates they don't approve. Later, however, a teen magazine about the message one sends by the clothes they wear show up on Willow's bed. It seems her parents are underhandedly trying to give Willow advice on how to fit in without taking responsibility. Willow, however, persists at being herself.

Also important to notice in this section is the shift in tense that takes place in Chapter 2. Chapter 1 is written in the first person point of view. Although it is indicated in the beginning of Chapter 2 the time frame is two months prior to her parents' death, the first portion (about 6 pages) is written in the present tense. After Willow describes her garden, and turns her focus back to her first days in school, the tense turns to the future. The remainder of Chapter 2 as well as Chapters 3 and 4 are written in past tense.

Discussion Question 1

What is your first impression of Willow? What might you have thought of her if you'd had her as a classmate?

Discussion Question 2

How does Willow's garden substitute for human companionship? Why do you think it is noted Willow believes her parents encouraged the gardening because plants don't talk back?

Discussion Question 3

What is Willow's opinion of the labels given to people? Do you agree with her opinion? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

edible, paraffin, precise, contracting, exclude, correlation, quantified, onomatopoeic, chronicle, diagnostic, sanctuary, sequence, horizontal, metallic, stimulated, biorhythms, jaundiced, inhibitions, impressive, aptitude



Chapters 5 - 8

Summary

In Chapter 5, although he had bigger plans for himself, Dell Duke, Willow's counselor, wound up in agricultural California dealing with troubled kids. As the newest counselor, he has been assigned the kids the other two counselors don't want. He's imitated the retired counselor's idea of putting the kids into categories, but had no intention of doing as much work as his predecessor. His system is called the Dell Duke Counseling System where he put his students into four groups of strange: misfits, oddballs, lone wolves, and weirdoes. Instead of labeling his professional files with these titles, he'd given each category a number and color to represent it. When Willow appeared in his office one day, however, Dell found she defied his attempt to categorize her.

In Chapter 6, Willow quickly decided Dell was not healthy and wished she could take his blood pressure. As he talked, she considered calculating the calories in the jellybeans on his desk, but then decided counting them by sevens would be more fun. She had not told her parents she'd been assigned to a counselor because she wanted them to think the school year was going well. She felt guilty because she'd erased the message about the test results from her parents' voicemail and hacked her mother's email to respond to the principal's message that she needed counseling. In her counseling session, Dell decided to play a word association game with Willow. Willow was intrigued by her counselor when he made a comment about female lemurs being the leaders of their packs.

In Chapter 7, Dell realized the only reason he knew about the lemurs was because of a nature program he'd fallen asleep watching. He was almost inspired by Willow's intelligence. He decided he needed to add a new category to his classification system. He deemed Willow a genius, a category he coded metallic gold.

In Chapter 8, Willow noticed her teachers and fellow students treated her differently after she was called to the principal's office for cheating, but she began looking forward to her meetings with Dell. At her next session, Dell gave her more standardized tests, all of which she aced. He wanted her to come back the next day for another session. When she arrived that day in Dell's office, she saw two other people already there. There was a boy who was coloring in a geometric coloring book while a girl was sitting with him. The girl told her she could come in as they were almost done. Dell had gone for a soda, she said. As Willow waited, she studied the girl next to her. She found her interesting and wondered if she was Native American.

Analysis

Dell and Willow's counseling sessions make up the main topic of these four chapters. Although Willow had been sent to counseling because her teacher believed she had



cheated on a standardized test, Dell soon realized this was not the case. He was both excited and cautious because he was dealing with a type of student he'd never had experience with before. These chapters are important because they give the background on how Willow came to be seeing a guidance counselor. They detail Dell's interest in this child who is unlike any he's ever counseled before. They also tell how Willow became acquainted with Mai, the girl she met in Dell's office.

The theme of categorization is furthered in these chapters as it is described how Dell came up with four categories in which to place any student he counseled. Once he'd put each student in a category, Dell doesn't have to do much work, he would just follow a script based on what he thought each child wanted and needed based on the category into which he'd put them. The shortfalls in his system were uncovered when Willow came to his office and he had to create a new category because he couldn't force her into any of the ones he'd already created.

Dell is a major character in the novel so it is important to study his personality as it is described in this section of chapters. He seemed to have had high ambitions for himself that never quite worked out the way he wanted them to. He doesn't seem to have any family or friends that care about him, as it is pointed out he never even had a farewell party when he left Walla Walla, Washington because no one cared he was going. He seems content to get by with as little work and as little effort as possible. He's overweight, his clothes and hair are unkept and he's lazy. With Willow's interest in health conditions, she observes him and quickly determines that he is unhealthy. She advises him to get his blood pressure checked.

Note in Chapter 5 that the point of view changes from the first person point of view of Willow to a third person narrator focusing on Willow's story from Dell's point of view. This is a technique the writer uses to not only allow Willow to tell her own story, but to get the input of other characters on what is going on in the background as they discover Willow's unusual intelligence and strange personality. Chapter 7 is also written in third person with a focus on Dell. Chapters 6 and 8, however, are both written from a first person point of view.

Discussion Question 1

Consider Dell's classification system. Is it fair to the students? Is he doing them any favors?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Dell have trouble classifying Willow? Do you believe he is correct in tagging her as a genius?



Discussion Question 3

Why does Willow not tell her parents she is being required to go to counseling? How does she describe her feelings of guilt?

Vocabulary

truancy, ironic, quantify, mavericks, fixate, memorabilia, spherical, longevity, deleterious, duplicitous, psychosis, primate, aptitude, microdosing, aura, feverish, peripheral, indigenous



Chapters 9 - 12

Summary

In Chapter 9, Mai's older brother, Quang-ha was a troublemaker but Mai was not. Mai accompanied her brother to his counseling sessions, then they would walk to Happy Polish Nails, the salon their mother owned. Their mother had been outcast by her Vietnamese family because she was the child of a black American soldier. She was given a chance in America as a teenager where she went to live in California. She changed her name from her Vietnamese name, which was Dung to Pattie. She had two children with a Mexican who left them, claiming to go visit a sick brother but never coming back.

Instead of giving Quang-ha a real session, Dell had assigned him to complete three pages of a geometric coloring book, and then left, claiming he was going for a soda. He returned instead with a pet carrier after Willow had already arrived for her session. He was angry because Quang-ha hadn't left when he was told to. When he yelled at Quang-ha, Mai responded, calling Dell out for not having a real counseling session with her brother and for being late to Willow's appointment.

In Chapter 10, Willow was impressed with Mai's outburst, but Dell chose not to respond. In order to change the subject, he opened the pet carrier and introduced his pet cat, Cheddar. Willow believed this was Dell's attempt to bond with her. All those in the office were surprised when Cheddar ran out of the office into the parking lot. They searched the parking lot but weren't able to find the cat. The kids made lost cat posters hoping someone would return Cheddar. Willow was surprised that Mai and Quang-ha accepted her input into the project even though she wasn't trying to act any differently than she usually did. At home later that day, Willow decided to learn all she could about lost cats and the Vietnamese culture.

In Chapter 11, when Dell and the students arrived at Willow's house, Mai was intrigued by the garden she was able to get glimpses of behind the house. She wondered if Willow's parents owned a plant nursery. Dell dropped off Quang-ha and Mai, then headed for home, past the school district offices. He saw Cheddar, but didn't even stop. He had responded to a lost cat ad in the paper, but in reality, Cheddar wasn't even his. Dell was most troubled by the picture of Cheddar that Quang-ho had drawn as it showed the boy had artistic talent. In Dell's categorization system, the slot to which Dell has assigned Quang-ha indicated he should not have this talent.

Once inside his possession choked apartment, Dell heated a microwavable meatloaf and ate all three servings. He fell asleep on the patio furniture he used for living room furniture then later moved to the bedroom where he slept in a sleeping bag.

In Chapter 12, Willow ordered a taxi to pick her up for her next counseling session so she could get there more quickly and be more likely to meet up with Mai and Quang-ha.



When she arrived at her destination she told the taxi driver to never let anyone tell him he couldn't do something. Even though she was referring to her pride in her successful taxi ride, she suspected the taxi driver thought she was talking about him. At the counseling trailer, Willow greeted Mai in Vietnamese. Mai was impressed and in turn asked Willow about her garden. During her session, Dell asked Willow economics questions, a topic in which Willow tried to tell him she had very little interest. Pretty soon, she was telling him answers that were opposite of what she thought they should be. She was disappointed that Dell didn't seem to notice.

Analysis

As presented in these chapters, Dell seems even more despicable than he did in prior chapters. He'd picked up a cat he read about in a lost pet ad just to try to impress Willow by calling it his. When the cat ran off, Dell seemed completely unconcerned. When he drove back by the school and saw it sitting in the parking lot, he didn't even stop to pick it up, just left it to fend for itself. He seems more troubled that Quang-ha doesn't fit into the category of the strange to which he'd assigned the boy than he does by the cat he'd abandoned. Even Dell's concern about his misplacement of Quang-ha seems not to be for Quang-ha's sake but seems to throw Dell off kilter because he did not evaluate the boy correctly.

Two impressions are made when Willow, Mai and Quang-ha work together to make the missing cat fliers to help locate Cheddar. First, Dell noticed Quang-ha's artistic ability. This ability disturbed him because as a lone wolf, Quang-ha shouldn't have any artistic talent. Dell decided that because he discovered this ability in Quang-ha, he would have to put him in a different category. As much as Dell wanted to make his counseling job easy, he has learned that people don't always fit easily into a rigid classification system. This discovery by Dell adds to the theme of categorization in the novel.

The second impression is made by Willow. She has been intrigued by Mai's strong personality and Native American looks from the start and would like to be friends with the older girl. Although Willow doesn't make any attempt to alter her behavior, but just acts like herself, Mai and Quang-ha accept her into their work group. Willow indicated it was the first time she felt human.

In these chapters, the verbiage remains in the past tense. The author is using these chapters to tell the stories and develop the personalities of the main characters in the book. The characters of special interest include Willow, Dell, Mai and Pattie. Notice Mai's self-confidence and her ability to stand up for herself. She stands up for what she believes is right, especially when it comes to someone close to her, like her brother. While Willow believed Mai might have been Native American, it turned out she was actually a mix of Mexican, Vietnamese and black. Mai's mother, Pattie, is well acquainted with grief and hardship as she was outcast by her parents because she was a mixed race baby. Once given a chance in America, however, Pattie has done well for herself, it appeared, as she owned her own business. However, Pattie was left to



manage her business and raise her children on her own when their father abandoned them when the children were still small.

Discussion Question 1

What is your opinion of Dell? How does his treatment of the cat affect your opinion of him? What about the condition of his home?

Discussion Question 2

Why do you think the author gives background on Mai and Quang-ha's mother? How does this affect your opinion of the children?

Discussion Question 3

Mai and Willow seem to share a common interest in each other. Which of Mai's qualities attracted Willow? What attracted Mai to Willow?

Vocabulary

geometric, fixated, obliterated, sauntered, provocation, incentive, motivator, intriguing, surly, inflection, conjugation, botanical, colossal



Chapters 13 - 16

Summary

In Chapter 13, Jairo picked up a pamphlet about continuing education from Bakersfield College during his break. He believed Willow's statement was a sign it was time to pursue his education as a medical technician. Meanwhile, Dell wondered how he could use Willow to improve his situation.

In Chapter 14, Willow requested Jairo's taxi for a second time. This time, he had cut his hair and Willow noticed a mole on his neck. During her ride, she wrote a message to him advising him to have the mole biopsied. Willow and Mai spent their afternoon talking in Vietnamese and looking for Cheddar. Willow gave her information about botany, then told Mai she was her new best friend. When Mai was silent, Willow knew she had crossed a line. Willow added that Mai was really her only friend since she was in a new school, Mai smiled.

In Chapter 15, Roberta Chance was sent to an imaging center for a dimple she'd noticed in her breast. She realized something was wrong when the doctor asked her to come back to his office after the ultrasound. The doctor told her the dent was a tumor and that she needed to call her husband. The doctor told them the surgery to remove the tumor needed to be done immediately.

Jimmy and Roberta sat on a bench to talk and decided they would not tell Willow what had happened. They drove Jimmy's truck to her next appointment. Jimmy slowed the truck on Eye Street because the light was red but it changed to green before he'd completely stopped. He didn't look to see if another car was coming into the intersection as he would generally have but instead reached and touched Roberta's arm. It was at this instant that their vehicle was t-boned by a medical supply van. Jimmy died on the scene. Roberta died three hours later during emergency surgery. The van driver was left in a coma.

In Chapter 16, Mai told Dell that she, Willow and Quang-ha wanted to go for ice cream. The kids worked together to manipulate Dell into taking them for the treats. Willow believed the dynamic was changing in the group and would not go back to the way it had been. She commented that endings signal the beginning of something else.

Analysis

It is in this chapter that the theme of signs and the importance of signs is introduced. Notice that Jairo is described as a man who pays attention to signs. Jairo had been deeply moved by Willow's statement to him that he shouldn't let anyone tell him that he can't "do it." Although Willow had actually been referring to her own accomplishment of successfully getting a taxi, he believed she was talking to him, addressing his own goal. Believing that the unusual young lady was some sort of sign indicating to him it was



time to get on with his original plan of going back to school, he went and picked up a pamphlet at a community college. When Jairo was called to pick Willow up a second time, she noticed a mole on his neck and warned him to have it checked. As Jairo had already decided Willow was a bringer of signs, it is no doubt he will take her warning seriously.

It is also in this section that the reader learns what happened to Willow's parents, and, perhaps more importantly what they'd learned just before their wreck. Because of a breast tumor, Roberta was on her way to a doctor to get the lump removed. Knowing how upsetting it would be to Willow, they decide not to tell her about her mother's tumor. The two were killed on their way to Roberta's second doctor's appointment. Her parents' quick death in the car accident kept Willow from knowing that her mother possibly had cancer. It also explains why neither parent had returned Willow's phone messages saying she would be late. It is ironic that at the same time that Mai was trying to manipulate Dell into taking them for ice cream, Willow's parents were facing this terrible news, then having a car wreck. While Willow had no idea what had happened to her parents, she is correct in her assumption while still at the ice cream restaurant that she would always remember that day and that things would never be the same.

