

Family Life Study Guide

Family Life by Akhil Sharma

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Plot Summary

"Family Life" begins with the narrator being 40 years old, even though through the rest of the novel he goes from 8 years old to adulthood. Ajay tells the reader of a moment with his parents where they laugh and tease each other, giving the reader insight into how his family evolves over time, since no story stays on 'happiness' for its entirety.

Ajay is 8 years old when his story starts. He describes his parents as hard-working, yet struggles to understand his father's purpose in the family since his mother is the main caretaker and he just doesn't have a strong bond with his father. He has a 10-year-old brother, Birju. The two of them play together regularly with other kids in their Delhi, India, community. The family lives in two cement rooms on top of a house. Their mother's extreme frugality is described in how she has them split matches in half to double the use of the box.

Ajay's father moves to America about one year before Ajay, Birju, and their mother Shuba. He sends plane tickets in August for them to arrive in Queens, New York, in October. When the tickets arrive, opening them is a community event. Emigrating from India to America in the 1970s was considered an event. The family sells off almost everything they own, and keep only what they can carry onto the plane.

Once Ajay, Shuba, and Birju arrive in America, the boys are enthralled with the differences between where they are and where they came from. Hot, running water available at all times and a large, stocked library are two luxuries Ajay appreciates. Cable television, especially "Gilligan's Island" is another treasure for Ajay as he acclimates to life in America. Birju finds it easy to make friends, and even gets a girlfriend. Ajay has the opposite experience: until 10th grade, he doesn't have any friends or girlfriends.

When Ajay is 10 years old and Birju is 12, the summer after Birju is accepted into the Bronx High School of Science, Birju slams his head on the bottom of a pool while visiting his aunt in Arlington, Virginia. He becomes permanently brain damaged and is now in a vegetative state for the rest of his life. From this point on, everything revolves around Birju's accident. The family prays daily, even creating an altar in Birju's hospital room as well as at his aunt's house. Shuba temporarily moves down to Virginia while Rajinder, Ajay's father, stays in New York during the week to work and then comes to visit on the weekends. Shuba and Ajay visit Birju every single day.

Rajinder, Shuba, and Ajay each have their own way of dealing with Birju's accident, and all three of their coping strategies evolve over time. Shuba's main coping strategy is to focus on what she can do in the here-and-now, rather than focus on the accident or on what could have been had Birju never gotten into the accident. Ajay's coping strategies involve blind, obligatory behavior, then escape by way of books, then outbursts of anger toward his mother, escape by way of having a girlfriend, academic discipline, and finally career success. Rajinder's coping strategy is denial, though it takes on more than one



form: talking about what he wishes life could be; drinking alcohol to excess; and ignoring his family all together.

After several months in the hospital, and after Shuba makes sure the insurance company will pay for a nursing home, Birju is moved from the hospital in Arlington to a nursing home in Metuchen, New Jersey, where the Mishra family now lives so they can be close to the nursing home and also close to a temple. Again, Shuba and Ajay visit Birju every single day. Unfortunately, the nursing home doesn't take good care of Birju; they feed him too much at one time, they forget to reposition him, and objects are often found under Birju, even a pair of scissors. Shuba's outrage is apparent and therefore, the family decides to bring Birju home so they can care for him there.

Once Birju is brought home, the Indian community shows their constant support for the Mishra family. Though this seems to only help Shuba and not Ajay or Rajinder, it does show a sense of togetherness and unity that tends to be present among immigrant communities. Neighbors and other members of the Indian community visit to bring food, spiritual encouragement, or just a distraction. Self-proclaimed miracle workers also come to visit, claiming they can heal Birju. None of them do, and Ajay remains skeptical of their presence.

Bringing Birju home proves to put even more of a strain on the family unit. Rajinder becomes an alcoholic and spends most of his time drinking. His help with Birju becomes less and less, and is eventually nothing. Ajay and his mother end up being the main caretakers, as they bathe Birju, feed him, engage him during their card games, tease him, and exercise him. Though they work together to care for Birju, this puts an enormous strain on Ajay and his mom's relationship. Ajay continues to feel isolated from his parents, and his mom continues to bear the burden of being the main emotional caretaker of the family. While Rajinder provides financially, it is Shuba who must bear the emotional weight of the family.

Rajinder's alcoholism gets worse and worse. Once, he quits for several months, but one night of one drink and he starts again. He quits again, but this time it was after being drunk enough that he was missing work, vomiting on the carpet, and had spent an entire winter's night outside in the backyard because of being so cognitively unaware. Eventually he checks himself into Bellevue Hospital in Manhattan where he attends rehab for about a month. Ajay and his mom visit every day. When he is released from the hospital, Rajinder begins attending Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, accompanied by Ajay at his mom's request. This time, Rajinder's sobriety sticks.

Ajay has spent his adolescence working for good grades, all as an attempt to prove to his parents that he is not Birju, but also that he wishes he could be. However, his parents are so lost in their own grief that they tend to not pay Ajay very much attention. Ajay tries several things to get his parents' attention, mostly getting good grades, behaving perfectly, and helping out with Birju, though he seems unaware that his efforts are for this purpose; Ajay sees his efforts as a way to push down his own self-shame that he cannot be like Birju.



Ajay decides to get a girlfriend in 10th grade. He dates Minakshi into their freshman year of college. Being with Minakshi gives Ajay a way to dream of a better future than he's ever before been able to do. Though this hope excites him and gives him some relief from feeling forever stuck in his family's situation with Birju, it also angers him that this hope has to be deferred until he can leave the house.

Ajay gets accepted into Princeton University, a result of his hard work and discipline throughout high school. However, he does not see it as an accomplishment for himself, but rather for his mother since she is the one who raised him and expected perfection out of him, especially given her other son's permanent vegetative state. Once at Princeton, Ajay does very well. He gets a job after graduation as an investment banker, and subsequently makes a lot of money. He saves most of it, and sends a good bit of it to his parents so they can have some financial relief in caring for Birju. Though his mom is wary of spending it at first, she comes to spend it on a nurse that can be with Birju 24 hours a day, seven days a week, so that the family might have some relief.

The novel seems to end within a few years of where the novel began. When the novel began, Ajay was 40 years old. When the novel ends, he is about 10 years removed from college. He is on vacation at a resort in Mexico with his current girlfriend, Hema, a lawyer. He is surrounded by beauty and serenity, feeling happiness for one of the only times in his life. Yet, the happiness weighs heavily on him and he doesn't know what to do with it or where to put it. In that moment, when he is filled with happiness yet cannot enjoy it, Ajay fully realizes the damage done by his tumultuous, grief- and rage-filled family life.



Chapter 1

Summary

The novel starts with Ajay explaining his parents. He explains his father as being more “glum” natured, and his mother as being more cheerful. The positive interaction shown in the very first section of the first chapter is one of the only positive interactions Ajay shares with his parents throughout the entire story. This interaction is when Ajay is a 40-year-old man; the rest of the novel is Ajay from age 8 through his early 30s.

The author spends much time describing Ajay’s father and Ajay’s perspective on his father: the fact that his dad never felt like he really mattered or belonged in India; the fact that he loves science and, therefore, liked to spend time around scientific things, like hospitals and doctors; and the fact that his father was an accountant who wanted to live in America, a place that was booming with new scientific discoveries.

A year after Ajay’s dad moved to America, he sent plane tickets for Ajay, his older brother Birju, and their mom. Ajay was eight years old at the time; Birju was 12. Opening the envelope with the airplane tickets in it was a neighborhood ordeal, and some doubted Shuba (Ajay’s mom) when she said they would be fine in America. In India, the Mishra family’s dwelling place was two cement rooms on the top of a roof. Between the time Ajay, Birju, and Shuba received the plane tickets and the time they left two months later, the three of them sold off almost everything they owned aside from what they could fit on the airplane. They had one last visit with Ajay’s grandparents and said goodbye to their friends.

Some of the relationship between Birju and Ajay is shown in Chapter 1. They have a typical brotherly relationship, the older brother teasing the younger brother and the younger brother trusting what the older brother says.

The chapter ends with Ajay’s uncle arriving at their home to bring them to the airport.

Analysis

The author’s extensive description of Ajay’s father as compared to minimal descriptions about Ajay’s mother is one of the most important things to note for Chapter 1. It foreshadows the fact that Ajay’s identity evolution depends greatly on his father and their lack of a relationship. The author is working to set up the rest of the novel. It is important to understand how the Mishra family lived in India so the reader knows to what they are comparing their lives in America.

The overall sense of the Mishra family’s life in India is that of close community, and also poverty. For example, they live in two cement rooms on the top of a roof, they sat on the floor to eat lunch, and they were extremely frugal, cutting matches in half. Knowing this



helps the reader understand the seeming abundance they experienced once they arrive in America.

The first chapter is also important because it sets up Ajay's voice for the novel. He is the narrator; everything told to the reader is from his perspective only. Therefore, perspectives on his parents, their lives in India as well as in the states, other family members and friends, would all be from Ajay's perspective. The novel starts when Ajay is 40, then switches to him being 8 years old. He is telling the story as a grown-up remembering his life. Therefore the perspective is more mature than it would be had the author chosen to tell the story from 8-year-old Ajay and as he grew. As an adult, Ajay can give insight into various situations that he might not otherwise have been able to.

The family's excitement about moving to America is important to note as well. Ajay's father is most excited, seeing it as a progressive move. Shuba is less excited, seemingly wanting to stay around her family and around what she knows. However, she does not complain. This is the attitude Shuba will carry throughout "Family Life". Birju and Ajay are excited, but having to give away or sell almost all of their possessions takes a toll on them. For a family who does not have a lot, the little they had was meaningful. It would be difficult for a child to understand that they will be able to replace much of what they get rid of when they get to America; moving to a different country clear across the world is an experience they've never had before. Since they know little about the American culture, they might not trust that they'll be able to replace anything.

Discussion Question 1

What are the implications of the neighborhood participating in the event of Shuba opening the plane tickets sent from her husband to join him in America?

Discussion Question 2

Why might Ajay have started getting into fights at school just before leaving for America?

Discussion Question 3

Ajay has conflicting emotions about moving to America. Which seems stronger: wanting to go to America, or wanting to stay in India? How can you tell?

Vocabulary

glum, brooding, selfish, wriggle, cheerful, generation, hypocrisy, accountant, immigration, hypochondria, Green Revolution, munificence, inferiority, emigrating, constitution, frugal, poison, indecent, Urdu, Mughal, aristocratic, affectation, incense, courtyard, seemi, melancholy, armoire, abandoning



Chapter 2

Summary

In Chapter 2, Ajay reveals that he believed his father to be assigned to their family by the government, as he “seemed to serve no purpose,” (page 30). Ajay changes his mind by the time they leave for America, even though he still sees his father as having no purpose.

When Ajay, Birju, and Shuba arrive in America, Mr. Mishra is waiting for them, though the author describes him as appearing angry. Their apartment in Queens was a one-bedroom apartment, and was unlike anything Ajay had ever seen: there was carpet, hot water on a regular basis, and television with programming 24/7. There was also an elevator in their apartment building, which Ajay had never been in before. Ajay recognizes at this point – after having seen all that they already have in America – that while his father served no purpose in India, he “made [them] rich” by moving them to America. He also acknowledges that his father helps make family decisions, not just his mother as he had previously thought.

Ajay and Birju’s father takes them to the library, which is full of books and bigger than either of the two Ajay had been in in India. Mr. Mishra told Ajay and Birju he would pay them fifty cents each for each book they read. The reader also finds out that it is soon after they arrive in America that Birju is pressured to get accepted into the Bronx High School of Science, where the son of one of their dad’s colleagues went to school.

The beginning of Ajay’s school experience is described, and it is not so positive. He doesn’t make friends easily; the subjects are all confusing to him because he doesn’t understand all of the language; he has trouble distinguishing between all of the white kids because he says they look the same; and some of the boys found it easy to pick on Ajay because he was different and smaller than a lot of the kids his age. Ajay and Birju also went to school on Diwali, an Indian holiday, which is strange to Ajay because it feels strange to go to school on such an important holiday.

Ajay and his family do some of their grocery shopping in Chinatown in Manhattan, since in Queens there weren’t enough Indians to warrant an Indian grocery store.

As far as religious differences between their life in India and their life in America, in India Shuba used to prepare a certain food at every meal to feed the cows that wandered the neighborhood, since cows are sacred in India. In America, the family went to temple every Friday to pray for blessings.

Birju had a different experience in America right off the bat than Ajay. He made friends more easily, did better in school, and was even treated as smarter and better by their parents, since he was pressured to get into the Bronx High School of Science. Birju spends most of his time after their first summer in America studying for the entrance



exam to get into the Bronx High School of Science. When the acceptance letter came, the Mishra family went to temple and prayed before they opened it.

Shuba and Rajinder (Ajay's dad, though the reader doesn't learn his name until much later in the novel), remain the same after moving to America. Shuba doesn't complain about anything, but rather goes about her business caring for her family. Mr. Mishra remains irritable and seemingly angry. However, Mr. Mishra does appear to have more confidence, likely because they own more in America than they ever did in India, giving Mr. Mishra the idea that he has made his family rich.

Analysis

Though Ajay continued to see his father as serving no purpose in their family, perhaps him changing his mind from thinking his father had been assigned to their family by the government was because his father had finally served a purpose: moving them from India to Queens, New York. Ajay does eventually articulate this, but the sentiment was likely there before he did so.

Ajay's school experience is his first clue into how difficult he will find it to mesh his culture along with that of his peers. Cultural differences is a major theme throughout the novel, and Ajay's school experience is what starts Ajay's observations of those differences. The author is letting the reader know how difficult Ajay's personal evolution will be; how many battles, internally and externally, he will face, as well as the idea of Ajay feeling incredibly isolated upon his family's move to America.

Chapter 2 also shows a lot of Ajay's parents' attention going toward Birju, something Ajay struggles with throughout the entire novel. Much effort goes into making sure Birju is comfortable during his break in the exam, as well as giving him ample space and time to study beforehand. He feels less important, not as smart, and not as loved in his parents' eyes. This lays the foundation for Ajay's searching through the rest of "Family Life".

One of the more marked characteristics of this chapter and other early chapters is that there is a lack of analogies to describe various people, places, events, and objects. The writing lacks sentiment and comes across as a fact-only story with little-to-no embellishment or extra description. This is characteristic of the author's writing style, however it plays into Ajay's story and how he views himself, his family, and his journey from 8-year-old boy moving to America through the 40-year-old man who starts the story. So much of this time in Ajay's life seems to void of emotion, simply going through motions and doing what he believes he's supposed to be doing. As time goes on, Ajay uses more descriptions and analogies.

Ajay's love for books starts in Chapter 2, after his father challenges the boys to read books for pay, but also because Ajay finds the size of the library incredible and enthralling. He finds a home inside books, a safe place to vanish and not be a part of



his family. Though he cannot articulate his desire to not be a part of his family yet, he pays attention to the spark inside of him when he can disappear into a story.

Discussion Question 1

What does it mean for Ajay's family that his father's confidence has risen since moving to America?

Discussion Question 2

Even though Ajay felt like it was a mistake that he was being picked on since he was good at many things, why did it take his father coming into his class to stop the other boys from pushing him around?

Discussion Question 3

Why does it take going to school on Diwali for Ajay to feel that their life in America was not important, that only life in India mattered?

Vocabulary

government, foyer, merits, gauge, programming, pith, intrusive, barbershop, disciplining, colleagues, sachets, bullied, aerogramme, port of entry, gourds, papayas, incense, temple, model airplanes, garment, formfitting, suspicious, exotic, contemptuously, frittering, rascalion, cinder-block, pew, chamber, idol



Chapter 3

Summary

Since Birju had gotten accepted to the Bronx High School of Science, the Mishra family was being invited to other Indian families' houses. Ajay states that because there weren't very many Indian immigrants at that time, there were few role models. Because of Birju's academic achievement of getting into a prestigious school, he was considered a role model in their community.

Ajay continues to feel left out and wonders if his parents love him as much as they love Birju, especially since their mother jokes with Birju far more often than she jokes with Ajay. Birju even jokes about her body type/size when he teases her about working in a toll booth. Birju also gets a Korean girlfriend named Nancy.

Ajay and Birju go to Arlington again that summer; it's their second summer in America. Ajay spends his time watching cable television on his aunt's living room sofa; Birju spends his time at the swimming pool. Ajay's favorite show to watch during the summer is "Gilligan's Island", and he's watching an episode when they find out about Birju's accident.

Chapter 3 is the turning point for "Family Life", as it is the chapter where Birju has a tragic accident at the pool that leaves him in a permanent vegetative state. He dove head-first into the pool and struck his head on the bottom, then was left unconscious underwater for three minutes before the lifeguard saw and rescued him. At first, the family doesn't know what happened. They only know he was taken from the pool by ambulance to the hospital. At first Ajay is upset that his watching "Gilligan's Island" is interrupted. He seems to forget about that, though, once he learns of the significance of Birju's accident.

After the accident, the family spends most of their time in the hospital. Ajay and Birju's parents come to Arlington. Shuba stays so she can visit and care for Birju every day. Rajinder comes to Arlington on the weekends. Ajay is enrolled in school in Arlington since Birju is staying at the hospital there. Despite the fact that the Mishra family is living in Arlington for a period of several months, there is little interaction with Ajay and Birju's aunt.

Ajay is angry with Birju for creating this problem for the family. However, he obediently accompanies his mother every day to the hospital. He reads prayers to Birju and chants over him, as part of the family's religious practices. Ajay and his mom go to temple to pray. They also build an altar of their own at Ajay's aunt's house. Every day Ajay and his mom would pray for Birju's healing.

Ajay's father also starts his drinking habit, born out of anger and rage toward their new condition. Ajay's parents begin fighting with a lot of rage, according to Ajay.



Ajay has his first large display of emotion over Birju's accident. Though he cries some on the way to school and at school, he does not do so in front of his family until December, four months after Birju's accident. At Christmastime, the family is with Birju in the hospital and Ajay realizes what a different and pitiful Christmas this one is. He sobs and tells his mom she didn't get him a Christmas present, that he needs a Christmas present. He also tells her that he wants pizza and candy. In response, Ajay's father takes him to a candy shop and Ajay gets a large bag of candy that he eats on his way home from the strip mall where they purchased the candy.

Analysis

Chapter 3 is the turning point for the rest of the novel. Until now, Ajay's telling of his family life hasn't been entirely positive but they haven't been completely devoid of joy, either. Birju's tragic accident, however, sends each member of the Mishra family into their own downward spiral of despair. There are many facets to Birju's accident that are worth paying attention to.

Ajay's reaction from August when Birju was injured through Christmas is fairly stoic. He barely processes what is going on because he is focused on being obedient and having impeccable behavior, as he believes God will do more for his family if they are all obedient and do the right things. He reads and chants to Birju, he prays for Birju, he accompanies his mom each day to the hospital without complaint, and he attends a new school without complaint. Ajay's belief that having perfect behavior will help his family may be a manifestation of his wondering of whether or not his parents love him as much as they love Birju. He wondered that before the accident, and now that his parents must focus almost solely on Birju, it is natural that Ajay would wonder that even more often. The reality and finality of the situation finally hit him at Christmas, similar to how he decided life in India mattered more than life in America when he had to go to school on Diwali. It seems that when a major event or a significant day is supposed to be a certain way based on Ajay's frame of reference, any change to that routine sends Ajay into a crisis of faith.

In all of their daily prayers, Ajay and his mother prayed for healing. Yet, after a couple months of doing so every day, Ajay wondered if there was any point in praying since Birju was clearly not getting any better. Religion is one of the themes written throughout "Family Life", and this is just the beginning of Ajay's back-and-forth with the God to whom he prays.

Family dynamics change completely in Chapter 3, solely because of Birju's accident. Shuba is now almost 100% focused on Birju, though she does acknowledge Ajay's emotional meltdown at Christmas. Most days, however, she is focused on praying for his healing, making sure he is being well taken care of, and sitting by his bedside doing what she can to help him feel less pain and more comfort. While this is the natural tendency of a mother, it also means she basically neglects her relationships with Ajay and Rajinder. Ajay seems to simply transition from feeling less loved before the accident to feeling pushed to the side.



Rajinder and Shuba begin arguing with an intense rage that doesn't get any better for a long while. To cope, Rajinder begins drinking excessive amounts of alcohol on a daily basis. Though this temporarily helps him numb the pain of having his oldest son in a permanent vegetative state, it also serves to alienate his family and cause a great amount of tension between him and his wife. An interesting note about these early days of Ajay's dad's drinking habit: he seems kinder to Ajay. He and Ajay do not fight, and on Christmas when Ajay wants some candy, the two spend a quiet but meaningful time in the car as they go to a strip mall and buy some candy for Ajay. It's a moment that is marked with very few words, but is meaningful as Rajinder has taken care of a current and significant emotional need of Ajay's: the need to be heard and cared for, if even for a moment.

Discussion Question 1

Ajay articulates that he believes his behavior needs to be perfect in order that God might hear his prayers and heal Birju. What does this say about his relationship with God at this point in the story?

Discussion Question 2

What does Shuba's fighting for the insurance to cover the nursing home do to her relationships with her husband, son, and Ajay's aunt?

Discussion Question 3

What is the significance of Ajay's last statement in the chapter, that other people were likely enjoying the pool on a hot, sunny August afternoon, while his brother lay motionless at the bottom of the pool for three minutes?

Vocabulary

immigrants, dowry, vegetarian, tollbooth, valuable, stucco, hospital, sari, generator, altar, incense, operation, saffron, seizure, foolish, immaturely, crucifix, Kusum mausiji, Krishna, impeccably, whiskey, chanting, G-tube, civil-service exam



Chapter 4

Summary

Chapter 4 takes place almost entirely in the nursing home in New Jersey. After the insurance company agreed in Chapter 3 to pay for Birju to live in a nursing home, the Mishra family moved from Queens, New York, to Metuchen, New Jersey. The nursing home was close to their home, and Shuba continued going every day. Ajay would join her after school.

Shuba and Rajinder decided to move to Metuchen, New Jersey, because it was one of the only towns with a temple. As religion is important to the Mishra family, especially to Shuba, proximity to a temple was important.

At the nursing home, Ajay does the same things he did with Birju while Birju resided in the hospital: read to him, talk to him, and sit by his bedside. Mr. Narayan, the pundit from their local temple, is introduced in this chapter. He visits the family in Birju's nursing home room. Shuba had told Mr. Narayan that Birju was in a coma, but Mr. Narayan does not pay attention to the fact that Birju is not in a coma. He simply visits with the family, provides spiritual encouragement, and prays for Birju.

Rajinder's drinking habit gets worse. He becomes progressively angrier and is vocal about not wanting to care for Birju. Shuba challenges his thoughts when she is vocal about being happy to take care of her son. She doesn't say she's happy for the situation, but rather for the fact that she is alive so she can take care of her son in his condition.

Shuba, Rajinder, and Ajay attend a Ramayan Path - an Indian celebration - at a neighbor's house. The party makes Ajay feel anxious and as though nobody else is living a life like his family is living, because of Birju's condition and what the Mishra family's life requires/entails. After the Ramayan Path event, the Mishra family began receiving invitations to other people's houses, as well as visitors at the nursing home. Families wanted to be around the Mishra's for the following reasons: one, suffering was considered an honor; two, for parents to show their children why they need to be safe; and three, to try and heal Birju (these visitors were called "miracle workers").

The apartment in which Ajay and his parents live is described. It is a studio apartment in which they have a sofa for Ajay's bed, and a foam mattress that sits behind the sofa for his parents' bed. The sofa faced a television that sat on a cardboard box. Friday and Saturday nights Ajay's father would stay up late and watch movies on the VCR. The noise regularly woke Ajay from his sleep, and most nights his father was drunk.



Analysis

Chapter 4 is the beginning of Ajay's life in New Jersey. The author does not describe any transition time between their apartment in Queens and living in New Jersey, so the reader might assume that Rajinder moved everything to the new apartment in New Jersey before Ajay, Birju, and Shuba moved back from Arlington. Rajinder would have had to move everything by himself because Shuba stayed in Arlington from the night of the accident until Birju moved to the nursing home in New Jersey.

So far, the family's experience in the nursing home is about the same as at the hospital in Arlington. Birju's condition hasn't changed at all, and the setting is similar since they are both care facilities. The biggest difference is the community the Mishra family experiences in New Jersey. In Arlington, Birju's visitors were limited to his parents, his brother, and his aunt and uncle. In New Jersey, members of the local Indian community came to visit, offering support for Shuba and spiritual encouragement for the family. The fact that the Mishra's were also invited to other people's homes is another indication of how their community grew once they moved to New Jersey. It seems unexpected, as Ajay is nervous being around all these new people. He sees his family's situation and Birju's accident as being an important event, and the fact that other people act like the suffering is beneficial, or smile at him when he describes Birju's accident, makes Ajay feel like nobody understands the importance of what has happened in his family. Ajay also carries negative feelings toward Mr. Narayan, the pundit who offers spiritual encouragement both at the temple and while visiting at the nursing home. Even more, Ajay doesn't feel favorably about the self-proclaimed "miracle workers", men who come visit Birju at the nursing home claiming they can heal him. Therefore, even though the Mishra family was offered a wider community since moving to New Jersey from Queens (and Arlington), Ajay continues to feel isolated, as he feels nobody can truly understand what it feels like to go through what his family is going through.

Rajinder's drinking continues in this chapter. Shuba is angry about Rajinder's drinking, but Ajay does not describe the rage he did in Chapter 3. Perhaps that is because the anger in Chapter 3 was more as a result of Birju's accident and the life they were about to have. Since his drinking habit is described as more of an underlying, quiet, daily habit, the reader can tell that Ajay has quietly accepted his father's new state of being. There is not much Ajay can do about the situation, since he is only 10 or 11 years old and is subject to living in his parents' house for at least 7 more years, until he graduates high school and goes off to college.

Discussion Question 1

At the beginning of the chapter Ajay's aunt and mother are kind to one another, after having been irritated with each other in the chapter before. What could be the reason for their change in attitude?



Discussion Question 2

What are some of the indicators that Ajay doesn't care for Mr. Narayan, the pundit they meet at temple?

Discussion Question 3

How are the different coping strategies of Ajay, Shuba, and Rajinder evolving as more time passes after Birju's accident?

Vocabulary

clutched, conscious, hoarse, energetic, sarcastic, pundit, converted, coma, engineer, Ramayana, namaste, sacrifice, sheepskin, tendons, Hindu, lecture, Aeorplanes, miracle, melodrama, kitchenette

Chapter 5

Summary

A year after Birju's accident, the Mishra family receives the settlement in the lawsuit they filed against the apartment complex where Birju was injured. The settlement is about \$1 million dollars, but after court and lawyer fees, the settlement is \$618,000. Ajay's dad is happy with the amount; Shuba is not. She does not agree with how much the lawyers receive. Even though Shuba is unhappy with the amount, the family goes to the temple to give thanks for at least getting somewhat of a large sum. When Ajay learns that a settlement is based on how much the injured person could have potentially earned in his or her lifetime, he tries to do the math to see how much that equaled out for what would have been Birju's earnings. He comes up with \$6.18 per hour, which is higher than he expects. When the official settlement paperwork comes in the mail, Ajay shares a positive interaction with his mom after he asks if he needs to sign the paperwork, too.

Birju is still in the nursing home, though he is being poorly cared for. He is often fed too much at one time or fed at the wrong times, leading to excessive vomiting and vomiting of his medicines; there are often random and sometimes dangerous objects underneath his body; and he is often not turned and is, therefore, left to be uncomfortable for hours at a time. Shuba has a hard time watching her son be mistreated day in and day out and feels like she's abandoning him every time she leaves the nursing home. The family looks for other nursing homes, but ultimately cannot afford to move Birju. Thus, Mr. and Mrs. Mishra decide to purchase a house so they can bring Birju home and have a home nurse, as well as his mother and brother, care for him.

Mr. Gupta is introduced as their realtor. In the last house of the chapter that Ajay and his parents visit, Ajay realizes that he and his family will never be moving back to India. He begins grieving that fact.

Analysis

In keeping with her character, Shuba lets her opinion be known that she does not agree with a situation, but then she does not complain about the situation at hand. As the matriarch of the family, Shuba stands strong and firm in her position. She attempts to lead by example by not complaining, by doing what needs to be done, and by supporting her ill son without hesitation. She advocates for Birju with the nursing home staff, just as she advocated for him when the insurance company said they would not cover the cost of living in a nursing home. She has a strong sense of loyalty and fiercely believes in the wholeness of a family unit.

The fact that Ajay figures out how much the lawsuit determined that Birju was worth in terms of future earnings suggests that Ajay is curious as well as envious. It is possible, with Ajay's jealous nature toward Birju and the affection Birju receives from their



parents, that Ajay wants to know how much Birju is apparently worth so that he knows how much he needs to earn in order to be "worth" more than his older brother. When the math equals out to more than \$1 per hour, which is what Ajay was expecting, he is surprised but also disappointed. From Ajay's perspective, \$6.18 per hour for a young boy is fair.

Ajay's father is wholly present during this chapter, with no drinking episodes, and it may be because there are goals in front of him: the lawsuit and settlement, finding a new nursing home, then finding a new home. Since many dreams died with Birju's accident, having short-term goals, no matter how depressing they still might be, is likely seen by Ajay's father as something to at least work toward. With something to look forward to and/or work toward, drinking excessive amounts of alcohol isn't as likely because with the goals in mind there is nothing to be in denial about. The author also may be setting up the fact that Ajay's father's drinking habit will not last forever, and that there is hope for him to quit one day in the future.

Discussion Question 1

Based on their personal character, what might be the reason for the difference in Shuba and Rajinder's reactions to the sum of the lawsuit settlement?

Discussion Question 2

Aside from financial reasons, why might Ajay's parents have decided to purchase a home and care for Birju there, as opposed to finding a better, more reputable nursing home for him to live in?

Discussion Question 3

Based on his description of looking for houses, as well as his realization that he and his family are never moving back to India, what does Ajay think of the fact that his parents are buying a house so they can bring home Birju and care for him there?

Vocabulary

heaped, thermometer, lawyer, rubbish, agreement, convulsions, beclamide, gastric, gangster, therapy, diminish, potpourri, stimulation therapy, embankment, apropos, furnished, realization



Chapter 6

Summary

Birju has been in his current state for almost two years. Ajay has not told anyone at school about Birju, and so he decides to try. Ajay chooses a boy named Jeff, and eventually Jeff's friend Michael becomes involved in the information, as well. Ajay gives many details, including what Birju was like before the accident. Unfortunately, he includes the gory details of Birju's current state, including the vomiting, inability to toilet himself, his feeding tube, and things of the like.

Jeff and Michael's reaction is the same: at first, they seem like they might be interested. They ask a couple questions that could be considered typical follow-up to the kind of information Ajay gives. Quickly, those questions turn to mocking, then dislike. It is clear that Jeff and Michael do not want to hear about Birju, and they demonstrate their feelings by blatantly ignoring Ajay, even walking away from him while he's speaking.

Ajay feels like he's wasted the information about Birju, since Jeff and Michael don't respond with sympathy. He tells his parents that Jeff doesn't believe him about Birju, so he brings his dad to Jeff's house to try and convince Jeff that the stories about Birju are true; Ajay thinks that by someone else telling Jeff about Birju, Jeff will respond with sympathy and he can finally have a friend. It doesn't work, and in fact Ajay is even more embarrassed after they leave Jeff's house than he was after sharing the information in school.

A down payment is put on a house in Metuchen, and Ajay's parents let the nursing home know they're bringing Birju home to live with them. Ajay's father continues his drinking habit. It's getting worse in that his mother is having to carry him to bed, even though their bed isn't far from anywhere in the apartment since their apartment is a studio. Shuba has become quieter, as well.

Analysis

Ajay's telling of the details about Birju's accident, as well as describing what he was like before the accident, is Ajay's way of trying to make a friend. Though he obviously goes about it in the wrong way since it backfires, at this point he is kind of out of options. The author does not mention other Indian boys in his class, and even if there were, Ajay already feels like his life is so far removed from those around him because of Birju's situation. It's difficult for Ajay to interact in other social situations, so why would school be any different? All he's left with is an attempt to garner sympathy, even if he does approach it in a way that repels instead of attracts friends. The fact that he feels like he wasted the information on boys who could not appreciate it indicates two things: one, that he is self-aware enough to know that his approach to making friends did not work;



and two, that his anger and sensitivity toward the situation is still very real and very close to the surface.

Jeff and Michael's response is typical of middle-school boys. At that age (approximately 12 years old) it would be difficult to process all of the information Ajay shared about Birju, especially since some of the details were fairly intimate and gruesome. The boys probably reacted more unkindly than they needed to; instead of telling an adult that Ajay was making them uncomfortable they just began insulting and disrespecting him, making the situation even worse for Ajay.

An important aspect to note regarding Ajay's father is the fact that he continues to drink, and that situation continues to be destructive to his family. However, when Ajay needs help with a peer, his father doesn't seem to hesitate to be the one standing by Ajay's side. He also does not become enraged at Jeff's nonchalant attitude when the two show up at his house. Even though he remains in denial and is not dealing with Birju's condition in a healthy manner, it seems Rajinder has maintained his sense of pride in regards to his family, as well as his desire to protect his sons.

Discussion Question 1

Why might Ajay have chosen to reveal the information about Birju in the setting in which he did? Why wouldn't he wait for a time when he could tell someone face-to-face?

Discussion Question 2

Given Ajay's father's behavior the night their future home is officially purchased, what does Rajinder think about bringing his son home to live with him?

Discussion Question 3

Ajay spends a lot of time wanting more of his parents' attention and affection. What might have his father's accompaniment to Jeff's house told Ajay about his father's level of affection toward his youngest son?

Vocabulary

misunderstand, attendance, station wagon, gruesomeness, sidesaddle, gastrointestinal, fantasies, biography, antibiotics, freak, clenched, ranch-style, sympathy



Chapter 7

Summary

Birju is scheduled to come home from the nursing home. Ajay, Shuba, and Rajinder are living in their new house, with enough room for Birju to live and be cared for there instead of at the nursing home. The day Birju is scheduled to come home, members of the local Indian community, including Mr. Narayan, the pundit from the temple, visit. The visitors stayed all day the first day Birju was home in order to provide support and encouragement to the Mishra family. The women mainly stayed in the kitchen, cooking and singing with and for Shuba. The men did heavy housework - installing two air conditioners, mowing the lawn, raising the washer onto bricks. Ajay compares the activity on this day to a festival day at temple.

As Ajay, Shuba, and Rajinder adjust to Birju being home, each has different tasks and each deals with it differently. Ajay has a hard time getting used to seeing Birju in his current condition, lying in an ordinary room in an ordinary house. It had been about 2 years of going to the hospital or the nursing home every day. Still, Ajay teases Birju, calling him 'fatty' and jesting with him even though Birju can't tease back. Ajay helps his father bathe Birju and go get his medicines from the pharmacy. His father purchases the medicine quickly, and tries to leave the pharmacy as fast as he can. Ajay also helps to feed Birju.

Nurse's aides are hired for daytime and for a night shift. Sometimes the day nurse do not come because the miracle workers are there to keep an eye on Birju. Mr. Mehta is among the miracle workers who say they can heal Birju. Eventually he stops coming, and when Shuba phones his home to see if he is coming back, Mrs. Mehta tells Shuba that he is sick. Shuba blames him for being a coward and not admitting that he made a mistake, that he can not heal Birju.

Another miracle worker who visits the Mishra family bathes Birju in turmeric powder. Yet another tries willing Birju to speak by stating facts about Birju in the hopes that Birju will begin repeating them back.

Rajinder continues his destructive drinking habit, and he and Shuba return to their rage-filled, angry fighting. Shuba's response is to defend her caring for Birju, and then continue caring for him as she has since the day of his accident. Ajay reveals his sadness to his father, and his father's response is anything but sympathetic. In fact, it's a competitive response indicating that Ajay's sadness is nothing to his own.

Analysis

Birju coming home from the nursing home is another phase of the Mishra's life post-accident. The house has to be prepared and set up to care for a handicapped child, and the family has to be ready to receive the patient. Not only do they have to be physically



and materially ready to care for Birju, but they have to be mentally and emotionally prepared to see Birju in his vegetative state at all times. Breaks in between seeing him suffer and be uncomfortable have ceased to exist, since he lives at home now instead of at a care facility. While this makes Shuba more comfortable because she knows she can care for her son better than aides at a nursing home, it takes a toll on the family unit as well as on Ajay and Rajinder individually. Ajay seems to be able to tease his brother a little more now that they're in their own house, but he also has to deal with bathing his older brother, and seeing Birju in very undignified positions is awkward for Ajay. Rajinder's drinking seems to increase, and so does his rage. The win from the insurance company was short-lived, as Rajinder is now reminded every hour of the day that he's home what his oldest son's life will be like until he dies.

The miracle workers who come to visit are described with the same sentiment as the ones who visited Birju in the nursing home. However, Ajay minds them more than Shuba, who seems to view them as a true possibility for Birju's healing. Her feelings and her hopes are only natural for a mother who wants her son to be back to normal, not only so they can all live a normal life but so that her son doesn't have to suffer anymore. It is likely difficult for Ajay and Rajinder to keep up with her perseverance. While Shuba doesn't exude a positive attitude, she does exhibit resilience and a sense of perseverance in terms of caring for Birju.

Rajinder's response to Ajay's honest admission of, "Daddy, I am so sad," is a harsh one for a 12-year-old to process. Ajay has lost his brother and essentially his parents, as they are wrapped up with Birju and their own coping of the situation. He has tried reaching out to peers, and that backfired. Now he is reaching out to his father, a man who was already fairly elusive to him, and he is shut down. Ajay is unable to look to his father for comfort, as he is lost in his own grief. The implications for this are life-long, because as time goes on, Ajay's sense of isolation continues to grow.