Notice also that although Willow seems socially retarded, in a way, she realizes when she has stepped over the line when she tells Mai that Mai is her closest friend. Willow is perceptive enough that she realizes she has put Mai in an uncomfortable situation and quickly thinks up a way to lessen the pitch. Her explanation that Mai is actually her only friend at that time makes Mai smile.

These chapters remain in the past tense, as the events have not yet caught up with the first chapter of the novel where Willow learned her parent were dead. Chapters 13 and 15 are both told from the third person point of view. Chapter 13 is focused on Jairo while Chapter 15 focuses on Willow's parents, Jimmy and Roberta Chance. It is the only chapter in the novel that is told from their focus point.

Discussion Question 1

Consider the way that Willow tells Jairo that his mole might mean trouble. What might you have done in this situation?

Discussion Question 2

Do you respect Roberta and Jimmy's decision not to tell Willow about Roberta's tumor? How might you have handled this information at Willow's age? Do you think there might have been a better way to handle the situation?



Discussion Question 3

Why do you think it is significant that the only piece of two vehicles that are not mangled in the wreck is the plate containing a number to call to evaluate the medical van's driving?

Vocabulary

shaman, nevus, asymmetrical, recede, dynamic



Chapters 17 - 20

Summary

In Chapter 17, the police ask Willow about her next of kin. The only living relative is her father's mother. She has dementia. Many of her parents' other relatives have died of health issues. Willow thinks that considering kinfolk health histories is the only time she's been comforted that she was adopted. She cannot breathe and has trouble concentrating.

She sits on the front steps and cries. She believes she will never be herself again. Mai sits next to her making a cooing noise. Mai is crying as well. As she listens to the police making phone calls, trying to find out what they should do, Willow realizes she can't even count by sevens. Willow finally has to go to the bathroom bad enough that she gives Mai her key to open the house. She expects her parents to be there but knows they won't be. She describes her house as a museum of a family that is finished.

In Chapter 18, Mai helps Willow inside to the bathroom then goes to Willow's room with a brown paper bag. She picks up a pair of red pajamas and puts them in the bag. As she is leaving, she notices a book titled "Understanding Vietnamese Customs and Traditions." It is at this point that she realizes she wants Willow to come with her. In order for this to happen, Mai lies to the police, telling them that the their families had been friends for years.

Dell drives slowly as he follows the police car to Mai's mother's nail salon. They don't realize it, but they drive right through the intersection where Willow's parents were killed. At the salon, Dell and Willow stay in the car while Mai and Quang-ha race each other into the building. Dell seems most concerned that he will get into trouble because he has taken the three students off school grounds. He tries to say something comforting to Willow but his bumbling attempts only make her cry harder. Dell has to bite the inside of his mouth to make himself stop talking.

In Chapter 19, inside her shop, Pattie Nguyen is doing inventory. Patti believes in the signs of fortune. She is holding a bottle of blue nail polish when Dell's car and the police car pull into her lot. Immediately she decides the blue polish is bad luck and decides to stop carrying it. Quang-ha tries to make himself heard above Mai, letting him mother know that his sister lied. Mai is talking about Willow and the accident that killed her parents. As Patti tries to sort out what the kids are saying, the police officers come into the shop.

Instead of letting her mother be questioned by the police, Mai takes her to Dell's car and lets her see Willow. In Willow, Patti sees a younger version of herself, a child who had grown up without parents. She reaches out for the girl. Patti takes legal responsibility of Willow for the next 24 hours. Dell hangs around the shop, hoping to be invited home with the family but Patti tells him they will talk the next day as she pushes him out of the



shop. As he gets into his car, the reality of what has happened hits him and he begins to cry.

In Chapter 20, being hugged by Patti is the first time Willow feels she is able to breathe since she learned of her parents' accident. She is taken home with the Nguyens and learns their home is a garage. There is only one window and no bathroom. In order to use the bathroom, they have to walk across the alley to the salon. There is an airconditioner, but it is still hot. They sleep on a queen sized mattress and cot pushed together. A long table with two hot plates and a microwave make up their cooking area. Willow notices an unsafe plug with six electric cords coming from it. She thinks it might be good if the garage were to catch fire, especially if she were alone. That way she would be released from the pain of her grief.

Patti makes her soup and salty pork strips but Willow can't swallow the food. After Quang-ha goes to the salon as Mai asked him, she and Patti help Willow into her pajamas. Patti lights incense, then she and Mai cry with Willow. Willow decides she will make herself remember nothing of that night.

Analysis

The meat and potatoes of Willow's story seems to begin in these chapters. Notice the tense has changed back to present tense as the events have caught up with the beginning of the novel. Up until Chapter 17 much of the text dealt with description of Willow's background and her own personality, along with the background and personalities of Dell and Mai. Now that this foundation has been laid, the real story starts.

It is in these chapters that the theme of grief is introduced. Willow goes through all of the accepted stages of grief. In these chapters, she is in shock. She has trouble breathing and feels as if her world is coming to an end. She can't even count by sevens, an activity that brought her comfort in the past. Later, as she begins to come to grips with what has happened, Willow forces herself to forget the night of her parents' death where Pattie lights incense and cries with her. She notices an overloaded plug in the Nguyen's garage and wishes the garage would catch fire with her there alone. She believes the release from the pain of her grief would be a relief.

Notice that after Willow has learned the news of her parents' deaths, it is only Pattie who is able to bring some comfort to Willow. Mai sits by Willow and cries with her, but it is only when Willow is wrapped in Patti's arms that she feels like she is capable of breathing again. Although Dell tries to comfort Willow, his bumbling attempts only make her feel worse. The more he tries to say something comforting, the worse his attempts become. Thankfully, Dell realizes he's only making matters worse for Willow because he finally winds up biting the inside of his mouth to keep himself from talking any more.

The theme of signs and symbols works itself into this section of the novel as Patti works with her nail polish. She's conducting an inventory and looking at the colors she has in



stock when Dell's car, then the police car pulls up at her shop. She has always thought that red was a lucky color and has long wished it were the only color she carried. However, she's holding a bottle of blue polish in her hand when the cars pull up. Even though she doesn't yet know what news the people in the cars bring, she automatically decides that it is because she was holding the blue polish, and not the lucky, red polish that she will now have to deal with some trouble. Pattie's superstitions are so strong that she decides to quit carrying the blue polish because she has decided it is unlucky even before she fully knows what is happening.

Discussion Question 1

Notice the way the author works Pattie and her children's living conditions into the story. Why do you think this is significant?

Discussion Question 2

How does Willow express her grief in these chapters? Use examples from the text.

Discussion Question 3

Is Pattie a superstitious person? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

contradict, consolation, avalanche, dysphagia, oropharyngeal



Chapters 21 - 24

Summary

In Chapter 21, Quang-ha is angry because another person has been added to their already crowded living conditions. He is embarrassed by the robot underwear his mother bought for him on sale. He's angry everything he owns smells like nail polish. He decides he won't feel sorry for Willow because she's only adding to his discomfort.

The next morning, Willow refuses to go to school. Pattie is supposed to call the Department of Children's Services that day and have a file set up for Willow. She assumes family will come for the girl. She hopes they will take care of her.

In Chapter 22, Willow hopes she is dreaming when she wakes up in the garage. She analyzes the odds of being given up at birth then having another set of parents die in an accident 147 months and 7 days later. She decides the likelihood of it happening is a slim possibility. She has decided she isn't ever going back to school. The only person she'll miss is the nurse, Judi, who would talk to her about germ eradication.

She spends the day in Pattie's salon. When Pattie tells Willow she has a caseworker, Willow asks for a pen and piece of paper. A woman comes in about an hour later and talks to Pattie. Willow knows they are talking about her, but she doesn't pay attention. Soon the lady walks over to Willow and introduces herself. Willow hands her the piece of paper. On the sheet she has written that her family had no relatives or friends who would be suitable to take care of her. She instructs Ito's Garden Services to be contacted to take care of her garden and has written that she does not want to return to her home. She does, however, want her computer, printer and medical files. Willow asks to be allowed to stay with the Nguyen family.

Willow refuses to go with the woman, ignoring her while she talks and conjugating Latin verbs instead. When Mrs. Cole suggests she will use force on Willow if necessary, Willow goes. Saying goodbye to Pattie is the hardest goodbye she's ever said even though she didn't even know her a day before.

In Chapter 23, in the car on the way to Jamison Children's Center Willow believes her pulse rate is entering a dangerous level. Inside the building she notices the doors lock when they close and there are surveillance cameras everywhere. She finds it hard to breathe so she sits on a couch. On a coffee table next to the couch she sees a copy of the newspaper. It displays a picture of her parents' car accident showing the mangled, burned truck. She passes out, hitting her head on the elephant shaped coffee table. She is bleeding and hears someone say she needs stitches.

Willow is taken to Mercy Hospital to get nine stitches. She tells Mrs. Cole she's going to the bathroom but instead borrows a cell phone from another patient, calls the taxi company and requests Jairo Hernandez to come and pick her up.



In Chapter 24, Jairo worries that someone has done something to hurt Willow when he picks her up near the hospital. He's had the mole removed from his neck, which the doctor said didn't look good, so he's decided she's some sort of mystic. He notices Willow pull a hospital band from her wrist. After she gets out of the cab at the library, he pulls the band out of the trash. He decides the numbers on it are the ones he will play in the lottery the rest of his life.

Analysis

When Willow wakes the following morning in the garage with the Nguyen family, she hopes she is dreaming. This denial is another step in Willow's grieving process. She's hoping her parents really aren't dead, she just dreamed the whole thing. In a coincidence that would be devastating even to most adults, Willow sees a picture of her parents' mangled vehicle in the daily newspaper that someone has left on a coffee table in the office at Jamison Children's Center. She sees the paper at a time she's already in panic mode because she's been forced to leave Pattie, the one person who has been able to comfort her since the accident. It is no wonder that Willow passes out when she sees the graphic picture.

Seeking comfort and knowing she won't get it at Jamison, Willow runs away from the hospital to which they take her to get stitches. She calls Jairo, the one person she knows she can trust to come get her, and asks to be taken to the library, a place that she knows will comfort her.

Notice in this section of the novel that Pattie has already begun to care for Willow. Because she grew up with no parents, she knows what Willow will face. Not knowing Willow's whole story she believes the girl must have family who will come for her. Pattie hopes whomever Willow winds up living with will take good care of her.

Meanwhile, Jairo is even more convinced that Willow is some sort of mystic as he had the mole that she pointed out to him removed the same morning he'd made the doctor's appointment to have it checked out. Now, as he retrieves her hospital bracelet from the trash in the back of the taxi, he decides her hospital identification number is also good luck and he should play that number in the lottery.

The letter that Willow gives to her new caseworker is of extreme interest because of the information that can be learned about Willow from it. This letter shows the depth of Willow's intelligence as well as the grasp that she has on her situation despite the grief she is feeling. She lines out her situation for the caseworker saying that she has no close relatives or friends that can take her in. She requests to be allowed to stay with the Nguyens. At this point, Mai and Pattie have taken charge of Willow. Just having someone to take charge can be comforting in the situation that Willow faces.

Willow also asks for some unusual things, considering that she is only 12. She asks for a forensic autopsy to be done on both her mother and father, even though she knows she isn't ready to look at it at that time. She also asks that the pictures of them be put



into storage. It seems that Willow doesn't want to, or isn't ready to, face anything that will remind her of her parents as she also asks not to have to return to the house where she grew up. She appoints a guardian for her garden, and asks for some of her things, but makes it clear she doesn't want to go back there.

With her deep study of medical conditions, Willow asks she be given medication for anxiety and suggests she may later need something for depression. Few adults would be collected enough at this point in the loss of both their parents to even realize they needed medication to help them through the grieving process, yet here, Willow is lining out very clearly what she knows she made need in order to come to terms with what has happened.

Willow also requests to be allowed to stay with the Nguyen family. In fact she phrases her desire more as a statement than a request. Again, it is clear she has thought things through as she points out that she hopes the Nguyens will be reimbursed for the things they will need to take care of her.

Discussion Question 1

Consider how devastating it would be not only to be told your parents had been killed in a car crash, but then to unexpectedly see the picture of this crash in the newspaper. How might you have responded? Is Willow's reaction one that might be expected?

Discussion Question 2

Why do you think Willow panics so severely when she is taken into Jamison? Why is it that she believes she doesn't belong there?

Discussion Question 3

Consider Willow's written request to her new caseworker. What stands out in this request? Do you think her appeal to be allowed to stay with the Nguyens will be honored?

Vocabulary

definitive, eradication, formally, forensic, incurred, clarity, imperceptible, syncope, transient, glabella, disfigurement, automated



Chapters 25 - 28

Summary

In Chapter 25, Dell gets a call requesting he come to Jamison Children's Center as they believed he could be helpful in finding Willow. He drives past Willow's house first, but only sees the flowers, banner, candles and beer bottles that have been left in the yard. He thinks it looks like the remnants of a bad party. At Jamison, the authorities suspect foul play may be involved in Willow's disappearance, but Dell doesn't agree. He thinks about what a hero he'd be if he were to find Willow. Making his decision, he drives to Mai's school.

In Chapter 26, Willow wishes she could live in the library as books have always brought her comfort, a state she feels no longer exists for her. She looks for books dedicated to those who have lost a parent but is unable to find anything. She writes her desire for books on loss of a parent on a slip of paper she finds and puts it in the library's suggestion box. Up on the second floor of the library she crawls behind a chair and goes to sleep.

In Chapter 27, Mai turns the tables on Dell when she tells him that he must check her out of school so she can go look for Willow. He'd expected just to get some hints from her and find the girl himself.

In Chapter 28, Willow wakes up when Mai pokes her with her shoe. She and Mai ride in the backseat of Dell's car. He plans to take the girls back to Jamison but Mai makes him take them to a restaurant first. Next, Mai learns that Dell has a two-bedroom apartment. She talks to her mother in Vietnamese on Dell's cell phone. Mai has ordered food for her family. Dell doesn't look happy when he's called to pay for it.

Back at Jamison, Willow thinks people in the other rooms are talking about her. She can see Mai, Pattie and Dell outside in the parking lot. Mai tells her mother that if they don't take care of Willow and put down Dell's address as their own, Willow will have to stay at Jamison. The decision is made to let Willow stay with the Nguyens temporarily. She must go to Jamison once a week and continue to see Dell. Additionally, Dell has agreed to oversee her homeschooling. Later that night, Pattie tells Willow she will stay with them until a good place for her is found.

Analysis

Thinking he'd be a hero if he were to find Willow, Dell seeks out help from Mai, only to find the tables quickly turned on him. Although he'd been backed against the wall before by Mai when she stood up for her older brother, he is still surprised when she takes charge of the situation with Willow. He'd intended for the girl to give him a few suggestions as to where she thought Willow might be so he could get credit for finding her. Instead, the intelligent Mai not only quickly locates Willow, she also works a free



dinner for herself and her family out of Dell, and learns that Dell lives in a two-bedroom apartment. Mai spends a good deal of time talking to her mother on the phone in Vietnamese after she learns about Dell's apartment. The two strong women rope Dell into allowing them to put down his address as their own so they can show they have an adequate place to keep Willow until a permanent home for her is found.

The story of Willow's journey through her grief continues as she searches the library for information about the loss of a parent. She's particularly interested in finding something written for her own age group. She's not able to find what she's looking for, however, and in typical Willow fashion, submits a complaint to the library for not having anything on this topic. Notice that even as Willow searches for answers about her parents death and her own feelings, she reports she is having trouble concentrating, one of the typical hallmarks of grief, but one that must be particularly troubling to Willow as she does rely so much on her ability to think and concentrate.

Discussion Question 1

Consider the dynamic between Dell and Mai. Do you find it interesting that a grown man allows himself to be pushed around so easily by a teenaged girl? How do their interactions with each other reinforce the other's personality?

Discussion Question 2

Why do Mai and her mother convince Dell to allow them to put down his address as their home address? Why can they not use their own address?

Discussion Question 3

How do you think that Mai knew to look for Willow at the library? Use examples from the book to support your answer.

Vocabulary

viable, empirical, crypsis, hydrolysis, metaphorically, intuitively, fixate, provisional, carcinogenic



Chapters 29 - 32

Summary

In Chapter 29, Dell, Mai and Pattie all attend a memorial service for Willow's parents. Willow remembers little of the service besides that it was people from her dad's union who organized the service. There is a poster-sized picture of her parents that she recognizes but she can't remember anything that was said about her parents. After the service, she is horrified when they are to release balloons, which she knows are bad for the environment, in honor of her parents, but she can't bring herself to say anything.

A newspaper article announces a fund is being started for Willow's education. Her father's boss and Jairo Hernandez are the only two contributors Willow recognizes. Willow writes Jairo a thank you note and he calls her at Pattie's store. After the phone call, she visits the library again, crawling behind her chair to watch the people from that vantage point. After some people watching and a nap, Willow sits outside on the front steps. She thinks of herself as just being. She wants to go back and finds herself incapable of conversation. She believes this is why the deepest form of pain is expressed in silence.

Mai talks to Willow about her life, Pattie is there for Willow and Willow has decided that Quang-ha hates her. She realizes she's caused his life to be more complicated. Willow tries not to cause extra trouble for the family by using the bathroom last, and not mentioning that she's a vegetarian. She makes it through the first month; but she notes that she no longer counts by 7s anymore because she thinks she no longer counts.

In Chapter 30, Dell arrives home to his apartment at the Gardens of Glenwood after dark. There are no gardens, only a rock filled courtyard with a few weeds. The stairs smell funny and the elevator does not work. After Willow's parents were killed, Willow's file was requested. He hadn't sent them the results from all the tests from SATs to medical entrance tests that she'd aced. Dell feels caught up in a web of deception. At her counseling sessions, the two now sit in silence. He knows that she is studying him and it unnerves him. Also unnerving is the idea that he now cares about everything when he once had the easy job of not caring about anything. Meanwhile, Pattie hasn't enrolled in foster parenting classes even though she knows a hearing is coming up soon.

In Chapter 31, Willow is pained when she hears the manicurists talk about their families. She realizes they are part of something, a family, which she no longer has. Willow compares herself to a tree that has survived fire. Even though they are burned, they begin to grow again. Willow hopes this will happen to her.

Willow describes Pattie as being the type of person who follows her mother's saying that everything had a place and everything should be in its place. Willow believes she is the only thing out of place in Pattie's shop. Pattie gets a phone call and Willow believes



it is the call telling Pattie she will be free of Willow. Willow tries to be strong, believing she has caused nothing but problems for the family. She smiles at Pattie, who is still on the phone, but her lips quiver and Pattie tells the person on the other end they won't be there until 6:45 p.m. Willow admires Pattie's composure, comparing her situation to a time when she got hives just visiting the ocean. Pattie is on the phone with Dell telling him they have a home visit today. She orders Dell to come and get them.

In Chapter 32, Dell drives into the parking lot, then a few minutes later he, Pattie and Willow are headed to his apartment. Willow recognizes when she first enters Dell's apartment that he is a hoarder but as she isn't herself, she doesn't enjoy this close up look at Dell's emotional condition as she once would have. The living room is piled with magazines and mail while the kitchen counters are filled with disposable microwave trays and plastic cups.

Pattie and Willow follow Dell to where he has gone down a hallway and closed a door. In the bedroom they find Dell stuffing a sleeping bag into a sack. Although Dell tries to stop her, Pattie opens his closet door. It is packed with dirty underwear. Willow doubts the apartment can be made to look livable but Pattie believes she's up to the challenge. Pattie picks out and Dell buys a dining table and chairs, a sofa and leather lounge as well as bunk beds and mattresses at the Salvation Army Store. Back at the apartment, she sends Dell to the grocery with a detailed list. While he's gone she elicits the help of the moving men to get rid of all the trash. Dell doesn't seem upset when he returns that his trash is gone so Willow decides he isn't a true hoarder.

Analysis

Willow continues her journey through the grieving process in this section of the novel, which covers about a month of time. It seems that this period of time is Willow's rock bottom low time. She feels in the way with the Nguyen family. She even believes that Quang-ha hates her because she has made his life more unbearable. Willow continues to have a selective memory when it comes the things that involve her parents or their deaths. She can't remember any of what is said at the memorial service, for example. Additionally, she's lost interest in the things that used to preoccupy her mind. She doesn't want to go to school, doesn't want to think about gardening or medical conditions. She is tired and sleeps a good deal of the time. The thing she seems to concentrate on most is not being a burden to the Nguyen family.

Willow seems to perk up a bit when she and Pattie first look at Dell's apartment. She recognizes his apartment full of stuff is a sign of psychological disorder. She indicates that the "old her" would have really enjoyed observing Dell and being able to see first-hand someone suffering from this disorder. With her grief heavy on her mind, however, Willow feels only a prick of interest that seems to die away when Dell is not terribly upset because Pattie throws his things away. Remember also, that while the reader knew from prior descriptions of Dell's apartment and lifestyle what Pattie would be facing when she decided to use Dell's apartment as her own, Pattie and Willow were



unaware how inattentive Dell was to his housekeeping. Although the task of cleaning Dell's apartment is daunting, Pattie takes it on.

Notice that in this section of the novel, Pattie and Dell really do go beyond the call of duty to give Willow a good place to live, even though they do go about it in an unconventional way. Until the first home visit is scheduled, Willow lives with Pattie in the garage. As soon as the first home visit is scheduled, Pattie goes into action making Dell's apartment livable. Any other man might have refused to let a woman take charge of his home. Any other woman might have thought the work necessary to make Dell's apartment livable was too much. Dell and Pattie dive in full force, however, even though Dell is mostly strong armed by Pattie into his part of the process.

Notice also that because Willow has spent much of her life communicating with plants and learning about life from them, she still sees her life in comparison with the plant world. In this theme of thinking, Willow recalls that she's heard about trees that have been burnt in fires but have survived. Although they appear dead at first, these trees eventually begin to grow new leaves and recover from their trauma. Willow hopes that she can be as resilient as these trees, but is afraid she may never recover.

Discussion Question 1

What does Willow seem to remember most about her parents' memorial service? Why does this portion of the service make an impression on her?

Discussion Question 2

What turns out to be the biggest problem with the Nguyen's decision to pretend they live in Dell's apartment?

Discussion Question 3

How does Willow think she fits in with Pattie and her family? Use examples from the book to support your opinion.

Vocabulary

incapable, pumice, scrutiny, marginally, provocative, mortify, disposophobia



Chapters 33 - 36

Summary

In Chapter 33, Mai stays after school on Fridays for a program for at risk teens. As she waits at the bus stop after her program, Mai thinks about the way that Willow has said everything in life can be compared to a garden. The flowers teach the lessons about life, death and the stages in between better than anything else, Willow had told her.

Meanwhile, Quang-ha is surprised when Dell's car pulls up to him after school and he is ordered to get in. Dell only tells him that Pattie and Willow are in his apartment fixing it up as if they lived there. Quang-ha has his doubts but his mother calls him and tells him to pack up the things from the garage. Dell is shocked when he sees the Nguyens' living arrangements. He understands now why they listed his address instead of their own on the social work papers. Quang-ha begins to get excited because he feels as if he and his family are breaking some sort of rules.

In Chapter 34, Willow and Pattie haul Dell's underwear down to the laundry room and start the first load. Pattie mops and cleans the kitchen before Dell gets back with the groceries and Quang-ha. Pattie sends Dell out with another list, and then orders Quang-ha up to the roof to remove the tarp from the skylight. Quang-ha is angry because he's already been told to take a bag of wine bottles to the trash. Willow offers to help. She follows Quang-ha up to the roof. He drags the bag of bottles with them. As they pull the tarp from the skylight, the bag of bottles falls over and the broken pieces from a bottle falls onto the skylight. The two don't say anything but they both think the same thing as they begin breaking the bottles to cover the skylight. Back inside the apartment, Quang-ha rearranges the furniture. Willow praises his work.

In Chapter 35, Dell goes to a bar while Lenore Cole is inspecting the apartment. He adds a new category to his Dell Duke System of the Strange. That category is dictator for Pattie. Meanwhile, Mai is unhappy because she's had to take a second bus to get to Dell's apartment. She is upset because she's afraid she may have hurt Willow more by insisting that she stay with them. She steps on an acorn and notices it doesn't smash. It hurts her foot so she kicks it into the street where a car hits it. When she sees the acorn hasn't been flattened she decides it is a survivor. She makes up her mind to give it to Willow when she has a chance.

In Chapter 36, Lorene Cole doesn't stay at the apartment long so Willow assumes they've passed. She wishes the lady would go far away. As Lorene Cole drives away, Mai walks up to the apartment. Willow tells her about the apartment and their bunk beds. In the apartment Willow thanks Pattie for what she has done for her. They eat dinner, and then settle down in the living room to wait for Dell. Pattie is folding his underwear. When Willow leans back on the couch, the acorn pokes her. Mai suggests the acorn may be lucky.



Analysis

In this section of the novel, the dynamic in the relationship between Quang-ha and Willow changes. First, when Quang-ha learns that his family is working to make Dell's apartment look like they live there, he is excited because he feels they're doing something illegal, which appeals to him. He's long felt like an outcast because his sister never gets in trouble, but he seems to stay in trouble all the time. This excitement fades when Quang-ha realizes he is going to have to work harder than he wanted to. In his sour mood when he's asked to take out a bag of wine bottles to the trash and also remove a plastic covering from a skylight, Quang-ha accidentally breaks one of the bottles. When Willow and Quang-ha see the way the colored glass makes the light from the skylight come alive, they don't even have to discuss plans to finish covering the skylight with broken glass pieces. Bonding between the two seems to begin first with this craft project, then when Willow compliments Quang-ha on the way he arranges the furniture in the living room.

Meanwhile, Mai is afraid she has hurt Willow more than she's helped. Mai feels she may be giving Willow false hope that she can stay with them and only prolonging her introduction into a foster home. She knows her mother's concern that they don't have the money to support another child, and already live in a garage. It seems that the nut that Mai steps on reminds her that even something small and insignificant can be resilient. Since Mai hopes that Willow will be like the acorn and survive this tough spot in her life, Mai decides to arrange for Willow to find it.

Notice also in this section that as Mai looks at the rose bushes near her bus stop she thinks about the things Willow has taught her about the life cycle of plants. Willow understands life by comparing it to what she has observed in her garden. She's taught Mai that the life cycle of plants mirrors that of people. This idea adds to the theme of gardens and plants seen in the novel.

Adding to the theme of classification, notice that Dell adds another category to his system of the strange to describe Pattie. This is one of the problems associated with the attempt to classify people, every time a person with a different personality trait is discovered, a new category has to be added. It is indicated that Dell's act of putting Pattie in a category, however, helps him to feel as if he is regaining control of his life.

Discussion Question 1

How are Willow and the acorn that Mai finds in the street similar? Why do you think Mai decides to give it to Willow in secret?



Discussion Question 2

The novel indicates that Dell adds a new category to his system of the strange in order to help himself gain control. How do you think this act of labeling Pattie helps him feel in control?

Discussion Question 3

What is your opinion of the Nguyen family's plan to pretend they live in Dell's apartment? Is it a good idea? A bad idea? Do you, like Mai, think the whole process may be doing Willow more harm than good?

Vocabulary

morphs, detritus, qualitative, hermit, pragmatist



Chapters 37 - 40

Summary

In Chapter 37, Dell returns home to find Pattie and the children asleep in his apartment. He doesn't recognize it. He sleeps for five hours in his room until he hears the sound of the shower running. Pattie knocks on the door. She tells him social services will be coming again in a week and that it would be easier for them to just stay there instead of her having to clean up after him. She informs him that another tenant in the building is looking for a roommate. A short time later, he finds himself talking to Sadhu in apartment 22. Sadhu agrees to let him live there.