Discussion Question 1

What might it mean to the Mishra family that so many community members show up on the day Birju comes home?

Discussion Question 2

Ajay teases Birju quite a bit in Chapter 7. What is he trying to do by acting normally with his brother?

Discussion Question 3

How are Rajinder and Shuba's different coping strategies at this point affecting their marital relationship?

Vocabulary

chandelier, orderlies, pharmacy, tab, deny, saffron, oms, swastikas, periodically, roti, lentils, puris, sophistication, tourists, exorcism, coward, Kashmir, turmeric



Chapter 8

Summary

Ajay comes home from his first day of 7th grade and talks for a long while to Birju. He teases Birju about lying in bed all day, then admits some of the things that happened at school, such as getting made fun of for taking a lunch box. Ajay is worked up and upset about his day, as evidenced in his quick speech, but telling Birju about his day helps calm him down. While talking to Birju, Ajay recalls talking to God while he and his family were living in Arlington. He recognizes that nothing has changed, and therefore Ajay feels like he's being crushed day in and day out.

On Ajay's second day of 7th grade, he continues to think about his brother's state and how different life is than what they thought it would be. Ajay recognizes that he's so much luckier than Birju, since he has all his faculties, and also that he's so much luckier than his mother because his mother has to care for Birju and carries the weight of the family as her burden. Ajay has trouble believing that his high grades are important, since Birju is still lying in the bed. He wonders what he's trying so hard for when his brother can't do anything for himself.

Ajay continues to have trouble relating to kids at school, even other Indian immigrants; they find him irritating because he responds to the insults white kids say to him. He also continues to worry about money. Ajay has worried about his family's financial stability since Birju was in the nursing home, and having Birju home where they had to pay for the nurses made his anxiety worse. Ajay and his mom try to save money where they could, and they stayed quiet while Rajinder crunched numbers and tried to figure out solutions. One of their challenges is the fact that the insurance company denies many things that Birju needed, including his Isocal formula used to feed him.

Neighbors and community members began coming to Ajay's home in order to receive a blessing from Ajay's mom. Ajay states that it's common in the Indian culture to view someone who is suffering as holy, and so members of the community wanted a blessing from someone they thought to be holy for their children who would be soon taking the SATs. One woman, Mrs. Disai, visited so that Ajay's mom could help turn Mrs. Disai's son from bad choices he had been recently making.

Analysis

Ajay's one-sided conversation that he holds with Birju represents the relationship he wished existed between him and his brother. Even though Birju cannot talk back, Ajay's anxiety is calmed after releasing to Birju details about his day. It was likely a bad day, since he was made fun of and has no friends. Since Ajay already feels isolated, talking to his brother, even though the conversation is one-sided, is likely a cathartic exercise for him. While talking to Birju, Ajay compares it to talking to God when he was living in



Arlington. Ajay had stopped praying and talking to God *because he was not seeing anything change. Ultimately, he knows Birju's condition is permanent, but he had held out hope by praying that it might not be.

The fact that Ajay thinks the next day about his good fortune as compared to his mom and his brother is a sign of maturity. Though he feels guilty at times that he is so much more fortunate than his brother, he is grateful that he is not in his brother's place. Not only would he be grateful for having all of his faculties, but also because of the financial strain Birju's condition is putting on the family. Since Ajay takes on his family's stress - he always has - he imagines his guilt would be greater if he and Birju were to trade places. In that sense, Ajay is glad to not be costing his family money.

The fact that community members come to Shuba for a blessing for their children is important. Ajay knows that in the Indian culture, suffering is considered a blessing and, therefore, the person/people suffering are considered holy. However, he feels that being treated as holy is dangerous and is risking God's anger. Even though Ajay hasn't talked to God in quite some time, it is obvious the family's religion remains important to them. Ajay still believes God has a lot of power, and he does not want to unleash any kind of wrath on his family, since they're dealing with so much already. Another reason he may be uncomfortable with others treating his family as holy is because he knows the reality of the situation; he knows how much his father drinks, how his mother suffers in silence, how he must suffer in silence at times, and how uncomfortable and inhibiting it is to have a brother in a permanent vegetative state. While he cannot voice his opinions to the visitors nor to his mother, his tone and attitude toward them gives away his feelings about visitors wanting blessings from his mother.

Discussion Question 1

What is Ajay trying to achieve by talking to Birju when he gets home from school?

Discussion Question 2

Why might Ajay respond to the insults other kids throw at him, while the other Indian immigrants do not?

Discussion Question 3

What does Shuba's reaction to community visitors wanting blessings for their children say about her level of acceptance of Birju's condition?

Vocabulary

possessed, stubble, shrill, fortunate, cinder block walls, deliberately, haji, Filipino, simpleminded, blessing, suffering, holy, middle-class, deferential, compassionate

Chapter 9

Summary

Ajay is now in 8th grade. Visitors continue to come to the Mishra's home to provide company and support for a family that is fairly isolated from the rest of the community, due to Birju's condition. Sometimes it was just women, sometimes it was whole families. After they left, Rajinder would go upstairs and Shuba and Ajay would play cards next to Birju. Despite being with his mother, Ajay continues to feel alone.

Rajinder's drinking gets worse in Chapter 9. Though Ajay mentions that occasionally his parents get along and do nice things for one another, overall Rajinder's drinking has begun impacting his ability to care for Birju, leaving Shuba and Ajay to do more of the work. Having to bathe Birju by himself makes Ajay feel that his family is not good enough to provide what Birju needs; Ajay wishes for them to be better. Rajinder's drinking also greatly impacts his marriage; he and Shuba fight constantly, and Ajay states that it's so bad, "the walls vibrated with rage," (page 146). Shuba and Ajay work hard to keep Rajinder's drinking habit secret from the community, so as to spare them embarrassment. Even when Rajinder berates Shuba in front of other people, Shuba remains calm and tries to minimize the situation.

Ajay reveals his love for reading and how he is always lost in a book. Ajay becomes interested in Ernest Hemingway and checks out from the library every book he can written either by or about the famous author. Though it's sometimes hard for Ajay to understand the writings, he works hard at it and decides that he will use Ernest Hemingway's writing as his own teacher so that he might learn how to write well enough to become an author. Ajay even begins buying books instead of borrowing them from the library. His mother watches him carefully as he does so, but ends up complimenting him in front of Ajay's father for being studious and smart. After reading some of the books he has purchased himself, Ajay begins writing his own stories. He also begins seeing situations - such as being bullied - as potential writing material.

Analysis

The fact that Ajay continues to feel isolated no matter how much time he spends with his parents is an indication of their physical presence versus their emotional presence. Rajinder is rarely physically present, as he spends so much time drinking that he often keeps himself in his room after their visitors leave. Shuba, however, is always physically present; it is her emotional presence that comes and goes. For example, when she and Ajay are playing cards next to Birju, Birju is a constant reminder of the weight she carries as a mother. She is physically sitting with Ajay and playing a game with him, but Birju is always in the background of every activity.



Rajinder's continued drinking is to be expected, as there has been no change of events that would motivate him to change his habit. Therefore, it is also expected that Shuba and Rajinder's relationship would continue to deteriorate. There is never a mention of divorce or a family split among their fighting, though, so the idea of family togetherness against all odds and despite any circumstance remains true.

Ajay's new interest in reading and Ernest Hemingway is his new way of coping, and it is one of the first times Ajay seems upbeat about his life. He loses himself in stories, which is a way for him to escape reality for small portions of time. From his reading of Hemingway, Ajay has moments of hope for his future. He learns of Hemingway's life and he wonders if he can have a life he actually wants, actually desires. Rays of hope are important in times of tragedy because they have the ability to lift a person out of their sadness, even if just for a moment. That uplifting can carry a person through a difficult time that they thought might be impossible to surpass. Reading Hemingway also gives Ajay a goal toward which he can work: writing. Having a goal means that he is no longer embarrassed to read slowly; he does so on purpose. Though he has periods of not understanding some of Hemingway's writings, he cares enough to push through and look for the more practical things.

Ajay can also relate to some of Hemingway's writings. For example, many of his characters were frequently drunk, like Ajay's father. Even though this is a sad reality for Ajay and something he might not want to be able to connect with, having a connection likely helps ease Ajay's constant feelings of loneliness. He begins taking notes inside the books he purchases, which again give him ownership of something that matters to him. No kind of ownership has been mentioned by the author since Ajay and his family left India. This likely led to an even greater easing of Ajay's sense of isolation. Even though he is not connecting with his family like he might have wanted, Ajay is connecting with something, somebody, even, as he connects with Hemingway and some of the characters in the stories. Enough so that he is inspired to start writing his own material, another thing he can own and have for himself. Ajay also sees his own writing as protection: instead of being upset at people's meanness, he can use it as writing material. Thus, another coping strategy is born.

Discussion Question 1

Ajay enjoys having visitors who speak of India, as if their speaking of it is keeping its existence alive in Ajay's mind. What is the significance of Ajay needing to keep India alive in his mind?

Discussion Question 2

Why might Rajinder only fight with Shuba and not with Ajay?



Discussion Question 3

What are some of the positive emotions Ajay feels in this chapter that he has not felt since before Birju's accident? How can you tell?

Vocabulary

assassination, confirmed, hallucinatory, indirection, flattery, melodramatic, perceive, humiliate, occasionally, biography, scholarly, ecology, dialogue, protagonist, essayist, one-dimensional, psychology, spirituality, undignified, sod, surge



Chapter 10

Summary

Ajay finishes 9th grade with straight As, being one of 10 kids in his class who are ranked number one. He tells his mom when he gets home from school on the last day, and her response is a simple, "Very good," while she continued to exercise Birju. Ajay continues to feel guilty for being so proud of himself and for doing so well with Birju in such a depressing state, and when his mom responds with an apathetic tone, Ajay says he feels a collapse at the lack of affection and attention coming from his parents.

Similar to the times before when community members have wanted Shuba's blessings on their children, it happened again. Because of Ajay's straight As, people called and asked if Shuba would speak to their children, inspire them and encourage them to do well.

Ajay has his first crush on a girl. He bravely phones her to ask her on a date. She says no, but he tries again with another girl almost immediately and has success in winning her over. For weeks he whispers "I love you" to her when she's walking by, so that she's almost unsure of what she's hearing. The two begin a dating relationship that carries on through freshman year of college. Minakshi is the first girl that Ajay kisses, and just like with his reading and desire to write like Hemingway, kissing Minakshi gives him hope for his future. The two go into the woods behind the school and kiss until Ajay has to head home to help with Birju. The experience lets Ajay know that there is another life available to him sometime in the near future. However, the happiness was too much of a contrast to the pain, guilt, and frustration he felt from his home life. Therefore, one of his coping mechanisms would be to sabotage his relationship with Minakshi. It doesn't work, since he denies telling another girl he loves her.

Analysis

Chapter 10 shows a great amount of contrast between the two lives Ajay is living at this point. In a short amount of time, Ajay has gone from having a life of working hard to maintain good grades and helping to take care of Birju, all of which was burdening, to having a girlfriend and some hope for a better future yet still having to take care of Birju. The contrast between the two - the pride he feels for his grades and the happiness he feels with Minakshi, versus the weight he feels with Birju's situation - is almost too much for Ajay to bear.

The reader can see the pressure of the contrasting situations from the beginning of the chapter, when Ajay is proud of himself for getting good grades, yet feels both guilty and disgusted with himself. Ajay's guilt is for doing well and feeling proud when Birju is stuck as a vegetable for the rest of his life. His self-loathing is because he wonders why he should be so proud of himself when nine other students achieved the same as he



achieved. The way Ajay has positioned himself in his family has taken over his identity: that he doesn't matter, that he should be pushed to the side so that others are recognized, and that his achievements are nothing special, because someone will always be either the same or better. This plays a part in Ajay's self-evolution, it is one of the reasons the process takes so long. Ajay's self-loathing and struggle to feel happiness without feeling guilt is so engrained in him that it is a back-and-forth, one step forward/two steps back kind of process.

The fact that Ajay is in another situation that is giving him hope (his relationship with Minakshi) is important to pay attention to. Not only is he allowing himself to dream of a better future than the one he has seen since Birju's accident, but he is also allowing happiness to seep in despite the overwhelming misery that usually takes place when he thinks about Birju. Even if it is momentary, Ajay having hope for a better future is enough to carry him from one day to the next without completely giving up.

Discussion Question 1

Given his character traits of being an introvert and lacking self-confidence, what is the significance of Ajay calling a girl to ask her on a date?

Discussion Question 2

Minakshi and Ajay connect with one another in more ways than just both being Indian immigrants. What makes the experience of having a girlfriend meaningful for Ajay?

Discussion Question 3

Ajay tries adding self-sabotage to his list of coping mechanisms, but it doesn't work. What is his attitude toward Priya after he denies telling her he loves her?

Vocabulary

carnival, collapse, favoritism, reasonable, timidly, shyness, engineer, obligations, burden, imply, boyfriend, girlfriend, maples, crab apples, parka, mysterious, pneumonia, irrationality, conscious



Chapter 11

Summary

Ajay starts having Minakshi over to his house when his parents aren't there. She continues to represent escape and a better future for Ajay, however this makes him more impatient with his mother. Ajay helps his mother bathe Birju almost every morning, and one morning Ajay became increasingly impatient and angry because his mother was telling him that he helped take care of Birju because of guilt, not love. Shuba's accusation causes Ajay to strip down to nothing as he yells at his mother. She yells back, saying that if Birju were all right she would tell him to "Take your stupid grades and die," (page 175).

Ajay is in 11th grade now. Sometimes he got to go out to the movies with Minakshi, since he told his parents he was meeting friends and she told her parents the same. He was happy having a life with Minakshi, and looked down on his parents for their unhappiness.

Rajinder's drinking habit gets worse. He begins not going to work, instead drinking and/or lying in bed most or all of the day. Rajinder and Shuba continue to fight, with Shuba becoming more and more impatient with Rajinder's bad habit. One day, Ajay comes home from school and finds his father sitting at the kitchen table. That night, he swears on Birju's life that he will stop drinking. Shuba and Ajay watch him every moment that he's home, and the dry spell lasts for several months.

During the time when Rajinder did not drink, Ajay describes his family life as wonderful; Ajay is happier during this time than at any other time in the novel. Rajinder and Shuba still fought, but not as much as before. Once he started drinking again, his behavior went back to how it had been before: lying in his bed, and he and Shuba fighting. There is even one night when Rajinder stays out in the snow for so long that he could have gotten frostbite or hypothermia; the nurse's aide finds him and wakes Shuba to let her know. About a month later, Rajinder doesn't come home from work. They are worried, but around noon the next day Bellevue Hospital in Manhattan called and said Rajinder was admitted there the night before.

When Ajay and Shuba get to the hospital, Ajay doesn't recognize Rajinder. Ajay is disturbed by this, because he thinks that by not recognizing his father, he has lost his father completely. Rajinder explains to Shuba and Ajay that he is going to work hard to get better, with the help of the hospital. Rajinder is smiling as he tells his family what he considers to be good news; Shuba and Ajay remain skeptical, but are hopeful.

Analysis

There is a decent amount of tug-of-war going on in Chapter 11, especially for Ajay. While the situation with Birju remains the same, his relationship with Minakshi moves up



a step in the physical department, his dad's drinking worsens, then betters, then worsens to an even greater extent, then stops completely. Ajay's relationship with his mother goes back and forth, as well. They argue almost every morning while they bathe Birju, yet worry together when Rajinder doesn't come home from work. They argue so intensely, mainly started by Ajay because of his sense of isolation, yet they rely heavily on each other for physical and emotional support. Though Ajay is obviously more mature in 11th grade than he was when Birju first had his accident when Ajay was 10 years old, Ajay's ability to healthily process his situation remains somewhat stagnant. There has not been a time or even a chance for Ajay to express his feelings, and his achievements are passed over with a quick "good job", whereas before his accident Birju's accomplishments were celebrated.

An important aspect of this chapter is the fact that Ajay continues his relationship with Minakshi, an experience that gives him hope for an escape from his current life. Yet, the idea of escape only increases his irritation with his mother and with his family life. The fact that he has hope is a good thing, but the fact that the hope must be deferred is inhibiting Ajay's ability to truly experience that hope.

As Rajinder's drinking continues to take a toll on his family, it is easy to see why Shuba and Ajay fight more than any other pair in the house. They are the two household members holding the most amount of emotional responsibility, since Rajinder is fairly checked out of Birju's situation on a daily basis. It is a weighty burden for each to carry, and neither one of them has anywhere to go with their anger, frustration, confusion, and even isolation. Though they might lean on each other for support and a relief from how isolated they both feel, instead they isolate themselves even further by screaming at each other and accusing one another of not caring for either each other and/or Birju.

Since the chapter ends on Rajinder getting help for his drinking problem at Bellevue Hospital in Manhattan, the back-and-forth of the chapter continues. There is positivity and hope, then there is despair and desperation, then hope again. With the back-and-forth, the author may be trying to show the reader that Rajinder is in fact trying, and that eventually he will get it right for himself and for his family.

Discussion Question 1

What part does Ajay's mom play in the fact that even though Ajay holds hope for a better future, this hope angers him more than it relieves him?

Discussion Question 2

What are some of the factors that led Ajay's father to begin drinking again after months of sobriety?



Discussion Question 3

Why might Ajay feel as though he's losing his father, even though his father is checked into a rehab facility in an attempt to quit drinking once and for all?

Vocabulary

embodiment, impatient, inspired, stripping, stunned, khush, enraged, pleasurable, superiority, contempt, busyness, hopeless, exhilaration, descended, humiliations, Haitian, captivated, overwhelming, photocopied, admittance



Chapter 12

Summary

Shuba and Ajay visit Rajinder at Bellevue several times a week. Ajay notes the foul smell of his dad's room, but his family appreciated privacy so they often shut the door while visiting. While watching his mother care for his father, he realizes how much she cares for her husband. He sees his mother watching his father and sees it as an act of love, since she appears to be trying to memorize him.

During his father's stay at the hospital, Ajay, Rajinder, and Shuba attend group counseling sessions meant to support the families of alcoholics as they work through the sobriety process. Ajay sees it as very American to call drinking a disease and therefore avoid responsibility, so the reader knows that these counseling sessions are not his favorite time of the day. The counselor gives tips on how to effectively communicate with one another, as well as times when an addict might be more likely to drink, such as when he or she is H.A.L.T. - hungry, angry, lonely, or tired.

Ajay's father is released from Bellevue Hospital. Upon arriving home, he requests that he not have to see Birju that day. Beginning the night he comes home, Rajinder begins going to almost-nightly Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meetings. Ajay accompanies him at his mother's request so that Rajinder will not stop anywhere and begin drinking again. Ajay's impression of the AA meetings is not very positive; he gets angry at the different ethnicities and races of attendees who treat their alcoholism like it isn't their fault. He also gets irritated that white people, who receive a general privilege in society, have the same problems as Indian people, who are not treated nearly as well.