In Chapter 38, Pattie tells everyone the arrangement is temporary until a good place can be found for Willow. Willow feels bad for Dell but compares their situation to being part of a flock of birds. Although Dell is unhappy with having to move out of his apartment, Willow believes Mai has never been happier with her living arrangements. Dell is happy when Willow programs his television correctly so the colors are the right hue and the picture isn't stretched. He asks her to review the remainder of his appliances.

One morning after they've moved into Dell's apartment, Willow decides she needs to start pulling her own weight. The first thing she does is to put Pattie's business accounts onto a new computer program. Later, when Quang-ha leaves an avocado pit in the kitchen window and Mai tells about him trying to grow avocado trees from pits, Willow begins thinking about soil composition for the first time since her parents' deaths. As she lays in bed, she is unable to sleep. When she closes her eyes, she sees rooting hormone. She refers to the world of plants as a slippery slope where it's hard to care just a little.

In Chapter 39, Dell comes to the apartment to watch television, as Sadhu doesn't have one. Quang-ha agrees to let him stay if he doesn't do anything nasty. Willow observes as the two interact with each other and the television. After awhile, she's had enough and goes outside. She misses her garden. She wonders if there is anyone else trying to make sense out of life. Walking in front of the apartment, she sees a hummingbird. She goes back upstairs prepares some sugar water for hummingbird food and gets her red sun hat. She sits next to the flowering tree with the syrup on her fingers and waits for the hummingbird to eat from her fingers. At this point Willow decides to see only the present. In that present, she decides the Gardens of Glenwood need a garden.

In Chapter 40, Willow begins collecting a few clippings. She begins noticing gardens and lawns again on her walk to Dell's office. He suggests going back to school but she says she's not ready. When Dell asks her for one thing he could do to make her life better, she asks for a packet of sunflower seeds. When she gets home that day, Dell has 24 packs of sunflower seeds spread out on the kitchen counter. Willow cries as she takes the packets to her room. She realizes that Dell is a really caring person. Later, Dell and Mai help as she spreads some of the seeds out onto a moist paper towel.



Analysis

This section of chapters seems to begin an uphill climb for Willow out of the darkness of her grief. She has reached a stage in her grieving process where she is becoming interested in making life easier for those with whom she lives. She's also started thinking about plants and her love of gardening. Willow also decides she needs to live in the present, a sign that she doesn't want to continue to be pulled down by the sorrows of the past and perhaps is beginning to realize there is nothing that will change her present circumstance. She also recognizes it will do her no good to worry about her future. Instead, she sets her mind to the positive activity of beautifying the place she now lives.

Because she's never observed much in the way of male friendship, Willow is amused as she watches Quang-ha and Dell bond while watching television. Her father didn't bring home friends to watch television with, so Dell and Quang-ha's scratching, channel surfing and girl watching is a new experience to her.

Notice Willow's observation that the word "temporary" is one that Pattie uses often. Willow has come to believe it is Pattie's favorite word. Her custodianship of Willow is temporary; the family living in Dell's apartment is temporary. Willow even ties the idea of temporary into Pattie's chosen career, as she points out there is nothing more temporary than nail polish.

As Willow struggles to understand her situation, she continues to compare it to things she has witnessed in her garden. In this particular instance, she explains Dell's willingness to go along with Pattie's plans in terms of a flock of birds she's observed in her garden. In a flock, the birds have lost their individual intent and move as part of the larger group. Willow makes the point that she and Dell have become like these birds and are now part of Pattie's flock. This being part of a flock, a larger whole, is something that Willow longed for as she listened to the manicurists talk as they worked in Pattie's salon. This "flock" that she is now part of, as unconventional as it may be, may be part of the reason that Willow's outlook on life is improving.

Discussion Question 1

What does Willow's renewing interest in gardening indicate about her movement through the grieving process?

Discussion Question 2

Notice the capitalization of the word "Before" in Chapter 38 as Willow refers to her life prior to her parents' deaths. What is the significance of this capitalization?



Discussion Question 3

Discuss Willow's interest in the bonding that is going on between Quang-ha and Dell. How is she intrigued by their behavior?

Vocabulary

agitation, persecution, legitimate, surveillance, psychological, indigenous



Chapters 41 - 44

Summary

In Chapter 41, Mai, also has decided to enjoy the way things are right now even though she knows they could be told to pack up their things any day. Meanwhile, Jairo drives to the college bookstore to buy textbooks. He almost puts the books back, but then thinks of Willow and gets new courage. At the counter, when the clerk takes his money a red light swirls and a buzzer goes off. He thinks at first he's done something wrong, but is told he is the store's one-millionth customer. He has won \$20,000. That check is worth a year's salary driving his taxi. Jairo realizes it will pay for all the college classes he ever wants.

In Chapter 42, Pattie and Mai pick up potting soil at the farmer's market for Willow while Willow and Dell search the recycling dumpster for suitable planting containers. While they're cleaning the containers, Willow sees Sadhu with three old computers he's planning on putting into the recycling bin. She asks if she can have them. She hopes to combine them into one working computer for Dell. Later while she's working on the computer, Dell's cell phone rings with a barking sound. Thinking of the cat, Willow asks if Dell misses Cheddar. Dell doesn't seem to know what she's talking about, telling her only that he misses his meat loaf.

Willow is surprised when Quang-ha helps with the planting. He refuses to plant three seeds like she tells him and plants only one. Willow is happy because he is actually going against her wishes instead of babying her. She feels like she might be coming back to some new normal.

In Chapter 43, Willow describes the new routine that includes helping Quang-ha with his homework. Or, more correctly, doing his homework for him. Dell continues to ask when she plans to go back to school. She asks him to tell her one thing she's missing at school. He tells her she's not going to P.E., and then tells her he plans to start running. Quang-ha laughs at the idea. Mai comes out and begins laughing because her brother is laughing. In private, Willow tells Dell she thinks it's a great idea for him to be thinking about exercising. The next day, he runs for the first day and is in bad shape after running only eleven minutes. Over the weekend, Willow writes a report for Quang-ha. Even after he deletes the introductory paragraph and misspells some words he is still moved into an honors class because of the report. Quang-ha is angry. Willow refuses to take the blame.

In Chapter 44, Pattie realizes she has to find something for Willow to do. She is afraid she will scare her customers so she lets her read the lease agreement. Willow finds three inconsistencies. She then helps Pattie rearrange the salon so there is room for another manicurist and the shop doesn't feel as crowded. Willow also prepares a report about infections from manicures and pedicures. Pattie is angry at first, but after having a



bad dream, lets Willow implement her health standards. She is surprised when the store begins getting new customers.

Dell's life has improved because he has finally fulfilled his mother's wish that he stop eating meatloaf. He's also enjoying his new computer. He decides to add a new category to his classification system for himself. That classification is mutant, as he believes he is changing. He feels better now that his apartment has been cleaned up and organized. He's been running now for two weeks, and he and Pattie have managed to keep Willow out of foster care. He feels that alone is pretty impressive.

Analysis

It is in this chapter that the positive impact that Willow is having on the people around her really begins to show. Dell decides to start exercising, and he's finally given up eating meatloaf. Mai is very happy with the new living arrangements as she finally has her own bed. Willow has helped Pattie by finding inconsistencies in her lease agreement and by rearranging the salon so another manicurist can be added to the staff. Willow has even put together a computer for Dell, made from three old ones that Sadhu was about to throw away. Quang-ha has been using Willow to do his homework. Even though he'd intended to use her to get away with doing less work, he actually winds up in an honors class because one of the papers is so well written. Meanwhile, the whole group is pitching in on Willow's sunflower project.

Willow makes a great stride in her grief process in this section thanks to the sometimes angry and sullen Quang-ha who promised himself he wouldn't feel sorry for Willow. It is because Quang-ha insists on planting his seeds the way he wants to that Willow realizes he isn't treating her like a baby or feeling sorry for her. Although Quang-ha's refusal to obey Willow probably seemed callous to his sister, it seems that it is a great freedom to Willow to realize that neither Quang-ha nor Dell are tiptoeing around in an effort not to upset her. They are treating her as an equal.

Notice also the signs in these chapters. First is Pattie's dream after Willow tells her about the possible infections spread by manicures and pedicures. It has already been noted that Pattie is superstitious so it is no doubt that when she dreams about her customers falling over dead in the manicure chairs that she takes this as a sign that she should heed Willow's warning about the possibility of infections. Listening to the child pays off as Pattie begins to have even more business that she did before she stepped up disinfecting procedures.

Even before Willow's parents were killed, Jairo believed Willow was some sort of prophet sent to him to lead him in the right direction. He's been fighting with his decision to go back to school even after she shocked him into action with her statement on the first day they met. When he wins the bookstore's giveaway of \$20,000 to its one-millionth customer, he's even more convinced that the girl is some sort of force bringing good luck into this life.



Discussion Question 1

How has taking care of Willow enriched the lives of those around her?

Discussion Question 2

Why is it significant that Dell and Quang-ha go against Willow's instructions about planting the sunflower seeds?

Discussion Question 3

How does Pattie first react when Willow talks to her about disease in manicure shops? What changes her mind?

Vocabulary

collective, peripheral, equidistant, optimized, manifesto, salvaged



Chapters 45 - 48

Summary

In Chapter 45, the sunflower seedlings begin to sprout. Quang-ha's is bigger than the others. One day Willow finds a drawing of the plant that he has made depicting the sprout coming out of a man's head. He lets her have it. She knows they'll have to move the sunflowers soon but doesn't mention it because she doesn't like to talk about relocation. During dinner one night Willow thanks Pattie and the other for what they have done for her. She describes the reaction as if she'd pulled out a rotten fish. Quang-ha leaves the table.

Willow decides she isn't physically fit. She notices how alive Dell looks when he comes back from running and wants to experience his feeling. She tells him she wants to start running with him. Mai decides to go along as well. At the Salvation Army store she gets a pair of hot pink running shoes that she doesn't like but tries to pretend like she does.

Willow continues to help Quang-ha with his homework. She believes she has a natural teaching ability as she's seen he'd gotten a 91 out of 100 on a recent pop quiz. Even the teacher is impressed. Meanwhile, she charts out a one-mile running course for herself, Mai and Dell. After trying the course the first time, Willow is surprised how out of shape she is. She can barely run six blocks without passing out, Dell and Mai have to walk with her back to the apartments. After this experience, she vows to exercise every afternoon from that point forward. As she struggles to keep up her routine, Willow believes she is making progress. She knows that exercise changes brain chemistry and wonders if that is what is happening with her.

In Chapter 46, Willow discovers there is dirt under the plastic and red rocks in the apartment courtyard. She tells the others she wants to plant her sunflowers there. Dell is against the idea. Mai tells them they should treat it as a community project and ask the bank that owns the building for permission to plant the flowers. Dell says he's too busy to work with the bank so Willow says she will do it.

Jairo agrees to pick her up at the nail salon and take her to city hall the following day. Pattie tells Willow she's happy Willow has a project. Willow doesn't tell her how nervous the change in routine makes her. Jairo comes in the shop to meet Pattie. The two begin speaking in Spanish to each other. She gives Jairo her cell phone number in case there are any problems. Willow realizes Jairo is the only person Pattie has spoken to whom she hasn't tried to boss around. On the way to city hall, Jairo tells Willow about his good fortune and that he planned to use the money to go to school. Once they arrive at city hall, Jairo calls Pattie to let her know they arrived okay.

Inside, Willow asks to review documents on file for building projects that had come before city council. The woman asks where Willow's parents are to which Willow recites a poem by Williams. The woman directs her to the Office of Building and Safety where



Willow speaks to a variety of different people. She learns that her plans for the garden don't need to be submitted to city officials, but that she needs to make her proposal to the bank look professional. When she finishes, she's afraid she might have given too much information. It's the first project she's done since before her parents' death. She puts the proposal in Dell's name and asks him to submit it. He balks but agrees when Mai enters the conversation.

In Chapter 47, a new court date has been set for Willow. Pattie wonders how the unusual child will fare in an adoption fair setting where prospective parents are supposed to mingle with adoptable children. During a shopping trip with her mother to the farmers' market, Mai notices sunflowers growing in tubs. She remembers what Willow said about their flowers needing to be put in the ground so they could develop their root system.

In Chapter 48, not only does the bank approve Willow's proposal, they also make Dell the building representative. When they begin on the project, Quang-ha suggests they give the rock away. Willow advertises the rock as being given out on a first come, first served basis. Four different people fight over the rock. Willow sends Dell down to mediate. After the rock is gone, they look at the hard packed dirt. Quang-ha points out that nothing will grow there. When the adults talk about how big the project has become, Willow wonders if they might be talking about her. When Willow looks at the plot the next morning, she realizes they need a Rototiller. Dell wants no part of the project. It is another tenant from the building, Otto Sayas, who motivates Dell by telling him that nothing will grow there.

Analysis

Willow, and the others around Willow, continue to compare their situation to a garden. When she and her mother are at a farmers market, Mai sees big tubs of sunflowers for sale. She remembers Willow telling her the sunflowers would need a place to put down good, solid roots. As Mai looks at these flowers she thinks that Willow, like the flowers, also needs a place to put down roots. Meanwhile, Willow takes charge of the garden project. It is the first one she's started since her parents' death, so her willingness to devote herself to such a big project is a sign that she's beginning to heal. As the project progresses, stumbling blocks and hurdles are discovered. When the others talk about what a big project the garden is turning out to be, Willow wonders if she, like this garden project, is turning out to be a bigger job than anyone had imagined.

Willow can be compared to the sunflowers in more ways than one. Not only does she need a place she can put down roots, she, like the flowers, also may have to be relocated in order to put down those roots. When the flowers get big enough that they need to go outside, Willow is hesitant about talking about the needed move as she feels she's also talking about her own move. For this reason, the sunflowers can be seen as a symbol for Willow and the situation she is in. They are growing and becoming healthy in the situation in which they are living, but can't stay there forever. A change is coming for both the flowers and for Willow.



Notice also in this section that Dell seems to be motivated by people saying that something can't be done. For instance, in an earlier chapter when Sadhu had told Willow the three computers for which Willow asked were junk, Dell stands up for the girl saying that one person can find treasure in another's junk. In the garden project, Dell has balked from the beginning. He doesn't want to get involved until a resident in the complex tells Dell and the others they are wasting their time trying to get anything to grow in the rock hard dirt of the courtyard. These words of discouragement seem to have the opposite effect on Dell as they make him want to put effort into the project.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the meaning of the poem that Willow recites for the woman at city hall.

Discussion Question 2

Consider the reaction that Willow perceives the family has when she thanks them for what they have done for her. Do you think their reaction meant what she thought it did? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

How significant is it that Willow has taken on a project to beautify the apartment complex in which she now lives?

Vocabulary

germination, regime, distillation, phenomenon, pungent, bureaucracy, communal, visceral, palindrome



Chapters 49 - 52

Summary

In Chapter 49, Dell winds up having to run the Rototiller by himself but when he is finished, Willow finds the soil has perfect acidity. Willow tries to describe soil acidity in terms of sour and sweet. When Dell asks her if she tasted the soil, Quang-ha laughs but then makes a comment about hydrogen ions that surprises both he and Willow. Mai reminds Willow that her favorite number is 7, the same number assigned to perfect acidity.

Willow looks forward to the planting the following day but when they wake, a Santa Ann wind has blown the freshly tilled dirt all over the ground floor apartments. Dell tears down his building rep sign and wraps himself in a blanket. Mai, however, puts up a sign apologizing for the mess. She gets her mother to take her and Willow to the rental store where they return the Rototiller and rent a power sprayer.

The sprayer looks like a machine gun so Quang-ha is interested in trying it. The grime, along with the stucco coating on the apartments, comes off with the spray. They decide they need to pressure wash the whole building to make it match as there is a soft, natural grey under the stucco.

In Chapter 50, while they're working on the building, Jairo pulls up in his cab. His backseat is full of towels and three window squeegees. He takes charge of the windows. As it gets later, Dell settles in on one of his lawn chairs. Willow admires the stars as she takes turns aiming a flashlight and directing the water flow. Quang-ha has laughed more that she's heard him laugh in the months she been with the family. Suddenly, she realizes she is laughing too.

It's after three in the morning before the project is finally finished. Along with the dirt, the cracks and bare spots in the stucco are all gone from the building. Willow thinks the building now looks futuristic and forward thinking instead of just ugly. After all the work, they all find it hard to move their arms. It's time to plant the sunflowers but they will only temporarily fill the area, Willow knows. She compares her temporary situation to that of her sunflowers. She taking root, but it isn't permanent. She has a court hearing in five weeks.

In Chapter 51, Dell tries to park his car in a too tight spot and winds up taking out a chain link fence, then denting the door of the school van. As he makes his way through the parking lot, a furry mass runs between his legs and he screams. It is Cheddar. Dell recognizes the thin, battle worn cat is frantic and terrified. Dell realizes the cat is in this predicament because of his actions. He decides to take responsibility. He puts the cat, which has begun to purr, in his car and takes him to a vet for a check up and flea bath. Back at school he takes responsibility for the damage to the fence and the van. Because the school district has insurance, he is told not to worry about the damage.



In Chapter 52, Willow is happy that Cheddar is back. Because Sadhu is allergic, Cheddar stays with her. The two become fast friends. Willow buys him a breakaway collar with his name and a bell on it. She also has Pattie's phone number on the collar for emergencies, but the cat seems content to never go outside again.

In her sessions with Dell, they talk about practical things. First, they talk about the search for a legal guardian. They also talk about a permanent fix for the garden. Willow has begun collecting clipping from around the neighborhood in hopes of getting a garden started from those. During a trip to Southside Nursery, Willow sees the nursery owner, Harry E. Pollack. She has done favors for him in the past, giving him grafting and fungus advice. She learns he's asked Dell how she's doing.

Meanwhile, Willow tells the others she plans to start taking clipping from interesting plants. When Quang-ha asks if that would be considered stealing she explains it wouldn't be if the plants are overhanging a public sidewalk. Quang-ha suggests she just take clippings out of people's green recycling bins.

Analysis

Balance is a significant idea in this section of the novel. After Dell is finished tilling the soil, Willow checks the acidity. Although those who had first looked at it considered it useless, Willow notes it is at the perfect acidity for growing plants. This balance of not too acidic and not too alkaline is necessary for good plant growth. Similarly, people need a balance in their lives in order to grow and develop properly.

Meanwhile, Dell, Willow and the Nguyens continue bonding through the garden project. Quang-ha laughs more than Willow has heard him laugh in the time she's been around him. He even surprises himself and Willow by making an intelligent comment on Willow's assessment of the soil.

Note that Dell is making strides in his growth as a responsible adult. He learns in this section that taking responsibility for one's actions doesn't always lead to punishment. For instance, when he confesses to tearing up a fence and denting a van with his car, he's told not to worry about the damage. When he stumbles upon Cheddar and decides to take charge of him, he finds a new friend for Willow. Amusing is the author's comment that Cheddar seems content to never set his feet on anything but carpet again.

Along the idea that Willow's garden in the apartment complex and her own life are running parallel to one another, Willow realizes that even after they get the sunflowers in the ground, it is only a temporary fix. Temporary being the word Pattie has used so often to describe their life with Willow. Willow realizes she has a court hearing coming up in about five weeks where social services will try to place her in a permanent home. Similarly, the sunflowers will only last about five weeks before they will have to be replaced by something more permanent. As Willow says in Chapter 50, "The garden is challenging me, as always, to see my own situation." In a metaphor, Willow calls herself a sunflower as she is becoming attached to the people and place she is at in the



present, just as the sunflowers they have cultivated are attaching themselves to the ground.

Discussion Question 1

Consider Willow's idea that Quang-ha is headed for a position in management. Do you think he's management material? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

How is Willow's situation like that of the sunflowers?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss Dell's steps toward responsibility in this section of the novel. Are you impressed with the decisions he's making? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

pulverized, stamina, futuristic, florets, spectacle, hypothetical



Chapters 53 - 56

Summary

In Chapter 53, Quang-ha suggests Willow take her clipping project to the roof to be put in containers so the plants can root. Unfortunately, a leak in the roof is reported and the repairman puts all the plants in the Dumpster. Before she even gets home, the trash has already been collected and hauled away. Willow believes it is a sign she will be leaving soon as well. She tells Dell she can't return to the past. He slips Mai a note to put on Willow's pillow telling her that he wants her to take Cheddar with her when she gets her future home. He refers to the cat as a therapy dog.

Willow goes to Southside Nursery for advice. She also buys a carton of red ladybugs because she believes they are lucky. The owner comes and looks at her garden spot, and then says he'll send some things over. She's surprised when a large truck with a forklift pulls up the next morning. Harry has brought box bamboo, a cherry tree and flowering vines among other plants. When he tells her it is all a gift, Willow can't respond because of the tugging she feels at her heart. As an additional surprise, a worker from Bakersfield Electric brings solar powered lights that will shine up through the foliage at night. The man, Lorenzo, explains to Willow the guys from the nursery called for a withdrawal from their favor bank. Willow believes she has lots of accounts of this sort with other people. Willow helps the man arrange the lights. When they're done, Lorenzo gives her his business card, telling her there is a big lighting project he'd light for her to take a look at. She agrees, believing she will be repaying a favor. After the workers are gone, Willow and Mai sit on the steps and watch the looks on the residents' faces when they arrive home. Quang-ha asks not to be told how Willow pulled off the garden. He wants to believe she is magic. She believes he's finally accepted her. When Pattie sees the greenery she says the building now has the right to be called the Gardens of Glenwood.

In Chapter 54, Dell finds a letter from the Kern Department of Child Services in the mail. He gives the letter to Pattie, then he researches permanent guardianship. He wonders if he could be Willow's guardian. Meanwhile, Pattie calls Jairo. They have gotten close and now she needs to talk to him about what to do. He doesn't answer but she knows he'll call back. Pattie promises herself she'll do the right thing.

In Chapter 55, before bed, Willow explains to Mai that everything just put into the garden is in shock. The plants will need balance to thrive. The next day, Willow gets the news that Lenore Cole has found a permanent place for her. She will be placed in a group foster home on 7th Street. Willow asks to go to the library and Lenore offers to drive her. Pattie arranges for Dell to pick her up. Once they are together in the car, Lenore tells Willow it is time to move on. She is to spend the next morning at Jamison, then the hearing will be the following afternoon. In the library, she doesn't cry, but thinks she won't be able to live without Pattie, Dell, Quang-ha and Mai. Willow wonders what will happen to them once she no longer lives with them. Dell appears and sits beside



her. He cries. She tells him she'll be okay but that only makes him cry harder. She recognizes the heartbreak in his eyes.

In Chapter 56, after Willow went to the library, Pattie closed the salon early. At home Quang-ha is at the table doing his homework. Mai is on the bunk beds holding Cheddar tightly. Pattie tells Mai they will figure it out, that Willow's placement is temporary. Quang-ha angrily tells his mother that after something has lasted for a certain amount of time, it can no longer be considered temporary. He tells his mother they shouldn't let Willow go. As they stand together, they can hear the sound of the bamboo rustling outside. Dell wakes up and is not able to go back to sleep. Finally, he decides to go downstairs to water Willow's garden. He notices new growth and blooms on the honeysuckle vine. He is sure it will be magnificent.

Analysis

The novel seems to reach a climax in these chapters. The situation, which was "temporary", has reached a point that it either needs to become permanent or will be dissolved. Dell researches the requirements needed to get custody of a child. Pattie calls Jairo to discuss the situation with him. At the apartment, Mai and Quang-ha are angry because Willow is being taken away. Surprisingly, it is Quang-ha who reminds his mother that after a certain amount of time, even a temporary situation can begin to feel permanent. As the small family stands together, they hear the bamboo from Willow's new garden rustling. The sound is an auditory reminder of all that Willow had added to their lives.

Notice also that although Dell has taken great strides in self improvement, he's still his old bumbling self. Willow is both amused and distraught because Dell refers to Cheddar as a therapy dog. Of course, Dell's heart is in the right place, he just doesn't get his wording quite right.

As Willow has been comparing her situation to what is going on with her new garden, it must have been a terrible shock to her to discover that all the plants she'd been cultivating had been hauled away. Willow takes this as a sign that she, too, will be taken from the apartments by force.

However, one of Willow's old friends steps forward with full-grown plants to fill the courtyard. It is a garden more beautiful than Willow could have made with the cuttings and clippings even after they'd grown for years. Willow never considers this surprise from an old friend could also be mirrored in her own life. When the call comes for her to go to court, she only believes she will be taken away from the place she has come to know as home. Notice that instead of worrying about herself, she puts the most energy into wondering what will happen to Dell and the others if she leaves.

It is in this section of the novel that Willow becomes acquainted with the idea of a favor bank. The men who come to install the lights in the garden tell her that they owed the nursery owner a favor and he'd decided to cash it in. Willow is fascinated with this idea



and decides she should start her own favor bank. Ironically, she doesn't realize she's been adding deposits to her favor bank all along without even realizing it. She has brightened the world of two children who once lived in a garage and now have a home. She has given a lonely, single man a reason to clean himself up and care about others. She's improved Pattie's business and introduced him to Jairo, a man with whom Pattie has become close. And, she's encouraged Jairo to go back to school, a decision that will not only be good for his future, but also helped him by earning him \$20,000 in the college bookstore give-a-way.

Discussion Question 1

At this point in the novel, what do you think the future holds for Willow? Who do you think will step forward to take custody of her? Why?

Discussion Question 2

Consider the idea of a favor bank. How has Willow been building up a favor bank all along?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the relationship between Dell and Willow. Despite their challenges, how have they helped one another? Do you think Dell would be an appropriate guardian for Willow?

Vocabulary

acceptance, perspective, defiant, hunched, encircling



Chapters 57 - 61

Summary

In Chapter 57, Willow wakes up early before anyone else is awake. She takes her pillow and blanket and sits in the bathroom. Cheddar joins her. She watches the sun rise through the bathroom window. When the sun is fully up Willow showers but doesn't do anything with her hair. She puts on her gardening outfit and puts the acorn Mai gave her in her pocket. She carries her red hat.

During breakfast, Dell and Pattie go outside to talk under the cover of getting something out of the car. Willow asks Pattie what will happen at the hearing. Pattie tells her not to worry. When Lenore arrives, Pattie tells her it isn't goodbye, only see you later. Mai is upset enough for all of them. She looks at Cheddar but can't bring herself to say goodbye to him. She asks them to water the garden and looks back before she leaves the apartment to see Cheddar sitting under the speckles from the broken glass on the skylight.

In Lenore's car, Willow looks up to see Cheddar in the window. She finally whispers "goodbye." She remembers that she did not say goodbye to her parents the day they died. That's why she doesn't want to go back to school, because it reminds her she didn't even hug them before she went to school that day. She worries about what will happen to Pattie, Dell, Mai and Quang-ha now that she is gone.

In Chapter 58, Willow gets the Internet password for Jamison and hacks into Lenore's email. She sees how overworked Lenore is and that she deals with children who are victims of criminal behavior and physical abuse. She next gets on Dell's system of categorization. Willow is at first appalled by the system but realizes it is Dell's attempt to make sense of the world and the people in it. As she finishes on the computer a lady comes to tell them lunch is ready. A girl sitting next to her cries when dessert is served. She has a burn on her arm and Willow wonders if that is why she's at Jamison.

Lenore comes for Willow and takes her to a grief counselor. The counselor tries to assure Willow she'll soon be back in the swing of things. Willow doesn't tell her she never was in the swing of things. Back in the car, Lenore tells Willow that the judge will take responsibility for her. Willow reaches over and touches Lenore's arm to let her know that she's sorry. She realizes she doesn't need more theory, just more experience with reality. Willow hopes to convey a positive attitude to the judge, even though she knows the stress she is under can lead to broken heart syndrome.

In Chapter 59, Dell puts on a suit and red tie. Pattie chooses her own clothing very intentionally. The two doves on her shirt symbolize love; the black skirt, respect; and the red slippers are for luck. In her history class, Mai knows the only thing that matters is what's happening with Willow in the courthouse. She tells the secretary there is a family emergency and she has to leave. She also gets Quang-ha out of his biology class. On



her way out of the school, she looks back and sees a decal of a sunflower. She believes it is a good sign.