Rajinder's demeanor changed after he got out of the hospital. He was nervous and wouldn't look people in the eye. A few weeks later, he begins telling members of the community of his drinking problem and current road to recovery/sobriety. Ajay's mother is angry with him for embarrassing the family. She's also upset that he has shown himself as weak, because now she sees people as preying on her family. A financial planner visits and tries to get control from Rajinder of all of his family's finances. Rajinder doesn't allow it, but Shuba is still angry that he was even given the opportunity.

Minakshi finds out about Ajay's dad. Ajay is worried she will break up with him for the embarrassment, but instead she reveals that she doesn't like her father, either. Ajay is thankful for her because he has no other friends. He states how the boys at school don't like him for his arrogance and his good grades. He also describes a scene where a peer makes fun of his father, but that nobody at Ajay's lunch table joins in the mocking. Ajay knows that each of the other Indian students experience some level of shame due to their differences from other kids, and he seems to believe that while he's not friends with the other Indian students, there is an underlying sense of community that making fun of one's parents brings about one's own shame, and therefore isn't really something to joke about.



Analysis

When Ajay sees his mother seemingly memorizing his father as his father lay in bed, he describes this act as a "shiny bit of glass flashing from the bottom of a stream", which is a visual metaphor of how seeing his parents actually care for one another and not be exploding in rage at one another is a tiny ray of hope. In this situation, since it is his parents providing the hope and not a third party, Ajay does not become angry with his parents - especially with his mother - at feeling hopeful. Instead, he seems to carry this hope with him through the beginning of his dad's sobriety, hoping it lasts and that things at his house are really about to change for the better.

Going to a hospital to visit a loved one is second-nature to Shuba and Ajay now. She doesn't comment on as much of the hospital setting as he did when Birju was in the hospital and the nursing home. Though it's been several years since Birju was brought home, the memories have likely not faded, especially since Birju has been in the same condition since the day they brought him home from the nursing home.

The fact that Shuba and Ajay are skeptical about Rajinder's drinking habit truly being done with is natural, especially for all they went through in the few years leading up to his sobriety. The back-and-forth of his drinking then not, then drinking again; Rajinder's mood swings and depression; the increased responsibility placed on Shuba and Ajay - all would lead to a spirit of skepticism, wondering if this choice to stop drinking would stick. Yet, their skepticism doesn't stop them from supporting his efforts. In their characteristic show of family unity and loyalty, Shuba and Ajay care for Rajinder when he gets home. Ajay accompanies him to AA meetings upon Shuba's request, but Ajay doesn't put up a fight. He wants his dad to get better, and at this point he's already had to take on more family responsibility than a typical teenager that he probably thinks, what's one more responsibility? Especially since it is to help his dad stay sober, which hopefully will have a lasting impact on his family, Ajay seems willing to participate. In fact, the aspect of his dad's recovery that Ajay seems to have the most issue with is the fact that other races that are treated superior in mainstream society seem to have the same issues. Ajay thinks that if they're treated as superior, they shouldn't have the same issues as Indian people. Ajay also wants the alcoholics at the AA meetings to take responsibility for their actions, rather than calling alcoholism a disease, which is another example of the cultural differences present throughout the novel. It's also an indication that he still thinks high enough of his father that he will defend him in a room full of other races and ethnicities.

Ajay's experience with his peers is significant because at a time when his life started to look better, he was afraid to lose Minakshi, who has been his constant source of happiness and hope since they began dating. The fear of losing her and their relationship was probably more than he thought he could bear. The fact that she connects with him over a common dislike for their fathers must be a significant relief for Ajay, since he has essentially been alone - emotionally - for several years. It's a similar experience when the Vijay mocks Ajay's father for being a drunk; nobody else at the lunch table laughs and Ajay realizes it's because even though he's not technically



friends with any of them, they all have a source of shame for being so different than everyone else. At last, when he's almost done with high school, Ajay has found a sense of belonging.

Discussion Question 1

What are some of the changes the reader sees in Ajay's relationships with each of his parents?

Discussion Question 2

Birju is barely mentioned in Chapter 12. What is the significance of that at this point in Ajay's story about his family?

Discussion Question 3

How can the reader tell that Ajay appreciates Minakshi's reaction to hearing about the fact that Ajay's father is an alcoholic?

Vocabulary

marshes, nostalgia, memorizing, addicts, addiction, disease, alcoholic, diabetic, divorce, released, ordinary, huskily, phlegm, talcum powder, Christianity, convert, timid, apologetically, suspicion, middle-class, worship



Chapter 13

Summary

Ajay has been applying for colleges. Every time a letter arrives, the family prayed, just as they did when Birju's letter from the Bronx High School of Science came in the mail. Most of the letters were rejections, but eventually an acceptance letter comes from Princeton University. Though typically a happy occasion, Ajay wants no credit for getting accepted into Princeton. He states that it's all his mother's doing. For the first time in what seems like many months, the author shows an interaction between Ajay and Birju, where Ajay asks his brother how long he will keep lying there. Ajay is keenly aware of the fact that if not for the accident, Birju would be graduating college that year.

Ajay is now the one who gets requests to go to people's homes, since he is an example of an Indian boy who worked hard and got accepted into a prestigious university. One of the community members who requests Ajay's presence in their home is Mrs. Sethi, the woman who used to be his mother's best friend but has since abandoned her after finding out Rajinder was an alcoholic. Shuba treats Mrs. Sethi with a surface-level of respect, and speaks to her with an undertone of disgust and anger. She asks Mr. Sethi to give Ajay guidance for surviving in the culture of American university life, and even pushes for it when Mr. Sethi doesn't want to. They leave the Sethi home without finishing their dinner after Shuba is sarcastic to Mrs. Sethi.

Walking back from the Sethi home, Ajay remembers that he, Birju, and their mother used to go places at night. They would need a flashlight because the electricity would frequently go out. Ajay remembers that Birju would take the flashlight and offer to lead the way for his younger brother and his mother.

Analysis

The fact that Ajay was accepted into a prestigious university is significant; unfortunately Ajay sees it only as his mother's accomplishment. So much of Ajay's drive over the years has been to either catch up to where Birju would have been, or an attempt to gain his mother's attention and greater affection, or even a way to simply pass the time and escape the sad reality that was his home. He doesn't want to take any credit for the acceptance because he feels like the work put in was ultimately not for him; he wasn't self-motivated so why would he want recognition? Ajay's mother's response is not described, only Ajay's subsequent conversation with Birju about getting into Princeton. Ajay thinks that should've been Birju, since that's what his parents wanted more anyway (in his eyes, anyway).

Even being asked to go to people's houses does nothing to increase Ajay's excitement or pride over getting into an Ivy League school. Any possible pride he would feel is overshadowed by the feeling that it shouldn't be him, it should be Birju. He doesn't want



recognition for his accomplishment because he doesn't even feel like the accomplishment is entirely his. What's more, is that Ajay knows that to get into Princeton means that he will soon move away from his family. Though he has had a miserable family life for most of the time since he was 10 years old, a desire to remain loyal to his parents and brother stays with Ajay. He will now have to live away from home, hope his father doesn't begin drinking again, hope his mother can manage the level of care that Birju needs, and hope that the guilt from being away does not crush him.

The reader can see that Ajay still wishes Birju would snap out of his vegetative state and be available to lead them once again. Since Ajay once thought of his father as serving no purpose, it is likely that Ajay saw Birju as the leader of the family. The story Ajay describes here shows that he used to look to Birju for guidance and leadership. That has not been possible for about eight or so years, yet Ajay still wishes things would go back to how they were before. He liked being led by Birju because his parents seemed to expect Birju to lead. Once Birju had his accident, his parents never looked to Ajay to lead; they seemed to just assume he couldn't do it like Birju.

Discussion Question 1

Even though the family prays before opening Ajay's acceptance letters just as they did for Birju before the accident, how are the reactions different between Birju getting into the Bronx High School of Science and Ajay getting into Princeton University?

Discussion Question 2

How can the reader tell Shuba's true feelings toward Mrs. Sethi, even though a direct insult is never spoken?

Discussion Question 3

What has transpired that would make Ajay think of the memory with Birju leading him and their mother through the dark with a flashlight?

Vocabulary

altar, encyclopedia, evolution, borne, continuously, sensitivity, crockery, chickpeas, guidance, education



Chapter 14

Summary

Ajay is attending college at Princeton University. He comments on all the changes that are happening in his community due to the new immigrants coming from India: the food that's now available that didn't used to be (i.e., seeds for bitter gourds and deep red carrots); shops that opened in the bottom floors of what used to be just people's houses; houses torn down; immigrants who worked outdoors; and immigrants who had different backgrounds than the Indian immigrants from the 1960s and 1970s.

Ajay returned home twice a month to do laundry and bring back food, but also because his mother would call him crying that she was exhausted from being Birju's primary caretaker. Shuba and Rajinder still fought, but Rajinder stayed sober. He was gloomier than ever, though, according to Ajay (page 211).

Ajay's experience in college is enough to make him feel far from home. He works hard and studies late into the night at Firestone Library. He tries to fit in with his peers, putting up Jimi Hendrix and Escher posters. The author doesn't write about whether or not Ajay's efforts worked.

When he is home, Ajay reflects on how he wishes he loved Birju. Some of Ajay's Shakespeare coursework is the catalyst for Ajay's reflection, though his major was economics with a focus in econometrics. Ajay is still dating Minakshi into his freshman year of college, but eventually she begins dating someone else. Ajay tries filling the void by dating a German girl named Diana, but Ajay doesn't really like white people so it doesn't last very long.

After Ajay graduates from college he becomes an investment banker at a firm in New York City. He works most hours of the day, is promoted through the ranks at a quick pace, and makes a lot of money - \$700,000 in his first year as vice president. Almost as soon as he began working, Ajay began sending money home to his mother. He didn't stop, though she hoarded it as if he would someday soon stop sending her money. The money Ajay sent throughout the years allowed his parents to eventually hire a full-time, 24-hour nurse's aide for Birju.

Ajay didn't date "in a regular way" for about seven years (page 216). He would panic and sometimes leave his dates if they went to the bathroom. Eventually, he began longing for women he didn't even know. Then he met Hema, a lawyer. He took her to a resort in Mexico, even though he didn't know her very well. He thought she was beautiful. The novel ends with Ajay seeing Hema at the pool at the resort in Mexico he took her to. She had been drinking and so was approaching drunk, though she wasn't yet there. Ajay holds her in his arms and notices the beauty of their surroundings. He feels so happy that the happiness weighs on him in an uncomfortable way. This, he says, is when he knew he had a problem.



Analysis

Ajay has finally escaped his family life. He survived almost ten years after Birju's accident and makes it to one of the most prestigious universities in America. Yet, he remains lost. He continues going through the motions without really feeling anything about them. For example, his stoic attempt to fit in with culturally relevant posters, as well as his preference to spend his time in the library. He acknowledges his anger toward white people, which is a sentiment that has been present through most of the novel. Though Ajay doesn't ever do anything to aggressively express his anger toward white people, the feeling is always lurking beneath the surface, which is likely inhibiting to him building any kind of peer relations with any of the white students.

Ajay's description of the differences is also fairly void of emotion; they're more of a third-party observation than a first-person participation. Ajay's main interaction with the community is with his school and his family's temple, so the presence of new shops might not mean very much to him anyway. What is important about the differences Ajay observes is that he notices everything around him changing, yet his family stays the same: Birju is in the same condition, sometimes worse, than he was when they brought him home from the nursing home; Ajay's parents fight the same way they did before; and his father is still depressed about his and his family's lot in life. One of the reasons Ajay seemed to want escape from his home was because nothing changed; it was a constant state of misery with no relief. Now that things around his home are changing, but he's not living there to experience it, it's like the change is happening to someone else.

Ajay's career and financial success is met with the same lack of sentimentality as most of his other experiences throughout the novel. One of the first things he does with the money is send it home to his mother. Though not acknowledged, Ajay is likely doing this because he already feels guilty enough for being the brother who survived, for not being in Birju's place, and even for being happy about the fact that he's escaped and is whole and well. Unfortunately, Ajay has spent more than half of his life with the internal struggle of familial obligation versus self-preservation. The feelings inside him will not easily subside just because he moves away from home. Therefore, his success is likely to fuel the same kind of feelings of guilt and self-loathing that his good grades and Princeton acceptance caused. He seems to try and cover or bury or justify it by sending his mom thousands upon thousands of dollars, kind of as a way to prove himself to her and try to once and for all earn her approval.

Ajay's final experience as described in the novel is significant. He is at a beautiful resort in Mexico with a beautiful girl that excites him. The scene around him is joyful, happy, serene, and paradise-like. Yet, the happiness that he feels weighs heavily on him. This, he says, is when he knows he has a problem. Ajay's problem stems from two things: not being able to rest in his happiness, but also that he sees his happiness as being twisted. He's happy to be in paradise, but he's also happy to be holding his current girlfriend who is slightly intoxicated. Though he hated when his father drank, it is familiar. And even negative familiarity can still breed comfort. The other side of Ajay's



happiness, though, is that he cannot rest in it. It's a strange feeling for him to feel happy, one that he's felt so infrequently throughout his lifetime that it feels more like a burden than something positive.

Discussion Question 1

Why might Ajay feel like living just 45 minutes away from his parents' home is like living in another country?

Discussion Question 2

What do Ajay's observations about college life and his collegiate peers say about his perception of the American college population?

Discussion Question 3

How has Ajay's parents' experience with Birju changed as a result of the money Ajay sends to them from his job as an investment banker?

Vocabulary

fragile, dizzy, exhaustion, attendant, chaotic, Gothic, generations, suitemates, Middle Ages, Shakespeare, accountant, German, hoarded, panicked, longing, gracefully, goddesses, resort, pupils, dilated, seaplane



Characters

Ajay

Ajay Mishra is the narrator of the story as he tells how his family went from living in Delhi, India, in 1978 to living in Metuchen, New Jersey in present day. He tells the story from an adult perspective, but begins the tale when he is 8 years old. Since Ajay is the main character, it is his character arch the reader will most notice. When Ajay begins the story, he is an 8-year-old boy living in his brother's shadow. Their parents treat Birju as the smart son and Ajay as just another son. He has friends in Delhi, India, and leaves with some sadness, but ultimately, he is looking forward to living in America.

Almost two years after moving to America, Birju has an accident at his aunt's apartment complex pool. The incident changes the course of the Mishra family, including Ajay's personal evolution. While visiting his aunt in Arlington, Virginia, Ajay preferred to stay inside and watch cable television; his brother Birju is the one who went outside and to the swimming pool. When Birju first has his accident, as well as all of the years following until Ajay leaves the house, Ajay is a dutiful brother and son, reading to Birju, helping his mother lift Birju into the wheelchair, helping to bathe Birju, as well as other various tasks. Though his descriptions of how he spent his time with Birju are lacking sentiment, he is clear in his obligation to be a participatory member of his family. He has a distant relationship with his father, as his father drinks heavily and quickly distanced himself with the situation with Birju. Ajay's relationship with his mother is more emotion-filled, though most of the time they are negative emotions. Before and after Birju's accident, Ajay carried a relationship to his brother that is similar to typical brotherly relationships: jealousy over the difference in academic prowess, difference in ability to make friends, and finally the difference in their parents' affections toward each boy. Even in his vegetable state, Birju elicits jealousy from Ajay.

As Ajay grows through adolescence and young adulthood, the reader can see his transformation. Though he accomplishes getting into Princeton University, he remains unsatisfied with himself to the end. The transformation is in the way in which he relates to his family. Though he may never believe his parents care for him as much as they care for Birju, in time he seems to forgive them for it and move on in his relationships with his parents. In middle school and high school, Ajay has no friends. In middle school he is picked on, though never physically harmed. He tries to make friends, but does so in such an awkward manner that his attempts backfire. In high school, Ajay continues having no friends because of his boastful and displeasing attitude. He dates a girl named Minakshi for the last two or so years of high school, which is an experience that gives him hope for a better future than what he can imagine while at home.

Ajay loves to read. Upon first coming to America, he was enthralled by the size of the public library. He reads to Birju in the hospital, nursing home, and at their family home after Birju is brought home to be cared for. He gets lost in the stories of his books, and Ernest Hemingway comes to be his favorite author. The books Ajay reads allow him to



mentally and emotionally escape his depressing home life. At first, his father pays him a low sum of money for each book he reads. Eventually, he reads because he loves it.

After he graduates from Princeton, Ajay becomes an investment banker. He makes a lot of money and sends money home to his parents so they can properly care for Birju and not carry a financial burden. Doing so likely makes him feel important and needed, two sentiments he did not experience from his parents while he was growing up. However, no matter how financially successful and no matter the fact that he has a beautiful girlfriend and has the chance to be happy, Ajay begins and ends the novel with a sense of loss and grief over a life he could have had, as well as a life he wished he did have.

Birju

The reader does not know much about Birju, simply because the tragedy in the story involves Birju entering a vegetative state. However, before the accident, the author makes it clear that in his parents' eyes, Birju is the Chosen One. Birju is expected to get higher grades than Ajay, as evidenced by the fact that he is forced to study day and night for an entrance exam into the Bronx High School of Science. Ajay describes Birju as a mean boy who liked to pick on others, and in the few interactions the reader sees before the accident, it is true. However, Ajay does say that Birju is kinder in America than he was in India.

Before the accident, Birju liked to build model airplanes. In India he would collect stamps, but his hobbies, attitude, and social status changed once the family moved to America. Birju made friends easily and even had a girlfriend named Nancy before the accident. Birju frequently joked around with his mother, though not much interaction is shown with his father. Birju's social personality can also be seen when he prefers to go to the swimming pool and be among his peers, while Ajay prefers to stay home and watch television.

When Birju's accident occurs, it is the summer before high school starts. Birju had been accepted into the Bronx High School of Science, which he now cannot attend as he is in a permanent vegetative state. For the rest of the novel, Birju is a background to Ajay's personal growth and evolution. He cannot speak, eat, drink, bathe, toilet, or move by himself, and he relies on his parents, Ajay, and his nurses to do everything for him. He is fed through a feeding tube from the time of the accident through the rest of his life. He vomits and spits up frequently, as he cannot hold too much food at one time.

The reader is unable to know a specific characterization of Birju after the accident occurs, but as Birju remains a central character he is important to pay attention to. Because without trying, Birju remains a source of jealousy and frustration for Ajay. Though Birju cannot help the state he is in, his vegetative state fuels Ajay's jealousy that his parents' affection remains higher for Birju. Their attention also remains centered on Birju. Birju's state is tragic and depressing, but it is the catalyst for Ajay's entire personal journey.



Shuba Mishra

Shuba Mishra is Ajay and Birju's mom. She is referred to as Shuba by her husband, friends, and other community members. She is referred to as mother by Ajay. Shuba is a woman who does not show a great deal of affection. She has a pragmatic, matter-of-fact personality and expects people to do things because they make sense. She seems to favor Birju, as she rides her hopes on his intellect before the accident. She and Birju joke together more than she and Ajay. In India, Shuba's main role to care for the children. In America, she took a job at a garment factory. Shuba wears traditional India dress most of the time while at home and for going to temple, but upon going to work in the factory wears jeans. The longer the Mishra family was in America, the more Americanized her style seemed to get.

Shuba's relationship to her husband is quite perfunctory. They are married, live together, and have two children together, therefore they must co-exist; that is how Shuba treats her husband most of the time. When he begins drinking heavily and coming home drunk, Shuba does not sit idly by; she tells him he must stop, that he's going to kill somebody driving drunk, and she is not secretive about how much he bothers her. Ajay comments on his parents' relationship with one another at the beginning of the novel, saying that for as long as he can remember they have bothered each other. The author makes this clear in their interactions with one another.

Shuba's ability to care for her family is obvious when Birju has his accident, as well as when Mr. Mishra is admitted to Bellevue Hospital in Manhattan for his drinking. With Birju, she is faithfully by his bedside each day he is in the hospital, then at the nursing home. She fights with the hospital and insurance company until the insurance company agrees to pay for a nursing home for Birju. She then fights the nursing home when they do not properly care for Birju. She is an advocate for her family and is not afraid to fight for what she believes is right. When Mr. Mishra is admitted to Bellevue Hospital, Ajay observes Shuba watching him sleep, seemingly memorizing every detail of his face. Ajay sees this as a strong act of love, and he never forgets it. Though Shuba's affection for her family is not as outright as one might wish it to be, her actions speak volumes about how much she cares for her family.

Shuba's influence on Ajay shows itself in how hard he works. Though he is toiling to earn the affection of his parents as they freely dispense it to Birju, his mother is a woman who does not complain of work, but rather just gets done what needs to get done. Ajay sees his mother as being the main caretaker, as well as being the main planner, of the family. Shuba is respectful of the people who come into her home, and after Birju's accident there is a steady stream of visitors to whom she must be polite. An important note about Shuba as she relates to the members of her community: she often tells people that Birju is in a coma, even though he is not. She does not articulate why she does this, but the reader can garner that it is simply easier for her to believe and explain that her son is in a coma, since for all intents and purposes, he might as well be.



Rajinder Mishra

Mr. Mishra is the last main character out of the four members of the Mishra family. He is the breadwinner of the family and is the first one to go to America, staying there for about a year before sending airline tickets to Shuba, Birju and Ajay for them to join him. If Shuba lacks the expression of affection toward her family, Mr. Mishra does even more so. He is an apathetic-seeming man who shows little ups and downs in his emotional state; it's mostly just negative. Ajay describes him as glum-natured, a hypochondriac, and a man who can't pull himself out of a depression. He works but does not seem attached to his work; it is simply a means to an end. He becomes an alcoholic soon after Birju's accident, choosing to deal with the situation through a drunken stupor.

Mr. Mishra seems quite focused on the difference between Indians and whites, and specifically the way whites are more privileged even when they don't deserve it. Mr. Shuba makes comments throughout the novel relating to this sentiment, such as saying that Birju didn't receive mouth-to-mouth resuscitation at the time of his accident just because he was Indian. His dislike toward whites seems to make Shuba angry, though he doesn't stop or change his comments. Mr. Mishra fights with his wife only, and not with Birju or with Ajay. It is unclear as to the exact reason why, but the reader can assume that Mr. Mishra is fighting with his wife because she is his only clear equal. He does not become enraged with his children, nor does he yell at any of the people at the hospital or nursing home. He may feel comfortable enough with Shuba since she is both his equal and his spouse, someone whose presence in his life he is sure of.

Mr. Mishra's main influence on Ajay seems to be that Ajay is left without a connection to his father, despite the fact that they live in the same household. Ajay says at the beginning of the novel that he used to think his father was assigned to their family by the government, that's how much of a lack of sentiment there is exuding from Mr. Mishra as well as between Ajay and his father. As time goes on, Ajay's thought on this changes, as he understands that the government did not assign his father to their family. However, the disconnect exists for most of Ajay's life. It is only in the prologue, which is when Ajay is 40 years old and his father is 72 years old that the two share a positive interaction. The rest of the novel shows the two of them not even fighting, just existing around each other in the wake of Birju's accident. Even when Ajay attends Alcoholics Anonymous meetings with his father, the two do not share an emotional connection.

Jeff and Michael

Jeff and Michael are two of Ajay's peers in middle school. Ajay tires of keeping all of the details of Birju under wraps and to himself, so he lays them out for Jeff and Michael, starting with Jeff. Jeff's initial response to Ajay's details about Birju and Birju's accident are fairly stoic; he simply nods his head and goes along with what Ajay is telling him. Jeff and Michael both ask Ajay a few questions about Birju's condition, though they seem to be mocking more than they are genuinely interested. Eventually, Jeff and



Michael begin laughing in Ajay's face, then blatantly ignoring Ajay as he talks, even if it's not about his brother.

It is likely that Jeff and Michael, like any middle schooler, would wonder why one of their peers is sharing deep, personal information when the two (Ajay and Jeff nor Ajay and Michael) are not close friends. They likely feel uncomfortable with the information Ajay is giving them and are not completely sure how to tell him, so they turn on him instead.

Jeff and Michael are not major characters, but they are important in that they are Ajay's first attempt at a social life since Birju's accident, and he fails miserably with them. The experience sets him up for the rest of middle and high school, as he does not have any friends during any of that time.

Mr. Narayan, pundit

Mr. Narayan is a pundit present at the temple in Metuchen, New Jersey. A pundit is another word for guru, and his role in the temple is to pray for the family and to offer spiritual encouragement. Mr. Narayan was a volunteer pundit whose real job was as an engineer. Ajay does not like pundits in general, and he specifically didn't like Mr. Narayan because he was not even a genuine pundit. Mr. Narayan was one of the first ones to visit the day Birju was brought to the house from the nursing home. He continued to visit Birju at the Mishra's home from time to time, praying for and singing over Birju in an attempt to heal him.

His presence in the story is important because religion is one of the themes that runs throughout "Family Life". The Mishra family prays, chants, and sings hymns throughout the entire novel, and especially after Birju's accident. The fact that Mr. Narayan has a place in the story is an indication that even though his presence bothers Ajay, Mr. and Mrs. Mishra are willing to accept any form of spiritual encouragement others are willing to offer.

Mrs. Sethi

Mrs. Sethi is an Indian woman who lives in Metuchen. She visits Birju and Shuba on a regular basis, providing company for Shuba and support for their situation. She is a minor character, however her shift in allegiance is important to note. Mrs. Sethi is someone Shuba might consider her best friend, if Shuba considered people to be her close friends. However, when the truth about Mr. Mishra being an alcoholic reaches the community, Mrs. Sethi withdraws her friendship. In a sarcastic and fighter-like move, Shuba goes to Mrs. Sethi's home after Ajay gets into Princeton in order for Mr. and Mrs. Sethi to provide advice to Ajay about going to college, since neither Mr. or Mrs. Mishra went to university. At her home, Mrs. Sethi appears defeated as Shuba is openly, yet subtly, rude to Mrs. Sethi, as a sort of payback for her dropping the friendship.



Metuchen community members

The Metuchen community members show up at the nursing home as well as at the Mishra family home. They come for many reasons, depending on the circumstances currently surrounding the Mishra family. When Birju is in the nursing home, members of the community come to show Shuba their support, to show their children what could happen if they are not careful, and also to try and heal Birju. Shuba tells many members of the community that Birju is in a coma, even though he is not.

When Birju comes to live at the house in Metuchen, community members visit from morning until night. They help set things up, prepare and provide food and prayers, and offer Shuba and Mr. Mishra sympathy and support. They continue visiting for the same reasons, however different circumstances bring about different reasons for visits. For example, when the SATs are coming up, families begin arriving at the Mishra home for Shuba to extend blessings onto the teenagers, that they may do well on the SATs. Ajay says it is because suffering is considered a blessing; since the Mishra family was suffering with Birju's situation, other families wanted the blessings on their family. In other situations, community members, specifically the women, would come to the Mishra house to simply provide company for Shuba. Mrs. Sethi became her best friend. Community members also came for Shuba to dispense advice to their children.

It can be assumed by the reader, based on the Mishra family's views of other cultures, that all community members who visit at the nursing home as well as at their home are Indian.

Self-proclaimed 'miracle workers'

The self-proclaimed "miracle workers" are people who visited Birju at the nursing home as well as at the Mishra family home in an attempt to heal Birju. They all proclaimed that they could work a miracle and change his state of being. They try praying for Birju, talking to him, pushing and pulling on his limbs, as well as chanting. Most of the "miracle workers" are unnamed. One who is named is Mr. Mehta, a man who is mentally ill but manages to stick around the Mishra family for almost a month before his wife begins to complain about his constant absence.

Ajay does not appreciate these "miracle workers" because he does not believe in them. He sees them as a nuisance, though he treats them with respect.

Minakshi

Ajay's second object of his affection and his first real girlfriend was Minakshi. For a period of time in 10th grade, Ajay told Minakshi he loved her, but only in passing whispers so that she couldn't for sure tell it was him telling her he loved her. Once she realized what was going on, they began talking and soon after dating. Ajay and Minakshi dated the rest of high school and even into their freshman year of college.



Minakshi was going to school in Virginia, and eventually began dating someone else. Ajay was upset about getting dumped, though he eventually moved forward. Minakshi was the most significant girlfriend for Ajay because not only did she last the longest, but she knew the most about his family history and current situation, and yet she stuck around. Ajay found a kindred spirit in her, since she didn't get along with her father, either. They enjoyed a close emotional as well as physical relationship.

Ajay's Aunt from Arlington, VA

Ajay's aunt who lives in Virginia is his dad's sister. She plays a very minor role in the story, and once Birju moves from the hospital in Virginia to the nursing home in New Jersey, his aunt is not mentioned again. However, it is important to note that she is the reason Ajay and Birju went to Arlington, Virginia, for the summer. They went to visit her and to spend time somewhere other than New York. Though she is obviously not the reason for Birju's accident, without her presence and the boys going to Virginia for the summer, Birju's accident would not have happened.

Members of Alcoholics Anonymous

Ajay attends Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meetings with his father after his father's release from Bellevue Hospital. While they are a minor part of the story, they are another avenue for the author to show Ajay's perception of the differences between Indian and white cultures. While at the AA meetings, Ajay becomes frustrated that AA members talk about alcoholism like a disease that they can't control. Ajay has seen what a drinking problem does to a family, and he sees this drinking as a choice rather than a demon that has control over a person's thoughts and actions. Ajay becomes particularly angry when an AA member is white, because he thinks that if whites are so superior (as they are treated that way by the rest of society), how and why do they have the same problems as Indians and people from other cultures.

Financial Planner

A financial planner visits the Mishra family toward the end of Chapter 12. He is a very minor character, but his presence is significant in the fact that he is attempting to prey on the Mishra family after finding out what Ajay's dad is an alcoholic. The fact that he tries to take over the Mishra's finances is telling of his personality, and the fact that Mr. Mishra denies him the ability is telling of his continued strength, even during his recovery.

Hema

The story ends with Ajay and Hema on vacation together in Cancun. She is a new girlfriend for him, and his happiness with her weighs on him heavily.

Ernest Hemingway

Ernest Hemingway is the author Ajay ends up favoring. Even though Hemingway is a person, he can be considered an important object in "Family Life". Ajay favors his writing so much that he uses his own money to purchase Hemingway's books instead of just borrowing them from the library; this way, he could take notes in the books and remember what he learned from them. Hemingway was a big part of Ajay's escape from his family's reality, especially until he got a girlfriend.

Hemingway's writing style is to the point, lacking in large flourishes of language. It would be easy for Ajay to connect to this style of writing, since he himself was not a flourisher by any means. It is important to note that "Family Life" is essentially an autobiography for Akhil Sharma, whose writing style seems to mimic Hemingway's in its straight-forward narrative style.



Symbols and Symbolism

Doctors in lab coats

In the beginning of the novel, Ajay is describing his father. According to Ajay, his father loves science and therefore works to spend time around as much science as he can, which means that Rajinder spends a portion of his time in clinics talking to the doctors in lab coats. It is at these clinics, talking to these doctors in lab coats, that Rajinder feels that he is close to important things. The doctors are a symbol for Rajinder's desire to be thought of as better than he thinks he is. Rajinder has always wanted to be in a higher social class, and putting himself among doctors in lab coats makes him feel that he might someday reach that goal.

Airplane tickets to America

A year after he leaves Delhi, Rajinder sends airplane tickets to his wife and two sons so they may join him in Queens, New York, where he's been working and living since he got to America. The tickets are important to the story because without them, the Mishra family would never have left Delhi. Though Ajay does not process the permanence of a one-way ticket until many months into living in America, he knows they are important.

The tickets are also a way for Ajay to see that his dad does serve a purpose in his family. For much of his childhood, Ajay thought that his father had been assigned to his family by the government. By his father getting them tickets to America, Ajay could see that his dad did serve a greater function than Ajay had previously thought. While this does not necessarily connect Ajay and his father on a deep level, it serves to connect Ajay to his family, which is important considering how isolated he eventually becomes after Birju's accident.

Birju's bicycle and Ajay's yellow bucket of toys

Birju's bicycle and Ajay's yellow bucket of toys serve as a reminder for the reader that these characters do not claim ownership of very much. Birju sobs when his bicycle is sold, and Ajay feels obligated to give away his toys instead of just leaving them at his house; he feels like he's abandoning them.

The author's description of Birju and Ajay's connections to their material goods sets up the abundance they feel once they get to America and have hot, running water every day, as well as a huge library of books from which to borrow. In Delhi, the family is clearly poor (by American standards, anyway). By comparison, the Mishra family feels wealthy once arriving and living in America.



Snow

The first time it snows in America, Ajay states that he feels like he's in a book or a TV show. It is surreal to his eyes that he has never seen snow, and it puts him in a place where he feels like his life is something fantastical that's been made up. It's also a representation of the brand new life he and his family are about to live, something completely different than what they lived in India.

Ajay's books

In Chapter 2, the reader gets their first clue into how much books and stories will mean to Ajay. At first, he is elated at the library's selection of books as compared to the libraries he knew back in India. Later in the novel, he begins escaping into books. He is always reading and eventually comes to love Ernest Hemingway's work so much so that he begins purchasing them instead of just borrowing them from the library. This way, he can mark them up with notes as he studies how to be a writer.

The books serve as a way for Ajay to feel a connection with something, since he struggles to connect with his family after Birju's accident. Since his mother shows most of her affection and attention to Birju, and his father becomes an alcoholic, Ajay has to feel affection from somewhere or the loneliness would be too overwhelming. He finds this in the stories he reads. The books also serve as a way for Ajay to escape his reality.

Bronx High School of Science

The Bronx High School of Science is the school that Ajay's parents push Birju to study for and get accepted into. Birju gets accepted into the school, though he does not end up attending because of his pool accident. The school itself, however, remains a symbol throughout the book for what could have been. Ajay even mentions it when he and his mom are opening his acceptance letter to Princeton, 8 years after they opened Birju's letter from the Bronx High School of Science. A common thread throughout "Family Life" is grieving what could have been had Birju not become permanently disabled by his accident, and the school is a representation of that.

Altars

The Mishra family builds an altar in Birju's hospital room, in their apartment when Birju is still in the nursing home, and then again in their home in New Jersey. Each altar is a symbol of hope for the Mishra family; they pray daily for Birju's healing, and they pray at other times when they feel like they need divine intervention, e.g., for Birju to get into the Bronx High School of Science; for Ajay to get into Princeton; and for Ajay's father to stop drinking. The altars at the temples at which the Mishra family prays serve the same function. Ajay states that the most important thing was to appeal to God (page 57), and so the altars were used to do just that.



Pizza and candy

The Christmas after Birju's accident, Ajay has his first emotional breakdown in front of his parents. He is upset that he is not having a normal Christmas like his peers, and during his emotional breakdown he says that all he wants are pizza and candy. His father takes him to a strip mall to get both of those things, and to Ajay these are objects of comfort. Ajay has lost his brother, and is in the process of losing the emotional presence of his parents. Nothing can possibly take their places, but comfort food is enough to console him for at least the time being.

Invitations to other people's homes

Ajay, Shuba, and Rajinder began getting invitations to the homes of other members of the Indian community. They continue receiving invitations throughout the years, all of which represent a sense of community that is strung throughout the novel. Though the invitations stop when the community learns of Rajinder's alcoholism, there are many years where the Mishra's suffering and subsequently perceived wisdom are touted as meaningful and valuable, inciting dinner and holiday invitations.

Ajay does not appreciate the visits to others' homes, as he gets nervous being around a lot of people. He also has a difficult time relating to people who have not experienced a tragedy such as his family has, and therefore finds the gatherings meaningless. The author makes apparent the contrast between the community's outreach and the fact that Ajay remains isolated in his grief and anger.

Ajay's conversations with Birju

Ajay has conversations with Birju as Birju is lying in his hospital bed. They are obviously one-sided conversations, as Birju is in a permanent vegetative state. However, Ajay seems to use these conversations to release pent-up emotions. Even though Ajay does not show grand expressions of emotion to Birju during these conversations, each time Ajay talks to Birju he is calmed from a state of anxiety. Also, the fact that Ajay is able to tease Birju is an indication that despite the inability to make things normal, Ajay is willing to try anything he can to put at least a small bit of normalcy into his family's life.

Stones in Ajay's pocket

When Ajay and his mom begin going on walks in the evenings, Ajay carries stones in his pockets. At this point in the story, he is being made fun of regularly at school for being Indian and for his Indian traditions. When Ajay and his mother walk, cars drive by and shout curses at the two of them, including things like 'sand nigger' and 'haji'. The stones in Ajay's pocket are not explained though they may serve as a distraction for Ajay. He can think about their weight in his pocket, or he can fidget with them as he and his mom



walk. They might also serve as a reminder of his own shame, which Ajay seems to sometimes prefer to sit in rather than climb out of.

Rajinder's birthday

One year, on Rajinder's birthday, even though he and Shuba had been regularly fighting with an intense rage, Shuba made for him his favorite dinner and dessert, and the family had a nice, calm evening. It was a respite night in the midst of all of the family's strife and suffering. For Ajay, it was an act of kindness, a reminder of the family he once had and wished he still had.

Ajay getting naked while caring for Birju

At one point in helping his mother care for Birju, Ajay strips down to wear nothing. He is so frustrated with his mother's lack of seeing him and paying him any mind, that his stripping down is symbolic of bearing it all, yet still being rejected. Ajay has gotten good grades, stayed out of trouble, and continued helping with Birju, yet his parents remain emotionally distant. His mother only talks back at him, leaving Ajay to his ever-present sense of loneliness and isolation.

Ajay's acceptance letter to Princeton

Ajay's acceptance letter to Princeton serves as his ticket out of his house. After several rejections from other colleges and universities, to be accepted to such a prestigious one is Ajay's reward, even if he doesn't see it that way. Ajay wants no credit for his getting into Princeton, since the main motivation for his academic discipline has always been a striving to live up to the standard his parents set for Birju. That's why the acceptance letter does not represent Ajay's hard work, in Ajay's eyes, anyway. It is his ticket out of the house and gives him the ability to think of a different future than the one he's been forced to dream of under his parents' lack of emotional presence.