In Chapter 60, Lenore takes Willow into a waiting area at court. Lenore is called out of the room. Willow realizes she could leave, but she doesn't. Lenore still hasn't returned when its time for Willow to see the judge. Inside the judge's chamber she sees Dell, who is wearing a suit that is too small, Quang-ha, Pattie, Jairo and Mai carries a big bunch of tulips.

The judge tells Willow that Pattie and Jairo have made a formal request to be Willow's guardians. She buries her face in her red hat as Mai tells her everything is going to be okay. It turns out that Pattie and Jairo are in a relationship. Instead of working late, as she's been telling them, Pattie has been spending time with Jairo. Dell wanted to get guardianship but didn't have the money. It turns out that Pattie has been hoarding money.

In Chapter 61, Pattie tells them she plans to buy the Gardens of Glenwood. Later that afternoon, Willow runs the loop, then sits down next to the bamboo. She knows she will remember this day many times. She suddenly also realizes it is the 7th of the month but she is not surprised. Seven is a natural number. It is the number of catastrophes, the number of the days of the week, the number of the colors of the rainbow, and Dell had seven categories in his classification system. She has decided that for every stage of living there are 7 people who matter. These are her mother, her dad, Mai, Dell, Quang-ho, Pattie and Jario. She decides from now on, instead of counting by 7s, she will count to seven. Willow shifts position where she is sitting and feels the acorn. She finds a good spot and puts the acorn in the ground. Two birds speak to her in their actions, telling her that life goes on.

Analysis

In this section of the novel, the reader finally learns why Willow was so adamant in not wanting to go back to school. The reason comes out as she is saying goodbye to Pattie and the others before she is taken to Jamison on the day of her court hearing. Her goodbyes are hard with the people who have taken care of her the past three months but she finds herself unable to say goodbye to Cheddar. It is only from the car as she glimpses him sitting in the window that she finally whispers her goodbye. She admits she'd planned to say goodbye and wonders if the act of saying goodbye really matters. She recounts how she'd left for school the day of her parents' wreck and had not said goodbye to them or even given them a hug. She's been carrying this guilt and lack of closure for months as she's refused to go to school. The idea of going to school makes her remember that she never got a chance to say goodbye to the people who meant the most to her. She had thought that if she could avoid going to school, she could avoid the pain of her guilt.

Notice the symbolism used in this section of the novel. Willow, once again, decides she will be herself as she goes to the court hearing. Just as she'd done on her first day at



the new school, she wears her gardening outfit. She does nothing to try to style or control her hair. She wants the people who deal with her on that day to see her as she really is. As always, Pattie lets the high priority she gives to symbolism drive even the outfit she picks. The doves represent love, while the red slippers are lucky because, of course, red is a lucky color. The black skirt indicates her respect for the judge. Even Dell wears a red tie. Notice that as Mai leaves school with Quang-ha, as she has just lied to get the two of them out of class, she looks back at the school and sees a sunflower decal. She believes this is a sign of good luck. After all, the sunflower has become an important symbol to the family as it was through these flowers that Willow began to heal and the family bonded with her through the gardening project.

There is symbolism also in the idea that Willow again begins to believe the number 7 is a lucky one for her. She hadn't ever really lost her affection for the number, but now it seems to have a new significance for her as it is the day of the month on which Pattie and Jairo were granted legal guardianship of her. In the past, Willow had counted by 7s as a way to comfort herself or distract herself. Now she realizes it might be more comforting to count to 7 be remembering all seven of the people who have been significant in her life.

Discussion Question 1

What is significant in Willow's act of planting the lucky acorn that Mai gave her?

Discussion Question 2

How did Willow's memory of not having said goodbye to her parents affect her grief process? Why did she connect it with going back to school?

Discussion Question 3

Choose a significant symbol or symbols included in this section of the novel and trace its significant through the course of the story.

Vocabulary

insurmountable, random, caution, futile, convey, cardiomyopathy, indicator



Characters

Willow Chance

Willow Chance is the main character of this novel. She is a 12-year-old who has been categorized as highly-gifted by educational counselors in her grade school. Dell Duke, her counselor at Sequoia, believes she is a genius. Willow realizes she is strange and accepts herself as she is. She searches for people who will accept her as she is. Willow loves the number 7. She studies medical conditions and likes to diagnose problems and suggest treatments. Willow draws comfort both from her garden and from books.

Willow's parents are killed in a car wreck early in the novel. Willow's problem lies in the fact that her family had no close relatives and few friends. There is no one to take guardianship of Willow and this exceptional girl is in danger of being put into foster care. Because Willow has taken enough interest in Mai to learn Vietnamese so they can talk in Mai's native language Mai becomes Willow's champion, convincing her mother to take charge of the girl.

Willow feels she as if she in the way and causing inconveniences for others while she's staying with Pattie and her family. In reality, Willow has been enriching the lives of those who are taking care of her just as much as they are helping her. Pattie and her children move out of the garage they'd been living in to an apartment because they need a real home for visits by the social worker. Although Dell is ousted from his apartment by Pattie, Pattie does get him organized. Her family becomes a surrogate family for Dell. For Jairo, Willow is his guardian angel. She encourages him to go back to school, tells him about a dangerous mole on his neck and leads him to win \$20,000 at the college bookstore when he becomes the one millionth customer.

Through the course of the novel, Willow struggles with her grief over the death of her parents. She worries about what life will be like after she is taken from Pattie and her new friends. She compares herself to a sunflower that is temporary but is putting down roots with Pattie. Willow is surprised when Pattie and Jairo step forward to take custody of her. She realizes that life will go on.

Dung "Pattie" Nguyen

Dung "Pattie" Nguyen is the mother of Mai and Quang-ha. She agrees to take charge of Willow after she sees her own grief as a child, outcast by her family, reflected in Willow's face. Pattie is half Vietnamese and half black. She had her children with a Mexican who left the family when Mai was a baby. Although Dung was her given name, she gives herself the name "Pattie" when she moves to America.

When Dell meets Pattie, he has to add yet another category to his system of classification. He labels Pattie as a dictator. Pattie is small, standing only five feet tall, but powerful. In truth, Pattie does boss Dell around quite a bit but Dell seems to need



someone to boss him around in order to get him motivated. Pattie is very organized and pays close attention to detail. In just a few hours she is able to use her organizational and dictator skills to transform Dell's trashy apartment into a place that looks like a family might live there.

Surprisingly, it is also learned near the end of the novel that Pattie is quite wealthy. While she worked in the nail salon and she and her family lived in the garage, she has amassed a significant nest egg. She decides to use this money not only to secure guardianship of Willow, along with the help of Jairo, but also to buy the Gardens of Glenwood.

Jairo Hernandez

Jairo Hernandez is the taxi driver who Willow encourages to follow through with his goal of going back to school. When Willow first calls Jairo to pick her up from Pattie's salon, Pattie seems suspicious of him. The two talk in Spanish, naively believing Willow can't understand that language. She hears Jairo tell Pattie that Willow had saved his life. Earlier, Willow had not only told Jairo not to let anyone tell him he couldn't do as he wished, but had also warned him about a dangerous looking mole on the back of his neck. After Willow runs away from the hospital, Jairo is angry when he sees how terrible she looks. He is afraid someone has done something to hurt her and thinks to himself if that is the case, they would have to answer to him. With Willow's prodding, Jairo decides to go back to school. While buying his college textbooks, he turns out to be the store's one-millionth customer, a coincidence that nets him \$20,000. Jairo knows the money will pay for all of the classes he ever wants to take. He credits Willow for his good fortune. Jairo, along with Pattie, apply for guardianship of Willow.

Mai Nguyen

Mai Nguyen becomes Willow's champion after she realizes the girl has put so much effort into learning Vietnamese. Even though their families never knew each other, Mai lies to the police and tells them the two families were close. She manipulates her mother and convinces her to keep Willow for the night. Mai is self confident and not afraid to stand up for what she believes is right.

Although Quang-ha is Mai's older brother, Mai has been in charge of keeping Quang-ha out of trouble for years. She is the opposite of her angry, deviant brother. Mai is intelligent and keeps out of trouble. Mai's life is enriched by Willow because her family is finally able to move out of the garage in which they'd lived for so many years. She has her own bed and a room she shares only with Willow.

Quang-ha Nguyen

Quang-ha Nguyen is Mai's older brother. He is the reason why Willow and Mai meet. He is a deviant who Dell at first classifies as a lone wolf but later goes back and reclassifies



him as an oddball when he realizes the teen has artistic talent. Quang-ha is angry when Willow first comes to live with them. He has lost what little privacy he once had. Quang-ha has an artistic ability that intrigues Willow. She also helps him with his homework and his grades begin to improve though he seems to be irritated by his new status as a smart student. He also shows an interest in Willow's gardening talent. Later, after the garden at the apartment complex is complete, Quang-ha tells Willow he doesn't want to know how Willow did it, he wants to believe that she is magic.

Dell Duke

Willow describes Dell Duke as not being a bad person, but being bad at being a person. Her description seems adequate for this overweight, underachieving school counselor. Before he meets Willow, Dell seems to avoid really getting involved in any other person's life at all costs. With Willow, Dell gets dragged into the situation before he can really do anything to get away. Once he gets involved in Willow's situation, Dell finds that he is capable of making changes, a metamorphosis that seems to surprise him. He begins losing weight and taking responsibility for his actions. He helps Willow with her projects and even briefly considers trying to get guardianship of her by himself.

Roberta and James "Jimmy" Chance

Roberta and James Chance were Willow's adoptive parents. Although her parents were white, Willow describes herself as dark-skinned. Even with their differences, she says the three of them seemed to fit together. The Chances adopted Willow when she was just an infant and have cared for her her entire life. Although they've encouraged Willow's highly intelligent mind, they've also seemed to drop hints that she should do more to fit in with other people. Roberta and James are killed in a car wreck when the truck in which they are driving is t-boned by a medical van. When the wreck happened, the couple had been driving to a doctor across town to have a tumor in Roberta's breast removed.

Cheddar

Cheddar is the cat that Dell sees in a found cat ad and claims as his own. He brings the cat to a counseling session with Willow but the cat runs away and cannot be caught. Believing that Cheddar was Dell's pet, Willow, Mai and Quang-ho make posters, hoping to find the cat. Dell sees the cat later, but leaves him to defend for himself. Later, on the same day the Dell tears down a fence and hit a school van, he encounters Cheddar in the parking lot. The cat is hungry and scared. Dell decides to start taking responsibility for his life and the choices he's made, beginning with Cheddar. At the apartment complex, Sadhu is allergic to cats so Cheddar goes to live with Willow. The two become fast friends.



Henry E. Pollack

Henry E. Pollack is the man who runs the Southside plant nursery. When Willow started her garden with her parents, it was from him they would buy their plants. Willow had even looked at and identified fungus and insect infestation for him in the past. Later when Willow goes to Henry explaining the project she's undertaken at the Gardens of Glenwood, he agrees to help. She does not expect a large truck full of plants and four volunteer workers. The plants include a box of timber bamboo, a three-year-old cherry tree and a variety of flowering vines and ground cover.

Miss Judi

Miss Judi, the school nurse, is the one person at Sequoia Middle School who Willow says she will miss. Willow would fake headaches to get out of going to P.E. and would instead be sent to the nurse's office. During her time there, she and Miss Judi would talk about diseases. She said they shared a love of germ eradication.

Sadhu Kumar

Sadhu Kumar is the man with whom Dell shares an apartment after Pattie and the children take over his. Willow describes Sadhu as an angry adult and suspects he must have had a lot of disappointment in his life. It is from him that she gets the three old computers that she combines into one working computer as a gift for Dell.

Judge Biederman

Judge Biederman is the judge who presides over the request made by Pattie and Jairo to take custody of Willow. Although Pattie and Jairo haven't followed any of the proper procedures to get custody of her, the judge agrees to overlook all of the red tape and grants them custody.

Lenore Cole

Lenore Cole is the counselor assigned to Willow's case. Willow first does not like Lenore but later realizes what a hard job the lady has.



Symbols and Symbolism

Willow's Garden

Willow's parents got her involved in this garden because an educational counselor told them that Willow needed something to keep her engaged. This garden became Willow's passion. She spent her spare time working in the garden. It was her companion, as not many kids her age wanted to hang around with her.

Red

Red is the color of Willow's gardening hat. She says it is a very important color in nature. Red is also a favorite color of Pattie's. She believes the color is lucky.

The Number 7

The number 7 is Willow's favorite number. Her parents adopted her on the 7th day of the 7th month. She entertains herself by counting by 7's. At the end of the novel, however, Willow realizes it is not as important to count by 7's as it is to count to 7, especially when counting her blessings.

A Copy of Teen Vogue

After Willow told her parents she planned on wearing her gardening outfit her first day of school, a copy of a Teen Vogue magazine with an article about what your clothing says about you appeared on her bed. Willow suspected one of her parents put it there but neither would admit it.

A Standardized Test

Willow's teacher in her English class gave the students this standardized test. Willow completed the test in 17 minutes and 47 seconds. She made a perfect score. Her teacher and principal assumed that she had cheated.

Dell Duke Counseling System

The Dell Duke Counseling System was the system by which Dell categorized the students that were sent to him for counseling. His original system included the categories of misfits, oddballs, lone wolves, and weirdoes. After he met Willow he added a category for genius. After he met Pattie, he added the category of dictator. For



himself, as he began to notice he was changing for the better, he added the classification of mutant.

Word Association

Dell played a word association game with Willow during his first visit with her when nothing else worked to give him a clue as to how to categorize her.

The Book Understanding Vietnamese Customs and Traditions

It is when Mai sees this book on Willow's desk and realizes the girl has been actively studying about Mai's own culture that she realizes she wants Willow to come home with her.

Peacock-blue Nail Polish

Pattie holds this bottle of nail polish in her hand when Dell's car, followed by a police car, first pulls into the parking lot of her salon. Before she even knows what is happening, she decides the color is bad luck and that she will no longer keep it in stock.