Flashlight

Near the end of the novel, Ajay remembers when the electricity used to go out in Delhi and he, Birju, and their mother would be walking back from somewhere in the dark. Ajay remembers that Birju would take the flashlight and lead Ajay and Shuba out of darkness. A powerful memory, it gives the reader insight into how Ajay still remembers Birju: as a leader. Especially since he didn't see his own father as a leader, Ajay still remembers when it was his older brother who kept him and their mother safe. It is also an indication that even though Birju has been a vegetable for many years, he is still leading the way since everything his family says and does seems to be determined by Birju's never-ending needs.

Settings

Mishra family home in Metuchen, New Jersey

Most of the novel takes place in the Mishra family home located in Metuchen, New Jersey. The family moves into this home when Ajay is about 10 years old, and they do so after Birju's accident so that they can bring Birju home and keep an eye on him and care for him themselves (with the help of nurses). Mr. and Mrs. Mishra chose Metuchen, NJ, because Metuchen is one of the few towns that has a temple. It is in this house that the following happens: Birju is cared for after leaving the nursing home; community members visit to offer support for the Mishra family (at which time Ajay compares the feeling in his home to the feeling in a temple on a holiday); community members visit in order to receive a blessing from Mrs. Mishra; miracle workers visit with claims and hopes of healing Birju; Ajay reads Ernest Hemingway and tries to learn how to become a writer; and Ajay's parents express extreme rage with one another.

Delhi, India

After the introduction to the story, Ajay flashes back to when he was 8 years old in 1978, living in Delhi, India, with his older brother Birju and his parents. The four of them lived in two cement rooms on the roof of a building. The descriptions are void of sentiment and indicate poverty. In India, Ajay and Birju play with other kids in the neighborhood and participate in typical 8- and 12-year old boy activities. Ajay doesn't describe a particular attachment to Delhi or India in general, though once he's in America and realizes he's not going back to India, a certain sadness takes over him.

An important piece of the story to note about Delhi, India, is the way Ajay describes his father's relation to the city and to the country. Ajay sees his father as pointless, having his mother as his main caretaker. Ajay is aware that his father holds some of that same sentiment for himself, as handed down to him by India. In India, Ajay's father feels forgotten and unworthy, which is one of the biggest catalysts for the Mishra family's move to America.

Ajay's school in America

Ajay's school is the setting of much agony for Ajay. It is there he experiences similar isolation as he does at home. At school, Ajay doesn't have any friends until he begins dating Minakshi in high school. Ajay doesn't get beat up, but he gets made fun of on a regular basis. Ajay spends his time in school either trying to make friends, which is difficult because he feels like he can't relate to anyone, or simply trying to get the best grades that he can. In high school is when his school experience seems to level out; even though he still has no friends aside from his girlfriend, he describes a silent kinship with the other Indian children who attend his same school.



It should be noted that Birju's school is Ajay's school at the beginning of the novel, but after Birju's accident he does not attend school.

Arlington, Virginia

Arlington, Virginia, is where Ajay's dad's sister lives. Ajay and Birju spent their first couple summers in America in Arlington. The city itself is never described, only that Ajay and Birju's aunt lived in an apartment with cable and a swimming pool nearby. Ajay preferred to lie on his aunt's sofa and watch cable television. It is in his aunt's apartment complex in Arlington that Birju has his accident that changes the course of the Mishra family's lives. After the accident, Ajay's mom enrolls him in school in Arlington for a period of time until Birju can be moved from the hospital to a nursing home back in New York.

Temple in New Jersey

The Mishra family goes to temple while living in New Jersey. They likely attended in Queens, as well, though it is never specifically stated. Religion is a theme throughout "Family Life", and the family's temple attendance indicates their hope in a greater power to heal Birju and free them from the snare of caring for him 24/7. In fact, Mr. and Mrs. Mishra chose Metuchen, New Jersey, specifically because it was one of three nearby towns with a temple. At the temple in New Jersey, Ajay's family prays and talks with a pundit, Mr. Narayan. Ajay describes each temple as basically a converted church with a "musty American smell" (page 76) with idol-lined walls.

Hospital in Arlington, Virginia

Ajay and his mother spend every day for weeks going to the hospital in Arlington, Virginia, where Birju is taken care of immediately following his accident. During the summer, Ajay spent all day at the hospital. Once school started, he would go to the hospital right after the school day ended. The hospital is described as a typical hospital, with dingy lights above and a scent that is a mix of chemicals and illness. For a while after Birju's accident, Ajay sat by his bedside and chanted prayers. Eventually, Ajay began spending time in the hospital lounge, reading and watching television.

The hospital is also the site of much agony for Mrs. Mishra. She fights with hospital administrators and the insurance company over the finances of Birju's care. She is unhappy with their assessment that Birju needs to be moved since his condition has stabilized, since the insurance company insisted that they wouldn't pay for a nursing home. Birju does not move out of the hospital until the insurance company agreed to pay for a nursing home.



Nursing home in New Jersey

Birju is moved to a nursing home in Metuchen, New Jersey, around Christmas time the same year of his accident. Just as when he was in the hospital, Ajay and his mom visited every day. Ajay's father also visited every day. At the beginning, Ajay would read to Birju from an old issue of "Chandamama", an Indian monthly magazine for children. The nursing home was located across the street from a hospital, and the two were connected by a bridge. The staff at the nursing home care improperly for Birju, and so Mr. and Mrs. Mishra decide to bring Birju home to care for him themselves. They hire nurses, but at least at their home they can keep an eye on the nurses and they know Birju will never miss a meal or his medication.

It is also important to note that members of the local Indian community visited Birju and the Mishra family at the nursing home. Some of the visitors were families trying to teach their children a lesson, others were people who said they could heal Birju, and also some community members came to offer support in the form of dinner invitations and temporary distractions.

Mishra family's apartment in Metuchen, New Jersey

After moving from Queens, New York, the Mishra family lived in a small studio apartment. Ajay slept on the sofa and his parents slept on a sponge mattress set up behind the sofa. The apartment consisted of a small kitchenette and a television that sat on a cardboard box. On the weekends, Ajay's dad would stay up late watching movies on tape (VHS). It is while the Mishra family is living at the apartment that Mr. Mishra begins to drink heavily. On the weekends, sometimes Mr. Mishra would remain on his mattress for most of the day instead of going to visit Birju at the nursing home.

Woods behind Ajay's school

The woods behind Ajay's school is where Ajay and Minakshi kiss each afternoon after school. It is a popular make-out spot, covered with maple and crab apple trees. The woods is an important setting for Ajay because it is here that he can physically escape his home situation. While mentally he had always escaped through books, the woods offered Ajay a physical distraction from his home life. Kissing Minakshi every day gives him hope that someday his life will be okay, and the woods is the setting for that sentiment.

Bellevue Hospital in Manhattan, New York City, New York

One night, Mr. Mishra doesn't come home. Mrs. Mishra and Ajay fear the worst, however they find out that he has checked himself into Bellevue Hospital in Manhattan so that he can once and for all give up his drinking habit. Mrs. Mishra and Ajay visit



Ajay's father several times a week during his stay. Mr. Mishra's room is described as having green walls and smelling of sweat and unwashed clothes. It is at Bellevue that Ajay realizes how much his mother cares for his father, as he sees her faithfully sitting by his bedside, watching him as he slept and healed. Bellevue is the site of the family's first counseling session before Mr. Mishra is released.

Alcoholics Anonymous meetings

After being released from Bellevue, Mr. Mishra begins attending Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meetings. Ajay accompanies him at his mother's request/instruction. At the meetings, Mr. Mishra listens intently to the other members of AA, while Ajay becomes angry that they are mostly white people who are complaining of having a disease (alcoholism). In the first little while after Mr. Mishra is released from the hospital, he and Ajay went to AA meetings nightly. The meetings took place in places like churches and party spaces.

Mr. and Mrs. Sethi's house

Ajay and Mrs. Mishra go to Mr. and Mrs. Sethi's house right after Ajay gets accepted into Princeton. Mrs. Sethi had been Mrs. Mishra's best friend for several years, but once she found out about Mr. Mishra's drinking stopped spending time at the Mishra house, as did many other community members. The significance of the Sethi house is that Mrs. Mishra uses the visit to their home as an opportunity to be nasty back to the woman who was her best friend. She brings Ajay there under the pretense of Mr. Sethi offering advice for Ajay for college, but works hard to cut down Mrs. Sethi, though more through her tone than through her words. The visit is short and uncomfortable, especially for Ajay.

Princeton

Ajay attends Princeton University after college. He feels far away from his parents, even though it's only about a 45-minute drive from where his parents live. The Gothic buildings and general atmosphere are enough to set him apart from the home life he's had since he was about 10 years old. Ajay lives in a suite with seven other guys, none of which he truly fit in with. Ajay spent many late nights at the Firestone Library in order to do well and keep his grades up.

Resort in Mexico

At the end of the novel, Ajay is a grown man with a girlfriend named Hema. He has not dated in about seven years, and with Hema he goes to a resort in Mexico. It is at the resort that Ajay realizes that he is unable to be content with happiness. He likes his girlfriend, knows she is beautiful, is among a beautiful scene of dragonflies, a pristine beach, a pool, palm trees, and breaking waves in the ocean. His happiness at the resort

is a "heavy happiness", which is when he realizes that he has a problem: the inability to rest in happiness.



Themes and Motifs

Family

Family is one of the major themes strung throughout "Family Life." The entire story is about Ajay's place in his family, how immediate family members relate to each other in good times and in bad, and dynamics between spouses, siblings, and parent-child are shown. It reads as a memoir at times, and everything that happens to Ajay always comes back to his family. Even Ajay's peer relations, good and bad, happen as a result of or reaction to his family life. It is through the varying dynamics of the different relationships within the immediate family that the reader can participate in the author's theme of 'family'.

For Ajay's parents, Shuba and Rajinder, family looks quite different yet quite the same. Neither one ever insists on abandoning the marriage or the family, even though there is less than a handful of positive interactions between the two throughout the entire novel. Both clearly have a high sense of obligation when it comes to their family, and no matter how difficult it is - or the coping strategies they use when faced with tragedy - both seem resolute on continuing the family unit as one. Happiness is never indicated as a necessity for one's family life. Only commitment is implied as the main ingredient, though the sentiment is never spoken.

For Ajay and his parents, the relationships vary slightly. He is fairly emotionally distant and somewhat of a stranger to both of his parents. In the beginning, Ajay remarks how he once thought his father had been assigned to his family from the government, a clear indication that he struggled to find and feel an emotional bond with his father. The emotional distance continues, especially as Mr. Mishra picks up a drinking habit that eventually controls him. Even after Mr. Mishra's short stay at a hospital and Ajay begins attending Alcoholics Anonymous meetings with his father, the distance remains. What gives the reader hope for an eventual reconciliation and good relationship is the prologue, where Ajay and his father share a positive, even fun-filled, interaction. However, throughout the entire story that is the only such interaction. Regarding his mother, Ajay is somewhat closer since she is the main caretaker. After Birju's accident, he is her main companion to the hospital and to the nursing home, and then her main helper when Birju is brought home to be cared for. However, despite the perfunctory actions Ajay completes under the obligation of being their son, his main feelings toward his parents seem to be resentment mixed with apathy, since their affections and attentions have always centered on Birju. The lack of sentiment shared between Ajay and his parents does not stop Ajay from sending thousands upon thousands of dollars once he begins earning a lot of money after college in order to support his parents and Birju. Though the action is born somewhat out of a constant need to earn his parents' affection, it is likely also born out of a strong sense of familial obligation. Ajay may have wanted a different life for most of his years, but he never abandoned his parents or his brother.



Though Birju experiences a tragic accident early on in the novel, the relationship between him and Ajay is clear enough for the reader to see a typical brother relationship: small arguments, tricks to see what the younger brother will believe, time spent together playing in the neighborhood with other kids, and the younger brother (along with the rest of the family) tailoring their lives so that the older brother gets into the best school. In India, the two play together with similar friends. Once they get to America, however, they have different friends and Birju even gets a girlfriend. Ajay sees that in America his brother is kinder and more socially accepted, however this has put a damper on their relationship because now Birju spends his time with his friends and his girlfriend instead of Ajay. After Birju's accident, Ajay acknowledges Birju in a similar manner to how he relates to his parents: more as the reason for and then the background to his miserable life. He performs obligatory acts (reading and chanting to Birju, bathing Birju) but as they cannot converse, the relationship they once had is gone. However, that does not stop Ajay from acting out of his sense of brotherly/familial obligation.

Note: Though extended family is mentioned in "Family Life", no member plays a significant role in the Mishra family's story aside from Ajay and Birju's aunt, and that is only because it is at her apartment complex where Birju has the accident.

Identity

Identity is a major theme throughout "Family Life". Ajay is only 8 years old when the story begins, but he spends the better part of his life trying to find his identity within his family as well as on his own. At first, he feels second-rate to his older brother Birju because Birju is the one being conditioned for a great school, and Birju is the one whose jokes are laughed at by his parents. A stronger bond seems to exist between Birju and his mother than between Ajay and his mother, and even though Ajay doesn't openly express his love for his mother, the reader can see that her acceptance of and attention toward him matters. However, until Birju's accident, Ajay lives in Birju's smarter-than-you shadow and wonders if his parents love him as much as they love Birju. After Birju's accident, Ajay is still left to wonder if his parents love him as much as they love Birju, simply for the fact that they barely interact with him and spend most of their time visiting, fighting for, or caring for Birju. Ajay is left to figure out who he is as a son and as a brother. He has to answer the big questions on his own: Who am I? Why am I here? What should I be doing with my life, now and in the future? Do my parents love me? Do I love my parents? Who would I be had Birju never gotten into this accident? His questions are never blatantly asked, but rather are implied through his insecurity.

As a result of an unclear identity at home, Ajay has difficulty relating to others. He does not have any friends at school. The one time Ajay tries to make a friend, it backfires on him, since all he does is talk about Birju's condition. He works hard to get good grades, but does not consider himself a great student since Birju is the one who got into the great school. There is no mention of Ajay even working toward getting into anything other than his neighborhood school, which again is a result of his place in his family as



his parents focus on Birju's condition. In high school, Ajay winds up having a girlfriend starting in 10th grade and then into his first year of college. The reader can see Ajay's sense of identity begin to shift here because it is one of the only times Ajay sees that he might have a better future than what his home life suggests. Dating - and particularly kissing - Minakshi gives him hope for a happy future.

Part of Ajay's identity is learned through his love of books, and specifically his affinity for Ernest Hemingway. Though he never becomes a writer as he sets out to do as an adolescent, he gets lost in his books. He finds a place to belong, to enjoy, to relish in if just for a little while. Though the author only mentions Ajay's reading habit a handful of times, the language surrounding those times is powerful and obviously an activity that Ajay does not abandon.

As Ajay graduates high school and attends Princeton University, the reader might think that since Ajay has gotten into a prestigious, Ivy League school, and goes on to become a successful investment banker, that Ajay's identity would be more solid and sure. Unfortunately, Ajay seems to continue floating through his existence as if watching it from a distance, sending money to his parents out of obligation and desire to care for them. He dates a couple women, and even takes one to Mexico, but he comments on how even though the scene and woman are both beautiful and serene, his happiness is making him heavy. All his years of toiling for happiness, working hard for his parents' affection and approval, has created a condition within him so that being content with himself and his place in life is near impossible.

Coping with tragedy

Coping with tragedy is a theme in "Family Life", as the oldest son of the Mishra family experiences a tragic accident that takes him from star student to vegetable with just one dive into a swimming pool. Birju is about 14 years old when he has his accident, and the Mishra family is forever altered as a result. Each member of the family copes with the tragedy differently, and each impacts the others with their individual coping strategies.

Ajay's coping strategy is to remain on the sidelines and do whatever his parents, in particular his mother, need. He remains at an emotional distance as he accompanies his mother every day to the hospital or nursing home, depending on where he is. He reads to, chants to, talks to, prays for, and bathes Birju, all out of obligation to his mother. When he is not around Birju or his family, he copes with the situation by getting lost in books, especially those authored by Ernest Hemingway. He also shares inappropriate information with his peers at school in an attempt to gain friends, which does not work. Ajay also prays in order to deal with his brother's condition. He talks to God as though God were a friend in the room, which seems to give Ajay some sense of relief in terms of having someone to talk to. As a teenager, Ajay escapes the misery of his family life by having a girlfriend; they kiss in the woods each day after school and for a short while, Ajay's reality fades into the background. Even after he moves out of his house for college and beyond, Ajay must still cope with the reality of his family's



situation. His approach remains the same: obligatory tasks that lack emotion or true processing.

Ajay's mom copes with Birju's accident by stoically caring for her son. She remains loyal and steadfast in her care for him, not complaining but rather expecting her other son (Ajay) and her husband to behave the same way. Her empathy for others becomes basically non-existent, save for a couple moments with Ajay when the reader sees that deep down she is sorry that this is his life, too. Shuba continues on with daily life as though this was meant to be her lot in life. She doesn't question it. Rather, she does what needs to be done. Her coping strategy is to solve one problem at a time, keeping Birju as her main priority.

Ajay's dad copes with Birju's condition quite differently. Keeping with the lack of sentiment, Ajay's dad's expression of despair over his son's condition comes out in a drinking habit. Soon after Birju comes home to live with the family and be cared for at home, Rajinder begins drinking alcohol to excess. His communication with Ajay is stoic and forced, and his communication with his wife is filled with anger and rage. He seems unsure as to how to actually handle Birju's condition, so he remains in denial by remaining in a drunken stupor. Mr. Mishra's condition goes so far as to hinder his performance at work, since eventually he ends up sleeping late during the workday and eventually not going to work for a short while. He does end up at Bellevue Hospital in Manhattan, and then begins the road to recovery. However, his lack of interaction with Birju demonstrates that even sober he is unsure of how to completely process and deal with his eldest son's condition.

The varying coping strategies of Ajay, Shuba, and Rajinder show that the human condition is fragile and unpredictable. While there are cultural factors that play into each character's dealing with Birju's accident and his current condition, each is wounded so deeply and confused so profoundly that they flee to whatever method comes second nature to them. Often, it is under extreme pressure that one's natural tendencies are tested. In this case, Shuba, Rajinder, and Ajay's natural tendencies play out in a mixture of obligation, loyalty, and denial.

Social Competition

The idea of social competition is mostly on the part of Rajinder, the patriarch of the Mishra family. Ajay is the narrator and he describes his father as feeling unwanted in India. The author makes it clear that Rajinder wants to move to America to feel like he matters. Ajay describes his father as feeling "forgotten" in India, but in America he has the potential to matter and to be known and seen. The result of that, however, is that Mr. Mishra is constantly trying to compete socially with his peers and his community.

First, Birju is pressured to attend the Bronx High School of Science, a school that would place the Mishra family higher on the social status scale. Ajay's father wants to be considered as the father of bright children, as he thinks that will improve his social



status. Though his dreams are dashed when Birju has his accident, Rajinder clearly still wants to be considered as important and as socially valued among his peers.