Bakersfield News Gazette

A copy of this newspaper, carrying coverage of her parents' wreck, is on a coffee table at Jamison Children's Center when Willow goes there for paperwork. She passes out when she sees a picture of the crash.

Elephant-Shaped Metal Coffee Table

When Willow passes out after she sees the picture of her parents' wreck on the front page of the paper, she hits her head on this table. The cut requires stitches.

An Acorn

Mai steps on this acorn that she throws into the street as she walks home one day. She notices the acorn isn't flattened, even when it is struck by a car. Mai decides it is lucky and takes it to Willow as a good luck charm. After Willow learns that she will be staying at the Gardens of Glenwood with Pattie and her family, she plants the acorn in the garden area.



Two Dozen Packets of Sunflower Seeds

When Willow asks Dell for a package of sunflower seeds she can plant, he surprises her by bringing back two dozen packets. She realizes at this point that despite his blundering nature, Dell is a really caring person.



Settings

Fosters Freeze

Fosters Freeze is the restaurant to which Dell is persuaded to take Willow, Mai and Quang ha for ice cream. This is the setting for the opening of the novel.

Rose Elementary

Rose Elementary is the school that Willow first attends. It is at this school that the kids label her as a weirdo after she comments that the book the teacher read them made her feel bad.

Sequoia Middle School

Sequoia Middle School is the school that Willow had just begun attending when her parents were killed in a car crash. Both Willow and her parents had hoped this new school would be a chance for Willow to make a new start. Instead, she was sent to an educational counselor because the teacher believed she cheated in order to made a perfect score on a standardized test.

Dell Duke's Office

Dell Duke's office is the place where Willow meets Mai for the first time.

Intersection at Eye Street

The intersection at Eye Street is the place where Willow's parents are killed in a car crash. Late the day of the wreck, Dell drives Willow through this intersection without realizing it was where her parents were killed.

Happy Polish Nails

Happy Polish Nails is the salon that Mai's mother owns. Willow spends a good deal of her time her after her parents are killed here because she refuses to go to school.

The Garage

Pattie and her two children live in this garage behind her nail salon. Willow spends about a month with them there before Pattie moves them into Dell's apartment.



House on Citrus Road

The house on Citrus Road is where Willow lived with her parents until their car crash. It was in the driveway of this house that Willow learned her parents were dead.

Beale Memorial Library

Several times during the course of the book, Willow goes to this library for comfort. The first time she goes there is after she's run away from the hospital where she was taken to have the gash on her head stitched up.

Gardens of Glenwood

The Gardens of Glenwood is the apartment building where Dell lives. When Pattie and the children need a place for a social worker to come for home visits, she moves her family into his apartment and has him share an apartment with a neighbor down the hall.



Themes and Motifs

Labels, Categories

The difficulty with making people fit a category or label is a major theme in this novel. Willow struggles with the pressure put on her when she is labeled. Similarly, Dell Duke tries to make sense of his world by putting the students he counsels into categories. He quickly learns that people often don't meld completely into any one grouping.

Early in her life, Willow is saddled with labels. The kids in her class refer to her as a weirdo. When she's evaluated by an educational consultant, she is labeled as highly gifted, a description that Willow doesn't even completely understand. Dell Duke later struggles to create a category in which to place the exceptional child. He eventually comes up with the label of genius. Later, when Willow sees his categorization system, she does not agree with his act of classifying her as a genius. She believes each person is a mix of genetic material that can't be simplified into large categories.

Dell first realizes there is a problem with his system of classification, in which he has included four major categories, when he meets Willow. He adds a new category for her. Then he meets Pattie and has to add the category of dictator for her. After he becomes more acquainted with Quang-ha, Dell realizes he's actually placed the boy in the wrong category. Dell later adds the "mutant" category for himself. Instead of seeing the folly in trying to force people into categories, as Willow understands quickly, Dell continues to try to force the people he meets into overly simplified categories.

Signs, Symbols

Signs, whether they indicate good luck, bad luck or foreshadow things to come are very important to the characters in this novel. Jairo and Pattie are the ones who are probably the most affected by signs. Willow, however, also interprets the way her life might go based on what she believes are signs.

The number 7 and the color red are two signs or symbols that are important to Willow. She says that it was the seventh day of the seventh month that her parents adopted her. She takes comfort in counting by 7s. Being a garden enthusiast, Willow also recognizes the importance of the color red. It is an important color in nature. She has a gardening hat that she wears when in the garden or when she wants to attract hummingbirds.

Later, when Willow is living with Pattie, she begins trying to determine how her life might go based on what she sees as signs. Perhaps the most important sign to Willow is the destruction of the plants that she had been rooting for her garden. She and Dell had been sifting through residents' yard trash for clippings that Willow could use to start a garden in their apartment courtyard once the sunflowers they'd planted there were gone. Willow locates her rooting operation on the roof of the apartment complex, believing no one will bother it. Unfortunately, a maintenance man is called to repair part



of the roof and he throws away all of the rooting plants. They have been taken out with the garbage by the time Willow gets home and realizes what has happened. She believes the loss of these plants is a sign that she will not live in the Gardens of Glenwood much longer.

One of the more superstitious of the characters in the novel is Jairo. It is said that he is one who watches for signs and believes in them. Beginning with Willow's first ride in his cab, Jairo decides that Willow is a symbol of good luck. Without even realizing what affect her words will have on him, Willow encourages Jairo to go back to school. In their next encounter, she alerts him to a possibly health threatening mole on his neck. At one point in the novel Willow is described as a "blinking red light" for Jairo. He credits her influence when he wins the \$20,000 prize as the one-millionth customer at the college bookstore.

Also highly superstitious is Pattie. Consider the incident with the nail polish on the night that she first meets Willow. Pattie has been taking inventory of her nail polish and is wishing that she could carry just shades of red, a color she believes is lucky. A new favorite, however, is blue. When the police car pulls up into Pattie's parking lot, she quickly decides this color is unlucky and throws it in the trash before she even fully knows what is happening. She thinks perhaps if she'd been holding the red polish, the police car would never have come. Later, when Pattie is to go before the judge for custody of Willow, Pattie dresses in clothes that she believes symbolizes the things she wants the judge to understand. The doves on her blouse are symbols of love while the black skirt is a symbol of respect. Her shoes are red, which has already been noted is believed by Pattie to be a lucky color.

After she gets to know Willow better, Pattie lets Willow talk to her about hygiene problems in her nail salon. What Willow has to say makes Pattie angry. That night, however, Pattie has a dream where all of her clients fall over dead in her manicure chairs. Pattie believes this dream is a sign that she needs to pay attention to Willow's suggestions.

Finally, the sunflower becomes a symbol for Willow. Willow not only uses the idea that these flowers won't last as a comparison point for her own temporary life with Pattie and the other but Mai also compares the sunflowers to Willow when she begins to realize that the young girl needs a permanent place to put down roots. When Mai and Quang-ha run from school on the day that their mother is to be granted custody of Willow, Mai looks back to see a decal of a sunflower bathed in sunlight on the school window. She believes it is a sign of good luck.

Favor Bank

The idea that one sets up a favor bank in which they do kind things for others and the others return these favors is a major theme in this novel. The beauty of Willow's "favor bank" is that she doesn't help people with the idea that she will get anything in return. She does what she feels needs to be done. These things help others, but Willow



doesn't take the credit. For instance, Jairo calls Willow his angel but Willow says she's nobody's angel.

Willow first hears the term "favor bank" from the lighting engineer who comes to install the lights in her new garden. She takes a liking to the term and soon decides that when the man asks her to look at some design sketches for a project on which he's working that she can consider this as part of her favor bank. In reality, Willow has been helping people out all along without even realizing the effect she's been having on them.

Jairo is perhaps the first person whom Willow helped in the course of the novel. He is also the character who most pointedly credits his good fortune to Willow. After her first taxi ride with him, Willow makes a comment to Jairo that he shouldn't let anyone say you can't do it. While Willow was talking about herself, the comment kickstarts Jairo's memory that he had once intended to go back to school and be something other than a taxi driver. Later, when he's buying books for the classes he believes Willow has challenged him to take, Jairo happens to be the bookstore's one-millionth customer, a circumstance that nets him \$20,000. He credits this windfall to Willow.

After she opens up to Willow's ideas, Pattie and her business are also helped by Willow. Because Willow has taken the habit of sitting so still when she spends the days in Pattie's salon, Pattie is afraid the girl will scare the customers. For this reason, she gives Willow the project of looking over her lease agreement. She's surprised when Willow actually reads it and finds inconsistencies. Next, Pattie challenges Willow by asking her to rearrange the salon so another manicure chair can be added. Willow does as Pattie asked and the salon actually seems less crowded after she finishes. Willow approaches Pattie with a third project involving better disinfection that Pattie opens up to only after she has a nightmare. After the ladies working in the salon incorporate Willow's ideas for better disinfection, the store actually begins to have more business.

Dell also is helped by Willow. Even though he's ousted from his apartment and sent to live with a roommate, he also gains a family. He'd lived as a lonely bachelor with no friends in a messy apartment and no desire to take responsibility for anything he did. Pattie actually helps to get him organized and cleans his apartment. Willow reprograms his television so the colors are the right hue and the picture fits the screen. When Dell comes to watch television with Quang-ha, he praises Willow for making the television look better. More important than televisions or cleanliness, Willow helps Dell recognize that he needs to be responsible for himself and his life.

Other people who profit from Willow are Mai and Quang-ha. Probably the most significant benefit to them is their new home. While they had been crammed into a garage, they get to live in an apartment with real beds and a bathroom when they take charge of Willow. Mai likes Willow from the beginning by Quang-ha is slower in accepting the girl. Willow spends many hours doing homework for the boy and helping him with his assignments before he begins to realize that she isn't all bad.



Grief

As Willow works through her grief following her parents' deaths, she goes through a variety of stages of grief. These stages range from her desire to go back in time to a slow decision to begin living in the present again. At the end of the novel, Willow realizes that despite her loss, her life will go on.

When Willow first learns that her parents are dead, she denies the news. She is numb and wants to go back to a time before her parents' accident. As she looks around the garage in which the Nguyens live, she sees the unsafe electrical outlets and wishes that the garage would catch fire with her inside so that she could die and be released from the pain she feels. She additionally complains of having trouble breathing and a high heart rate which come with panic and loss.

In the month that Willow spends with the Nguyens in the garage, she is depressed and shows a lack of the desire to live. She is tired and sleeps a good deal of the time. She is unmotivated. She goes through the motions and does things only when she's told to. As is common in a person suffering with grief, Willow has little interest in the things that had fascinated her at one time, like gardening. During this time, Willow also shows signs of selective memory as well as intentionally blocking out some memories that she believes may cause her pain. For instance, she makes up her mind to purposefully forget the first night after her parents' deaths, the night during which Pattie lit incense and cried with her. Later, although Willow attends her parents' memorial service, she can remember little of what was said about them, a sign of selective memory.

It is not until she and the Nguyens are living in Dell's apartment that Willow begins to find her way out of her grief. Her first step seems to be her decision to start pulling her own weight and help out as much as she can. Next, she starts missing her garden. This desire for a garden prompts her to try to live in and make the best of her present circumstances. She decides to start a garden project in the apartment courtyard. This project brings together the members of her hodgepodge "family." One day when they are working on the garden, Willow realizes she is laughing again. Later, after she learns that Pattie and Jairo will be given permanent custody of her, she sits in her new garden and knows that her life will go on, a sure sign that she has made it through the toughest part of her grief.

Plants

When Willow was first classified as being highly-gifted, her parents helped her start a garden. The garden had a two-fold purpose. It was to both give Willow something to occupy her mind and give her experiences into different forms of communication. Willow takes her gardening experience and uses it to understand and interpret the things she sees in everyday life.

One of the main things that Willow tells Mai that lets the reader know how closely she parallels life with her garden is the idea that the lifecycle of a rose is the same of that of



a human. Mai remembers this as she looks at a rose bush while she waits for the bus one day. Willow had said that understanding the lifecycle of these flowers had helped her to understand better life and death than any other explanation anyone had given her.

When Willow struggles with her grief and wonders if she'll ever feel like living again, she remembers trees that have been burnt in fires. These trees appear to be damaged so badly they'll never recover, but despite their injuries, they will begin developing new leaves and branches. Willow hopes that she will be like one of these trees.

Willow also compares her situation and that of Dell's as being part of a flock of birds. She remembers seeing flocks of birds in her garden that seemed to fly as one unity, almost as if they had given up their individuality. She credits this same phenomenon for the reason that Dell gives his apartment up to Pattie so easily. Willow thinks that she and Dell have been taken in as part of Pattie's flock, therefore they now move as part of the group without injecting their own opinions or desires.

Finally, the garden project at the apartment complex begins to symbolize Willow and her situation in several different ways. The sunflowers, like Willow, are temporary. Just as the sunflowers will bloom in the garden space only for about five weeks, Willow will have a court hearing and will most likely be moved on to a permanent home in that same amount of time. Willow compares herself to these flowers as she realizes her life in the apartments is temporary, but realizes that she is putting down roots despite her attempts not to do so. When the garden project begins to run into snags, Willow overhears the adults talking about how difficult the project has become. Willow wonders if she, also, has become a bigger project than anyone imagined.

Like the garden that is planted in the apartment courtyard comes by surprise from the generosity of people whom Willow has helped in the past, Willow's future is secured by people she has helped in the past. A nursery owner who had know Willow and her parents offers to bring some things over to help the garden after all Willow's clippings are lost. He brings all the plants necessary for a full, mature garden. Similarly, Pattie has promised Willow all along that she will not let Willow leave until they find a good place for her. Although it seems to be as big a surprise to Pattie as it is to Willow, it turns out that Pattie decides not to let Willow leave at all. She, with the help of Jairo, decide to apply for permanent guardianship of the girl.