Another example of Rajinder's attitude of social competition is when he offers to pay Birju and Ajay 50 cents for each book they read. Again, he wants to be the father of smart children, as he thinks this will improve his social status in America. Though the deal doesn't last long, the fact that he offers it to his sons shows the reader that Rajinder cares very much how his family is perceived by the community.

Rajinder is also very interested in science, which obviously plays a part in him wanting his son to attend the Bronx High School of Science. What's important about this fact is that science is considered one of the more prestigious topics of study, since it is the heading under which medicine and technology fall. In the beginning of the novel, Ajay describes Rajinder's frequent visits to the clinic, not only because he was a hypochondriac, but also because he liked to be around doctors in lab coats because they were important things, and therefore Rajinder felt important simply being around them.

When Birju has his accident, Rajinder becomes an alcoholic. He can barely deal with the shame of having his oldest son in a permanent vegetative state because social competition is no longer possible. It is not until he has a near-death experience with alcohol and checks himself into Bellevue Hospital that Rajinder relaxes on his need to be socially accepted and have a high social status.

Personal sacrifice

Personal sacrifice is another major theme throughout "Family Life", but just like the theme of "Coping with tragedy", personal sacrifice manifested itself in different ways depending on the character. It is important to note that since the novel is entitled "Family Life", it is obvious that when the tragedy of Birju's accident happened, there was no question that there would be a dissolution of the family unit. The author is clear about his intentions from the start that this novel would be about the day-to-day happenings of a family.

After Birju's accident, his mother is the first one to show personal sacrifice. Since Ajay is still young when it happens - he is about 10 years old at the time - the older members of the family somewhat shield him from the gritty details of what was going on. Shuba does not miss one day at the hospital or the nursing home, presumably either losing or quitting her job at the garment factory. She does not complain about their new situation, she doesn't complain about the time spent in the hospital or in the nursing home, she doesn't complain about how much it does and will continue to cost to maintain their place of residence on only one income, and she does not complain about having to feed, bathe, and help toilet her oldest son. Shuba also fights for Birju when he is not properly cared for, sacrificing more of her time and energy to do so. The author makes it clear that Shuba's perspective on being a mother is that the mother is to do all she has to do in order to care for her son, no matter what those needs are. She does hire nurses



for when Birju is brought to live at home, but that is because she knows she does not have all of the medical know-how to give him everything he needs. Shuba's expression of personal sacrifice is in her time, her money, and her willingness to advocate for her son.

Rajinder, Birju and Ajay's father, expresses personal sacrifice somewhat differently. Though he remains in denial for much of the novel about Birju's situation by being drunk on a daily basis, he does continue to work in order to provide for his family. Also, he doesn't complain about Shuba not working and the loss of income from her spending each day with Birju. The personal sacrifice for Rajinder comes in the form of time and understanding that his wife needs to be the main caretaker for Birju. He might prefer to have a second income, especially since they will need continual care for Birju and they purchase a home, but he sacrifices that second income because he knows it's what his wife needs to do as Birju's mother.

Personal sacrifice comes into play for Ajay, too. As the younger sibling, even before Birju's accident, Ajay had to sacrifice time with his parents and his brother as Birju was studying for the Bronx High School of Science entrance exam. Since his parents' attention and affection leaned more toward Birju than it did him, Ajay had to learn to live with not having the relationship with his parents that his brother had. Ajay also had to accept sacrificing time with Birju, as Birju studied for hours each day. After Birju's accident, Ajay's personal sacrifice pretty much stayed the same, it just looked a little different. His parents' affections and attention were still pointed more toward Birju, and instead of fighting for it he let it happen. He also sacrificed his time, as he went to the hospital and nursing home without complaining, and he read to and chanted to Birju in the hopes of helping him get better. The author's description of Ajay's demeanor and attitude from the moment of Birju's accident all the way through adulthood suggests that Ajay was sacrificing healthy, meaningful relationships with his parents before he even realized it. Though the first section of the first chapter shows a positive relationship with his parents, it is not that way through the rest of the novel. As an adult, after leaving the house, Ajay sacrifices his personal wealth in favor of sending his parents hundreds of thousands of dollars, as he earns it as an investment banker.

The different ways each family member sacrifices for the sake of Birju's comfort or for the sake of the family unit's cohesiveness shows that even though each person made their own personal sacrifice, it is a shared family trait.

Cultural differences

Cultural Differences is a theme that is scattered throughout the novel. It is not at the forefront, like Family and Identity, but it is an important theme for Ajay and his family as they live their family life. The Mishra family is originally from Delhi, India, and so their first language is a certain dialect of the Hindi language. They know some English, Birju and Rajinder knowing more than Ajay and Shuba, but learn to be more fluent only after moving to America. Interestingly, the language barrier is not anything that any character mentions as a reason for having trouble assimilating to American culture. It is more the



difference in how families are structured, how children are treated by their parents, and the expectations people have of each other.

Toward the beginning of the novel, after the family moves to America, Shuba expects Birju to study most hours of the day for his entrance exam into the Bronx High School of Science. She comments that American parents do not expect enough of their children, and that she will not be that way. Shuba's focus in regards to cultural differences is always how she believes Indians should act as opposed to their white counterparts. Rajinder, however, focuses on the pieces of white culture of which he disapproves. For example, he makes a comment during one of Birju's breaks during the exam that, "These tests are for white people. How are we supposed to know what 'pew' means?" (page 43). His attitude influences Ajay's attitude, as Ajay also mostly focuses on aspects of white culture that in his eyes are uncomfortable and/or strange. For example, when Ajay joins his father for Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, Ajay is angry because he thinks white people should not have the same problems as Indians because they are treated with such a higher standard than Indians. He is angry that they are complaining of having a disease because he thinks they shouldn't have such an ailment, considering all the privilege they experience on a daily basis.

Toward the end of Ajay's time in high school, the author hints that while he is not friends with the group of Indian kids who attend his school, they all sit together as a kind of solidarity and likely for a sense of belonging, no matter how faint. One of Ajay's experiences where he spells out the differences between his culture and the white culture, and does so in an attitude of slight defeat, is when another Indian student at his school is mocking him for having an alcoholic father. The boy, Vijay, slurs his words and pretends to be Ajay's dad in a drunken stupor. The other students present at the lunch table become quiet, nobody saying anything on either side but seemingly supporting Ajay as they don't play into Vijay's mocking. Ajay goes on to describe how everyone sitting at that table has a different home life than the rest of the student body, and they know it. He states that most kids didn't have the heart to be mean because they were all different, and they all carried a sense of shame about it. Even though Ajay, Birju, Shuba, and Rajinder are never outwardly insulted for being an Indian among many whites, they carry with them a strong sense of knowing they are different, feeling shame because of it, and wanting to maintain their sense of identity within their culture even if that means they are starkly different from their community and peers.

It is important to note that there are a few cultural nuances that were accepted by members of the Mishra family, such as "The Love Boat" and American libraries for Ajay; they were his two favorite things about living in America. These are more surface-level acceptances and have little to do with Ajay's sense of self and his identity as a boy from India, but it is important to note that he did not hide away from everything American simply because his family overall preferred the Indian culture.



Religion

Religion is a theme throughout "Family Life" that exists a little before Birju's accident, but is most prominent after Birju's accident. Before Birju's accident, temple and praying to God is mentioned in regards to Birju's entrance exam. They hope their prayers will help Birju pass the test and therefore gain acceptance into the school. Once Birju's test results arrive, they go to temple before even opening the envelope in an effort to persuade the results, and also to calm their anxiety.

After Birju's accident, all of their temple and altar time is devoted to praying for Birju's healing. They speak with a pundit (spiritual guru), they pray to various gods, and they participate in typical practices of their religion. At home, the altar is used to pray for Birju's healing, as well. It is a makeshift altar and so is a white sheet over a box with incense to burn. The pundit also comes to the Mishra home once Birju moves there from the nursing home. His presence is an indication that the Mishra family appreciates the spiritual support, and that they continue to lean on their spiritual beliefs for comfort and healing.

Ajay has a unique approach to religion. He prays with his mom and he chants prayers to Birju while Birju is in the hospital, but he also has his own conversations with God. Sometimes their conversations are deeper than others, and sometimes the author stops the conversation when Ajay asks a particular kind of question, usually about Birju's healing. But Ajay is clear that he finds comfort in talking to God as a friend, especially since he does not have a friend of his own.

The fact that the Mishra family is looking to their religion for comfort and healing is an indication that religion is important to them. One thing to note is that Birju's circumstance never changes, and neither does Shuba's prayer practices. Ajay and Rajinder seem to step away from religious practices the longer Birju is in the vegetative state, but Shuba continues to pray and look to her religion for comfort. This is likely because of her fiercely loyal and committed personality; no matter what she is served in life, her philosophy seems to be that of acceptance.

Loneliness/isolation

Loneliness and isolation are most recognizable in Ajay, since he is the person pushed to the wayside due to his older brother's tragic accident. However, the concepts of loneliness and isolation show themselves in Ajay's parents, as well.

For Ajay, the loneliness starts when his family moves to America from Delhi, India. In India, Ajay experiences togetherness with his grandparents living nearby, time spent with his brother, and having fun with kids in his neighborhood. When the Mishra family moves to America, Birju finds more friends his own age and gets a girlfriend, Ajay has a hard time making friends and relating to peers, and his only family is his aunt in Virginia he and Birju stay with for two consecutive summers until Birju's accident. Ajay is left by himself and he feels the pain, noting that he got lost in books and how he preferred to



spend the days at his aunt's house laying on the couch watching cable television. With his parents, Ajay has a hard time connecting fully with them because of their constant praise of and affection toward Birju. He often wonders if they love Birju more than they love him, which would naturally lead to a sense of loneliness and isolation if a child is wondering whether or not his own parents love him as much as they love his older brother. Though Ajay might be more of an introvert than Birju, the author makes it clear that Ajay feels lonely due to his lack of meaningful, emotional connections.

After Birju's accident, Ajay's loneliness becomes stronger. He clearly feels ignored and sometimes even invisible to his parents, as they focus their efforts all on Birju. Though Ajay spends the time with his family, it is time spent worrying about or focusing on Birju. He continues to have no friends at school all through middle school, and even in high school he only feels like he fits in with Minakshi, the girlfriend he has from tenth grade through part of his freshman year of college. Ajay does not fight for his parents' attention, though he does things to try and obtain it. For example, one morning when Ajay and his mom were bathing Birju, the two of them were having an argument. So Ajay took off all of his clothes while yelling at his mother, hoping to just be seen by the woman who bore him. Throughout the novel Ajay is trying to find his place in his family, but he is doing so amidst a constant sense of loneliness and isolation.

Ajay and Birju's parents show their loneliness and isolation in the sense that they do not come together in Birju's tragedy. Rather, they deal with it on their own in two completely separate manners: Shuba by taking as much control of the situation as possible, and Rajinder by drinking heavily. Instead of coming together and leaning on each other for support, they isolate themselves and try to deal with the situation alone.

Jealousy

Jealousy is played out in Ajay and Rajinder. Ajay's jealousy begins as a young boy even before Birju's accident. He is jealous of how his parents seem to love Birju more than him, as well as Birju's ease in making friends once they move to America. Before Birju's accident, Ajay seems to not have an issue feeling jealous of his brother, as he sees it as a typical aspect of a brotherly relationship. However, after Birju's accident, Ajay's jealousy causes him to feel ashamed of himself. He wonders why he should be jealous of his parents showing more attention to Birju when Birju clearly needs it. Ajay also feels ashamed at his jealousy of Birju's vegetative state because he knows he wouldn't really like to be lying in a hospital bed, he's just having such a hard time at school that sometimes he thinks being in a vegetative state would be easier than living his day-to-day life. Ajay's jealousy calms down as he gets older and grows more into himself, however because it is an emotion that has been rooted inside of him since he was a young child, it is not easily dispensed of.

Rajinder's jealousy is expressed in his anger toward Birju's accident and current circumstance. He is obviously jealous of other families who do not have to deal with this kind of situation. The author makes it very clear that Mr. Mishra does not love white culture or white people, but is jealous of how easy they have it (in his eyes, anyway).



The fact that he begins drinking alcohol is an indication that his jealousy is so strong that it is difficult to bear. He wanted his son to attend a prestigious high school, which now will not happen; he wanted his family to climb the social ladder, which now cannot happen; and he wanted to have a better life in America than they had in India, which is impossible with Birju in a permanent vegetative state. Each of these circumstances seems to make Rajinder jealous of everyone else who is able to have what he wants.

Shame

Shame is a theme that seems to underlie most of Ajay's adolescence and young adulthood. It seems to begin in India, when he is unsure of his father's true belonging in his family. As a young boy, Ajay thought his father had been assigned to their family by the government. This not only suggests an emotional distance from his father, but also a sense of, "I don't think you belong here," directed at his father. If a person is thinking that a member of their immediate family does not belong in the mix, it is natural to feel a sense of shame about that person.

Once the Mishra family moves to America and Ajay sees that his father is more involved in their lives than he originally thought, he then understands that Rajinder was not assigned to the Mishra family by the government; that his parents are married for a reason. While this would seem to remove some shame toward his father, Ajay's shame only shifts focus. He seems ashamed of his family's habits: his mother's dress, his family's food, even the way they speak differently. Ajay's expression of shame manifests itself in the fact that he keeps to himself, doing very little to make friends but rather preferring to spend his time alone.

After Birju's accident, Ajay's shame again shifts focus, this time more to himself. Ajay does not seem embarrassed that his brother is in the state he's in; he understands it was a tragic accident and that it was important, but he does not seem ashamed of it. He seems weighted by the situation because not only has he lost his brother, but he's also lost his parents to their own grief and the fact that they must give constant attention to Birju. He almost treats Birju's situation as sacred, and therefore does not feel the need to share it with a lot of people. Instead, his shame is turned inward: Ajay is jealous that his parents continue to love Birju more than they love him, which makes Ajay feel shameful because maybe if he was a better brother he wouldn't feel that way and would completely understand his parents' attention on Birju. Further more, Ajay is at times angry at Birju for being in a vegetative state, which also elicits feelings of shame, as Birju cannot help it and certainly did not create the situation on purpose. Ajay's shame toward himself as a result of his feelings toward Birju lead him to withdraw, become a recluse and spend most of his time reading and studying. Even in college, he does not have much a social life, but rather tries to get the best grades possible so as to prove himself to his parents and probably even to his brother.

The only other character to show shame is Rajinder. He is disappointed in his family's place in American culture, as he wanted to better them all by moving from Delhi to America. If Birju's accident hadn't of happened, their family very well may have moved



up the social ladder, what with Birju attending a prestigious high school. However, Birju's accident throws Rajinder into a state of depression and shame as to his family's lot in life, and it comes out in the form of a destructive drinking habit.

Grief

Grief is a theme that is manifested in the actions of Ajay, Shuba, and Rajinder. Though no person actually dies, each of them must grieve the life they had expected once coming to America. For the first two years after their arrival, everything was going as planned. The boys went to school, visited their aunt in the summertime, Birju got into a prestigious high school, and Shuba and Rajinder got along relatively well. However, Birju's tragic accident changed the entire trajectory of the Mishra family. He would no longer attend school, let alone a prestigious one, and their lives would now be completely centered around and scheduled around Birju and his needs. Ajay had already felt like he was in his brother's shadow; after the accident, those feelings are heightened.

The way each character shows his or her grief is the same as their coping mechanisms. Ajay focuses on survival, staying out of his parents' way and trying to be a perfectly behaved son. When he is a little older, his coping strategies evolve and he begins fighting back a little bit. However, he never abandons his sense of duty to help care for Birju. Shuba deals with her grief by a marked stoicism that doesn't waver while she is caring for Birju. However, it is when she interacts with Rajinder and Ajay that her anger, stemming from her grief, shows itself. Rajinder's grief is shown in his alcoholism. He will never have the eldest son he always thought he would have, and therefore needed to escape reality as often as possible.

Community

The Mishra family, though isolated because of Birju's accident, also feels a strong sense of community throughout almost all of "Family Life". When Birju is in the nursing home, the community consists more of families who want to show their children what not to do, and also "miracle workers" who claim to be able to heal Birju. However, once Birju is cared for at home, members of the Indian community begin showing up most days in order to provide all kinds of support: they help Shuba cook, they provide her with company and make her laugh, and they provide spiritual encouragement. The day Birju was brought home to be cared for, Ajay compared his home to a temple on a holiday because of all the people who not only showed up, but stayed busy doing things like cooking, mowing the lawn, and setting up the washer on bricks. The reader can see that the constant presence of community does not ease Ajay's isolation, but it may have been much, much worse had members of the community ignored the Mishra family and their needs.



Styles

Point of View

"Family Life" is told through the lens of Ajay as he grows from 8-year-old boy to a grown man almost 10 years out of college. The reader experiences his observations of life as a young boy in India, a younger brother, a son, a young immigrant to America in the 1970s, and as a boy who is trying to figure out who he is, why he exists, and what kind of place he has in his family.

Ajay's observations and descriptions of his life experiences are mostly void of large displays of emotion. There is a general sense of contentment while his family still lives in India, and once they come to America he seems enthralled with things like running hot water and a huge library full of books. After Birju's accident, however, Ajay's observations and descriptions of life are far more negative and obligation-laden. He is doing what he is doing in order to appease his parents, not cause any trouble, and survive. Once in a great while he mentions crying, but he rarely does so in front of his parents.

By placing the story in Ajay's point-of-view, he is likely trying to stress Ajay's story of survival. Each character could have their own novel, since they all had different ways of surviving - and reasons to survive - after Birju's accident. However, Ajay's is most dynamic and interesting to the reader because he is the youngest one in the family. He had the most potential for lasting psychological damage since at the age of 10, he cannot process or appropriately internalize everything that was going on. Stressing Ajay's story above the rest of the family's was a way the author could tell a story of compelling emotional survival and resilience.

Language and Meaning

"Family Life" was written over the course of more than 12 years. It is the author's second novel and is based on his own experience of having almost all of the events in the story happen in his own life. Sharma writes with a lack of extreme emotion, which is different than many contemporary authors whose style is flourishing descriptions and largely leading emotional descriptions of the characters' thought processes and reactions to various experiences. Sharma may have chosen a different path because the story is so much of his own life story, but he also may have done so to keep the pace of the novel flowing.

When Ajay's family immigrated, they did not speak fluent English, though they spoke enough to get by. On rare occasions, the author states that characters are speaking in a certain Hindi dialect; some words are even included within the text. However, that is rare enough that the reader can see the family's attempt to maintain some of their traditions (i.e., food), but also assimilate to their new culture.



Interestingly, there are some words with a non-Western spelling, such as aerogramme; the typical Western spelling of that word would be 'aerogram'. This does not interrupt the flow of the novel, rather it reminds the reader that the author is not of Western origin.