Styles

Point of View

This novel is told from a variety of points of view. The main point of view is that of Willow, the main character of the story. Other chapters are written from the third person point of view from the viewpoint of other significant characters in the novel. Of the book's 61 chapters, 37 are told from the first person point of view of Willow. The remainder of the book's 24 chapters are written in the voice of a third person narrator from the view point of Dell, Mai or Pattie. One chapter is told from the viewpoint of Jimmy and Roberta Chance, Willow's adoptive parents.

The varying points of view in this story are important because they fill out the holes in information that Willow can not provide. While the intent of the story is to follow Willow as she deals with the grief from her parents' death, it also follows the lives and the changes in the lives of those with whom she interacts. If the story were told from a third person point of view in its entirety, the reader would not feel the personal connection to Willow. However, if the story were told in a first person point of view in its entirety, the thoughts, feelings, emotions and intentions of those who come to know Willow would not be known by the reader, and the metamorphosis that takes place in their lives would not be as significant. In order for the author to tell the story of Willow and how her story affects those around her fully, the varying points of view work well.

Language and Meaning

From Willow's high intelligence to Dell's bumbling, the personalities of the individual characters are captured in their speech by the author of "Counting by 7s." Dell's personality is characterized by his fear that he might be called upon to take responsibility for something. This fear is captured in the first quote from his mouth when he tries to talk to the police who have come to tell Willow her parents are dead. He stutters and stammers through his explanation in Chapter One that, "I see two of these k-k-kids for counseling. I'm just d-d-driving them home."

Notice there are several times in the novel where the author uses different type to emphasize her points. For instance, in Chapter One, when Willow first overhears that her parents are dead, the word "no" is repeated each time. Each word is its own sentence on its own line. The type gets larger and bolder with each "no" as if a person, in this case Willow, were actually saying it a little louder and a little stronger each time.

Later in the novel, in Chapter 57, the author plays with the letters of the word "anymore" spelling them out so the word runs diagonally, horizontally and vertically from a common beginning letter "a." This word play takes place at a point in the novel where Willow has just realized she is no longer afraid of what the future might hold for her. The author's



act of playing with the letters of the word “anymore” seem to highlight the idea that Willow is so relaxed that she’s allowing her mind to play with words again.

Willow’s speech is characterized by her high level of intelligence. She calls plants by their scientific names, knows the proper medical terms for diseases and part of the body and even throws in an example of a literary technique every here and there. For instance, she comments on her belief that the word “fetus” is onomatopoeic. Onomatopoeia is a word that sounds like the thing that it describes. In introducing the neighbor who tells Dell and Willow nothing will grow in the courtyard, Willow notes that his name, Otto Sayas, is a palindrome. A palindrome is a word that is spelled the same forward and backward.

Structure

This book is divided into 61 chapters. Some chapters are as short as three pages while the longest are 12 pages. Each chapter is titled with its corresponding numeral but some get extra attention. In those in which major characters are introduced, such as in Chapter 1, their name is printed below the chapter number. Interestingly, even though these are titles and often people’s names, the author chooses to present the names in lowercase letters instead of capitalizing the first letters of each word which generally expected not only in a person’s name but also in a title. These name titles are followed by a short sentence that sums up the personality of the person being introduced or describes his role in the novel. Chapters 1, 5, 9, 13, 15 and 19 are the only chapters that have these special titles.

While the majority of the book is linear, there is one brief section in which the author goes back in time. It is in Chapter 2, which has a label title indicating that the action of the novel is going back two months in time prior to the first chapter, that the flashback begins. While Chapter 1 was written in the present tense, the author switches to the past tense in Chapter 2. This past tense continues until Chapter 17 where Willow’s story catches up to present time. Chapter 17 had a label title of “back in the now.” It is with Chapter 17 that the tense switches back to present tense.

This book is written for children and helps give insight into the grieving process as well as the process of returning to life after a great loss. The major plot of the novel follows Willow and her grieving process as well as the development of this band of misfits that gathers around her to provide her with a new family. Subplots include the changes that take place in each character’s life as they interact with Willow and try to help her.



Quotes

Mai does the lion's share of the speaking and eating (I give her my cone once I've had enough), and all I know for certain, with the sun on our faces and the sweet ice cream holding our attention, is that this is a day that I will never forget.

-- Willow (Chapter 1 paragraph 23)

Importance: Ironically, Willow did not know that her parents had just been killed in a traffic accident when she said it was a day she would never forget. Though she thought at the time it was a great day because she had finally found a friend, she would later try to block the memory of the day from her mind.

On the 7th day of the 7th month (is it any wonder I love the number?) my new parents drove north to a hospital 257 miles from their home, where they named me after a cold-climate tree and changed the world.

-- Willow (Chapter 2 paragraph 21)

Importance: In this quote, Willow describes the day her parents adopted her as well as the basis for her love of the number 7.

Besides the number 7, I have two other major obsessions. Medical conditions. And plants.

-- Willow (Chapter 2 paragraph 41)

Importance: It is Willow's obsession with plants that helps her to understand the world around her. Much of her coming to grips with her new life after her parents are killed is done through her connection with her plants.

It's possible that all labels are curses. Unless they are on cleaning products.

-- Willow (Chapter 2 paragraph 72)

Importance: It is after Willow is first labeled as being extremely gifted that she first decides that labeling a person is synonymous with cursing them. She believes no one label can adequately describe a person, as each person is made of such a mix of emotions, talents, abilities and failings.

And then on the afternoon that Willow Chance came to see him, all of his categorization ground to a halt, like a fork thrown into the gears of outdated machinery.

-- Narrator (Chapter 5 paragraph 93)

Importance: Even though Dell's categorization had worked for him in the past, he is unable to quickly file Willow into a slot as he was able to do with most other students. It is at this point that he begins to realize that his system has shortfalls.

He needed to put her in a category of Strange as soon as possible so that he could disconnect from whatever was happening in the room.



-- Narrator (Chapter 7 paragraph 12)

Importance: Dell feels motivated by Willow but at the same time, he fears developing a bond or connection with her. He feels that he must put her into a category so that he can avoid becoming too involved in her case.

It was there, in the small, stuffy trailer on the edge of the baking-hot blacktop of the Bakersfield school district parking lot, that I found an older girl who was disappointing only in her failure to speak the language of the mostly obliterated Cahuilla people. / I found Mai Nguyen.

-- Willow (Chapter 10 paragraph 5)

Importance: Willow is fascinated by Mai Nguyen like she is fascinated by few other people. This initial fascination turns into a friendship between the two girls.

This was Dell's attempt to please me. To bond. He brought in his cat. It was strange, but right then in that room, what wasn't?

-- Willow (Chapter 10 paragraph 13)

Importance: Willow believes Dell has brought his cat to her therapy session in an attempt to bond with her. She sees the act both as strange and kind.

I was not pretending to be anyone but myself, and they still accepted me into their troop. / I felt human. / That was the only way I could describe it.

-- Willow (Chapter 10 paragraph 37)

Importance: When she helps Mai and Quang-ha make fliers to help find what they believe is Dell's cat, she feels as if she is part of a group for the first time. Before this time other children had treated her as a weirdo so she had retreated into her mind and her garden.

She moved closer and she saw that the book was from the Bakersfield public library and it was called Understanding Vietnamese Customs and Traditions. / And that was when Mai knew that Willow was coming with her.

-- Narrator (Chapter 18 paragraph 10)

Importance: When Mai sees the effort that Willow has made in trying to learn about Mai's culture, shown by checking out and reading the library book about the Vietnamese culture, Mai decides that she needs to take Willow under her wing.

Her eyes focused on a version of her own young self, and so many other children in Vietnam who grew up without parents, some abandoned because of their ethnicity, others because of tragedy.

-- Narrator (Chapter 19 paragraph 32)

Importance: When Pattie first sees Willow sitting in the back seat of Dell's car, she



sees herself, as she had been a child without parents. For this reason, Pattie is able to empathize with Willow's grief.

If you analyze the odds of being given away at birth and then losing another full set of legal guardians 147 months and 7 days later, I'm right on the edge of the graph.

-- Willow (Chapter 22 paragraph 10)

Importance: In her introspective mind, Willow calculates the odds of being orphaned twice before even becoming a teenager. She realizes that her situation is quite out of the ordinary.

I admire that in a person. The ability to keep your mouth shut is usually a sign of intelligence. Introspection requires you to think and analyze. It's hard to do that when you are blabbing away.

-- Willow (Chapter 22 paragraph 55)

Importance: One of the first things that Willow notices about Pattie is her ability to be quiet, even when it seems it might be more appropriate for her to say something. Willow admires this quality in her new mother-figure, as she believes it is a sign of intelligence.

He felt a wave of anger roll over him. If someone did this girl wrong, they would have him to deal with.

-- Narrator (Chapter 24 paragraph 13)

Importance: When Willow calls for Jairo to come pick her up after she runs away from the hospital, he is angry when he sees her because he believes someone might have intentionally physically hurt her. This reaction to the girl indicates that Jairo has already begun to care for this odd child whom he later refers to as his angel.

I will help find a good place for you. I will not let them take you until we do. You have my word. You will stay here until we have the answer.

-- Pattie (Chapter 28 paragraph 145)

Importance: Just a few days after the death of Willow's parents, Pattie promises Willow that she will stay with them until a good place has been found for her. Although Pattie has told Mai that they cannot afford to take Willow in permanently, it is apparent that Pattie has developed an affection for the child.

Somehow, he'd been caught up in so many layers of deception: Willow Chance wasn't a cheater. Pattie Nguyen wasn't an old family friend. The Nguyens didn't live in the Gardens of Glenwood. (Why couldn't they use their own address?) He didn't homeschool her (like he was supposed to do).

-- Narrator (Chapter 30 paragraph 18)

Importance: Dell stresses because he has been caught in the middle of an unusual situation since he's met Willow. He knows she isn't a cheater, as her teacher thought, but hasn't told anyone what he knows. He also knows that Pattie is lying about being an



old family friend of Willow and her parents. He's also been pushed by Pattie into putting his address on the children's services paperwork and lying about homeschooling Willow. Although he doesn't like the lies he's telling, he doesn't come clean because he knows the truth would be bad for Willow.

I know that I've been nothing but a problem. I've tried to be invisible, but just my presence here has changed the dynamic of the situation.

-- Willow (Chapter 31 paragraph 43)

Importance: Willow seems to believe that she has made things worse for Dell, Mai, Pattie and Quang-ha just by being part of their lives. Although she tries to lie low and not cause problems, she feels she is in the way and interrupting their way of life.

There was as much of a lesson in that, Willow had explained, as in anything she had been told by anyone about life or death or the stages in between.

-- Willow (Chapter 33 paragraph 21)

Importance: As Mai sits at the bus stop and looks at a rose bush, she remembers Willow teaching her about the life cycle of these flowers. The plants came from the soil and eventually returned to the soil, like everything else that exists.

And I'm forced to admit that being in a room with a teenage boy who appreciates the effect of shattered glass slices of color makes me feel better about the world.

-- Willow (Chapter 34 paragraph 93)

Importance: Putting together the glass collage on Dell's skylight is one of the first activities that seem to bond Quang-ha and Willow.

But until this moment I hadn't realized that he's a really caring person.

-- Willow (Chapter 40 paragraph 51)

Importance: After Dell gets Willow not only the one packet of sunflower seeds for which she asked, but 24 packs of seeds because he didn't know what kind she'd like best, Willow realizes that despite Dell's physical and emotional clumsiness, he really cared for her.

I'm not sure it will function properly, but if it does, the computer will be a gift to Dell from me.

-- Willow (Chapter 42 paragraph 39)

Importance: To thank Dell for the things he's done for her, Willow uses her computer knowledge to piece together three non-working computers into a working machine as a gift.

He was changing. He was capable of that.

-- Narrator (Chapter 44 paragraph 54)



Importance: In his own system of classification Dell creates a category for himself. He refers to himself as a mutant because he is learning that he is capable of positive change.

Right now I'm the sunflower. Temporary, but attaching myself to the ground underneath me.

-- Willow (Chapter 50 paragraph 75)

Importance: Even before her parents died, Willow learned to interpret life through her backyard garden. Here she compares herself to one of the sunflowers she and the others have grown in the apartment courtyard. Even though she knows it won't last forever, Willow is thriving and growing in the atmosphere provided by the strange family that has stepped up to take care of her.

I have to piece together the sequence of events, and when I get to the bottom of it, I believe that the plant loss is not just a defeat; it's a sign. I'm not really going to live at the Gardens of Glenwood for much longer.

-- Willow (Chapter 53 paragraph 23)

Importance: Signs are important to many of the characters in the novel. Willow is one who seems to interpret things that happen in her life as being signs of what is coming. In this case she believes the loss of the plants she was starting for her garden is a sign that she, also, will be leaving the Gardens of Glenwood soon.

Even if he wanted to (and he didn't really, did he?), he had debt and barely any job security and he'd never even been able to follow through on getting his coffee card stamped correctly at the little place where he sometimes got a morning cup of hot brew.

-- Narrator (Chapter 54 paragraph 23)

Importance: Even though Dell cares deeply about Willow, he tries to talk himself out of his desire to try to serve as her guardian by making excuses for himself.

I did not say good-bye to my mom or my dad. I never got to do that. They were here and then they were gone. Does saying good-bye matter? Does it really end something? I didn't hug them that morning when I left to go to school. That's why I don't want to go back there. I can handle the other kids and the teachers and everything about it but the memory. I can't be in that place, because every time I allow myself to think about my last day there, I fall apart.

-- Willow (Chapter 57 paragraph 80)

Importance: Willow finally tells in this quote why it is she doesn't want to go back to school. It isn't the other kids or even the teachers although they gave her a hard time before because she is strange. Willow doesn't want to go back to school because it reminds her that she never said goodbye to her parents before she went to school on the day of the accident.



If the last few months have proven anything, it's that I don't need more theory, but rather more experience with reality.

-- Willow (Chapter 58 paragraph 124)

Importance: In the courthouse bathroom Willow examines herself in a mirror before she is to see the judge. She thinks about her parents and wonders if they were too busy looking after her to take care of themselves. Even as she theorizes about the reason they died and what they might have been able to do to avoid their death, Willow finally comes to the realization that theory does not take the place of, or change, the reality of things.