Structure

Ajay's story is split into 14 short chapters, with a total of 218 pages. Even though there is very little show of extreme emotion - which can often make a novel flow well from one experience to the next - "Family Life" reads somewhat like a diary and moves at a regular pace. It is not staccato, as one might think since there is a lack of sentiment. Instead, it reads as a simply recording of an immigrant family's experience.

The fact that the story starts when Ajay is 10 years old and moves through adulthood is important to the structure of the novel. Until Birju gets into his accident, time goes by at a normal, steady pace. Immediately following his accident, time seems to slow down as they deal day in and day out with the hospital, hospital administrators, insurance companies, then the nursing home. Once Birju is brought home to be cared for - almost two years after his accident - time seems to move faster. Everything is staying the same, except for Ajay's grade level and everyone's ages. Birju's condition remains, Rajinder's drinking problem remains for most of the novel, and Ajay's sense of isolation remains. The only thing that seems to change is the fact that everyone is growing older. The implication of this style is that the author is stressing how Ajay must evolve and grow and learn who he is, even though he's not in an environment that encourages personal evolution.



Quotes

I used to think that my father had been assigned to us by the government. This was because he appeared to serve no purpose.

-- Ajay (chapter 2 paragraph Page 30, paragraph 1)

Importance: Ajay's relationship with his dad is quite distant, and this quote is one of the first clues into that for the reader. Ajay's statement that his dad had been assigned to his family by the government shows the disconnect Ajay felt in their parent/child relationship. It also gives insight into one of the over-arching themes of the novel, which is Ajay's attempt to find his place and role within his family. If he feels like his father came from a third party, how is he to feel about his own place and role inside his family? Toward the beginning of the story, Ajay's father lives away from the family for almost a year while he gets settled in the United States and earns and saves enough money to send airline tickets to Ajay, Birju, and their mom so the family can reunite. The geographic distance does not aid Ajay and his father's relationship, either. One thing to note is that the novel starts in present day, with Ajay being 40 years old and having a positive interaction with his father. There is a gap between the end of the novel and this beginning, in which the reader must infer that the upswing experienced by the family toward the end of the story continues for years later. However, the amount of time it took for Ajay and his father to find the kind of relationship hinted at in the first section of the first chapter is set off by Ajay's statement that he used to think his father had been assigned to his family by the government.

I became infected with the anxiety that Birju and my parents appeared to feel.

-- Ajay (chapter 2 paragraph Page 42, paragraph 7)

Importance: Ajay spends a great deal of the novel fighting off jealousy toward his big brother, even after Birju experiences a tragedy that sends him into a life-long vegetative state. At the time of this quote, Birju is studying for the exam that will eventually get him admitted to the Bronx High School of Science. The tension in the Mishra home is so palpable, Ajay takes it on himself. As he works to find his place and role within his family, he takes on the stress of the rest of the family. The fact that Ajay uses the term 'infected' implies that even though he might have seen it as his duty to feel the tension right alongside the rest of his family, the sentiment is not something that was desirable for him. The fact that the tension experienced in the Mishra household stems from the oldest brother getting into a good school is also something to note. One of the themes in "Family Life" is the cultural aspect of Ajay's family life; it is distinctly Indian, even after the family moves to America. The family's dependence on the oldest brother to be smart, get a strong education, work so hard that's that all he does, is a mark of the Indian culture. It also proves that the parents have different expectations for the sons, as Ajay is never made to go through such intense studying. Would he, had Birju not gotten injured, is not clear. What is clear, however, is the parents' expectation that Birju be the strong, responsible brother.



My father said, 'These tests are for white people. How are we supposed to know what "pew" means?

-- Mr. Mishra (chapter 2 paragraph Page 43, paragraph 6)

Importance: Ajay's father says this when Birju is studying for his entrance exam for Bronx High School of Science, and it touches on two themes present in this novel. First, it touches on the cultural differences the Mishra family experience with their move to America. They speak a different language, wear different clothes, eat different foods, expect different things of their children, and now they are recognizing their difference in vocabulary and how it might impact Birju's chance at success. The second theme the quote touches upon is the concept of competition with one's peers, which is a state Mr. Mishra seems to be in on a daily basis before Birju's accident. He wants to be better than his peers, he wants to show his peers and his community that he has nice things and smart sons. Status is very important to Mr. Mishra before Birju's accident, and his complaint that the test is for white people plays into his attitude. He is saying that if the test is for white people, how is Birju supposed to do well and succeed? And if Birju doesn't do well and succeed, how can Mr. Mishra's superior social status be proved?

I wondered sometimes if my parents loved my brother more than they loved me. I didn't think so. They bothered him and corrected him so much more than they corrected me that I assumed they secretly preferred me to him.

-- Ajay (chapter 3 paragraph Page 47, paragraph 10)

Importance: Though it is without sentiment or emotional explanation that Ajay makes this statement, it is important to his journey throughout the novel. Ajay struggles throughout the entire story with jealousy and anger toward Birju and his parents' affection toward Birju. As a result, Ajay spends his adolescence and even young adulthood trying to figure out where in his family he fits. Ajay's wondering about the levels of affection from his parents to himself and his brother is telling of Ajay's journey. He already goes back and forth between being a distant, third-party observer of his family, going through the motions and being on autopilot, and being a fully participating member of his family and their happenings. The statement also gives light to Ajay's innocence toward the beginning of the novel. At this point, Birju has not had his accident. Ajay still experiences a lower level of attention and affection from his parents as compared to Birju, but the way he sees the situation is quite optimistic. It isn't until later that his view of his place in the family changes, when almost all of their attention and affection goes toward Birju.

I was convinced that I had been marked as special by Birju's accident. To me it appeared obvious that the beginnings of all heroes contained misfortune. Both God Krishna and Superman had been separated from their parents at birth. Batman, too, had been orphaned. God Ram had to spend fourteen years in the forest, and it was only then that he did things that made him famous. I waited until it would not seem improper to talk about myself.

-- Ajay (chapter 3 paragraph Page 60, paragraph 5)

Importance: Ajay is thinking this thought during a conversation he is having with God



shortly after Birju's accident. For a short while, Ajay talks to God privately but out loud. It is unclear as to which God Ajay is speaking, considering the fact that Ajay's family does not practice Christianity and when they go to temple, more than one God is mentioned. However, when Ajay talks to God, that is the only name given: God; no specific god is named. There are a couple things to note about Ajay's statement. First of all, is Ajay's continued optimism. The author writes with a distinct lack of emotion, yet Ajay's early optimism is clear. He may not portray it to his family, but in his conversations with God - during which he seems to be especially hopeful - he is optimistic about his place in the world. The reader can also see that by comparing himself to superheroes, Ajay is hoping that the situation with Birju propels him into an even more exciting life. Also, the last part of Ajay's thought, about waiting until it was not improper to speak about himself, signifies his knowledge of being in the background to Birju and Birju's accident.

Whatever you say, I am happy I'm here to take care of my son. What if I were dead and there was nobody to care for Birju? Thank God I have breath in me so I can love him.
-- Ajay's mom (Shuba) (chapter 4 paragraph Page 78, paragraph 3)

Importance: Ajay's mom makes this statement while a Mr. Narayan, a pundit from the local temple, is visiting. She is responding to Ajay's father's pessimism and anger toward the situation with Birju. The quote shows Shuba's intense sense of responsibility she feels toward caring for her son. Mrs. Mishra becomes the main caretaker as Mr. Mishra works at his office. She visits Birju everyday while he is in the nursing home, and when Birju comes home she cares for all of his physical needs, while a nurse tends to his medical needs. Mrs. Mishra's gratefulness that she is alive and well enough to care for Birju shows how much she cares for her son. It also is a clue as to where Ajay's optimism might have come from. If Ajay's mom can look in the face of tragedy and say she is glad she is alive to care for the remains of the tragedy, Ajay may have gotten some of his early optimism from her. The statement is also part of the disconnect between Mr. and Mrs. Mishra. Ajay points out at the beginning of the novel that his parents have always bothered each other. Birju's accident strongly tests their relationship, as they react in completely opposite ways. While Mr. Mishra is sitting in the same room saying he hates the situation the family is in, his wife is pointing out what she is grateful for. The fact that she can remain positive while her husband experiences a downward spiral of depression is a testament to her strength and to her place as matriarch of the family. Though Ajay's father supports the family financially, his emotional distance is never more evident as when Ajay's mom is present.

Walking through the crowd, nervous, I felt that the men and women around me were not living real lives, that my family, because it was suffering so intensely, was living a life that was more real than these people's, whose lives were silly like a TV show.
-- Ajay (chapter 4 paragraph Page 79, paragraph 3)

Importance: Ajay says this during a Ramayan Path, an Indian celebration centered on Lord Ram. It is a typical party atmosphere, and it causes Ajay to self-reflect on his family's current situation. Despite their early optimism, it is very easy for Ajay's family to feel disconnected from the world around them simply because everything they've always known to be true has completely changed. And because their world has



changed because of a tragedy involving the oldest son in the family, their family unit has been forever altered. The Mishra family is living in a new condition in which they don't know how to relate to one another or to others. This statement also gives insight into how Ajay is dealing with his family's new condition. Though he becomes accustomed to accompanying his mother to the nursing home, it is only when compared to other people's non-tragic lives that Ajay observes the heaviness of what his family is dealing with. Since one of the themes of "Family Life" is trying to prove one's superior social status, the fact that Ajay notes that his family's life is more serious and real than others' is important to note. Typically, when one thinks of proving a superior social status, one thinks of material wealth and community recognition. However, Ajay's statement reveals that he believes his family to be of greater importance because of the gravity of their situation.

There were parking meters on the sidewalk, gray metal poles the shape of matchsticks, upright, proper, brave, waiting for a coin so that they could come to life. When I walked past a parking meter, I would reach out and touch it.

-- Ajay (chapter 4 paragraph Page 84, paragraph 3)

Importance: Ajay is describing the scene on their walk to and from the nursing home. Since the author doesn't use a great deal of sentiment in his writing of this story, the author's use of imagery here is important to note. Ajay notes that the parking meters are gray metal, a cold-feeling description that likely matches Ajay's insides as he heads to the nursing home every day of his summer vacation to visit Birju. He also notes that they are brave, standing tall and upright. He implies they are immovable. This is perhaps how he hopes to describe himself as he carries the burden of his brother's accident. It is also perhaps how he sees Birju, as he may see Birju as brave, holding onto life despite being in vegetative state. Ajay's statement that the parking meters are waiting for a coin so they could come to life could also describe either himself or his brother: Ajay has basically been on autopilot since his brother's accident, unfeeling and following his mother to the nursing home most days. Simply going through the motions for an extended period of time may give someone the sense that they are dead inside, that they need something to enliven them. The statement could also describe Birju, who needs a miracle in order to come back to life. The last part of Ajay's statement, the fact that he reaches out and touches the parking meter, indicates that Ajay is searching for something to help him feel something - anything - even if it is just the sensation of the metal on his skin. This confirms the idea that he may very well feel dead inside and need something to enliven his spirit.

I had decided to tell Jeff because I was so unhappy, because everything was terrible, and become I had thought that if I told him about Birju, he would pity me and become my friend. Now I had the feeling that I had wasted something.

-- Ajay (chapter 6 paragraph Page 100, paragraph 7)

Importance: Ajay's current situation is a lot for a young boy to handle by himself. Since he does not express his feelings or talk about the accident with his family, it seems that Ajay hits a breaking point in holding everything in, and so he decides to tell a boy at school. Ajay does this for acceptance, even if the acceptance might be driven by pity.



He is lonely and longing for some kind of a normal life, which a friendship with a peer would provide. However, since Jeff doesn't respond with empathy or any kind of concern, Ajay feels that he has wasted not only his opportunity to make a friend, but also the information about his brother. While his brother's accident is not private family news, the details of his care and his needs aren't regular, everyday conversation. In trying to relate to a peer, Ajay actually isolates himself further. Also, the fact that Ajay admits to himself that he's so unhappy is significant in terms of his personal growth. Earlier in the story, Ajay was more optimistic and less brazen about his feelings toward his brother and his family. However, at this point Ajay is so lonely and feels so isolated from his family, that he can't be anything but unhappy. The unhappiness has taken over him in a profound enough way that it is now undeniable.

All this activity made our house feel like a temple being gotten ready for a festival, when the people of the neighborhood gather and mop the floor and string flowers into garlands. Having so many visitors gave me the sense that my family was important.
-- Ajay (chapter 7 paragraph Page 115, paragraph 4)

Importance: Through "Family Life", Ajay works through feeling as though he and his family are unimportant, which is a sentiment that seems to be passed down from his father. (At the beginning of the novel, Ajay describes his dad as having the sense that he doesn't really matter). When Birju comes home from the nursing home and the Indian community of Metuchen fills the Mishra home with support, Ajay goes through a short period of feeling that his family is significant, which is an essential component to Ajay's story and his own personal growth. This is especially evident in the fact that Ajay compares the support to that of a readying a temple, a significant object in Ajay's eyes. One of the themes of this novel is Ajay finding his place in his family, which he is struggling to do amidst his sense that others do not view his family as important. Ajay may think, what is the point in finding his place in his family if his family doesn't really matter? When members of their community show up and make Ajay and his family feel important, Ajay may more easily find his place in his family. What's more, is the Mishra family's desire to have a superior social status is appeased when the community rallies around them with support for their eldest son.

The sight of my mother in the kitchen caused my chest to hurt. Her belief that Birju could get better made me feel that she didn't love us, that she valued believing something ridiculous over taking care of us, that she was willing to let us be hurt so she could have her hope.
-- Ajay (chapter 7 paragraph Page 124, paragraph 1)

Importance: Ajay's earlier optimism has been depleted by the permanent vegetative state of his brother. Where he once fed off of his mother's optimism, he now sees it as a hindrance to his family. Ajay's loneliness has taken over and he is yearning for his parents' positive attention; he wants them to see that he is still alive, he still needs his parents, and he still has accomplishments that warrant attention and praise. Yet, his mother focuses on Birju and on hoping for a miracle, which Ajay sees as detrimental to his family actually healing and moving forward. It's important to note Ajay's anger toward his mother. At the beginning of the story he sees his mother as their main caretaker, a



strong, positive, hard-working woman who would do anything she had to for her family. Now that same attitude is making him angry, since it is inhibiting to their relationship and also to any kind of family growth or healing. Ajay's loneliness is turning to anger, and while it does not result in any kind of extreme rebellion, it takes its toll on Ajay's personal growth and journey as a young man.

When my father stood quietly in Birju's room, drinking his tea, I imagined that he was thinking about what he could do to make our life better. When he went upstairs to drink, I saw him choosing to be happy. It was, in my eyes, a mark of sophistication to find a way to be happy in a difficult situation.

-- Ajay (chapter 7 paragraph Page 125, paragraph 2)

Importance: Ajay is clearly searching for a way to be positive about his family's situation, and he is looking to his parents to provide the solution. In the previous quote, Ajay is angry with his mom for focusing all of her care on Birju and all of her energy on hoping for a miracle. In this quote, Ajay is praising his father for thinking about the situation and not spending every waking moment at Birju's bedside. Even though the second reference to 'drink' in this quote refers to drinking alcohol, Ajay has not yet seen that his father is avoiding the situation and remaining angry. To Ajay, his father's appearance of quiet strength is a mark of sophistication and positivity. It is important to note that where Ajay used to get his optimism from his mother, it has shifted to being sourced by his father, for however brief a moment. Ajay's relationship with his parents throughout "Family Life" takes on several forms, and most of the time Ajay seems willing to be in the moment and appreciate whatever sentiment his parents are putting forth. The fact that he can sometimes rely on his father for positivity and optimism - even if it isn't true, only imagined - is enough to help Ajay get through another day.

The fact that nothing had changed, that Birju was still the way he was, that we still needed him to be OK to be OK ourselves, made me feel like I was being gripped and slowly crushed.

-- Ajay (chapter 8 paragraph Page 133, paragraph 1)

Importance: When Ajay has this thought, he is standing near Birju's bed, talking to him on and off about his first day of seventh grade. He is also feeling like he has unfairly received so much of his family's luck, since he has been doing well in school, is healthy, and did not experience the kind of tragic accident that Birju had. Ajay continues to try and not only find but justify his place in his family, and the fact that Birju has not gotten any better or worse is weighing heavily on Ajay. Ajay's thoughts seem to indicate an awareness that his place in the family may never be justified if Birju doesn't get any better; his parents' hope centered on Birju even before the accident, and now that sense is even stronger as all of his parents' efforts and thoughts seem to be centered on Birju. This quote is also an indication of Ajay's gradual awareness of how different his family is and will continue to be, as compared to what they thought life in America would be like. Little by little, one experience at a time, Ajay becomes more and more aware of the fact that his family's life is not what they had all dreamed it would be upon arriving in America. To be aware of this fact means Ajay will continue to grieve - a little at a time - the life he and his family truly want, and truly expected to have.



My parents fought so much that the walls vibrated with rage. Anything could spark a shouting match: a banana peel left on the kitchen table, a garden hose left overnight on the lawn. The anger was so quick and extraordinary that it appeared disconnected from what was supposed to be the cause.

-- Ajay (chapter 9 paragraph Page 146, paragraph 2)

Importance: Ajay observes his parents arguing about everything, not just the situation with Birju. At the beginning of the novel, Ajay mentions that as far back as he can remember, his parents have bothered each other. The rage that his parents are displaying on a daily basis give light to the fact that they are angry about their situation with Birju, yet are communicating it in an unhealthy manner. Since the two of them are dealing with it differently - Mr. Mishra by drinking alcohol and Mrs. Mishra by taking care of Birju - the two are clearly at different places in their acceptance of the situation. Mrs. Mishra likely feels isolated from her husband, as he does not help her take care of their son. Mr. Mishra likely feels isolated from his family, as he puts himself in a drunken stupor each evening. A key word in this quote is "disconnected". Each member of the family has disconnected themselves from others and/or the situation in one way or another: Mrs. Mishra has separated herself from Ajay and his successes as she cares for Birju; Mr. Mishra has separated himself from everyone as he drinks heavily; Ajay has felt separated from his father since the beginning, and has since seemed to separate himself from Birju and his mother as he comes to terms with their situation. Though this specific mention of 'disconnect' is in relation to one's anger toward a circumstance, feeling disconnected or being disconnected is a common thread throughout "Family Life".

The biographer had mentioned that Hemingway's style was very simple. I understood this to mean that if I became a writer, I wouldn't have to be very good, that being merely acceptable would be sufficient for me to have a good life. I checked out all the books.

-- Ajay (chapter 9 paragraph Page 152, paragraph 2)

Importance: Ajay's outlook on his future changes a bit when he begins to read the works of Ernest Hemingway. He had already mentioned that he was a voracious reader, but the fact that his focus switches from reading to potentially writing is significant. This is the first moment where Ajay looks to his own future and thinks that it could be filled with something good. Up until now, Birju had all the potential (before the accident) and then Birju had all the attention (after the accident). The fact that Ajay allowed himself to look forward to something, and to work immediately at achieving something for his future, indicates that though his life may be filled with sadness at home, he still believes he can have a good life. There is some irony in the fact that Ajay is learning from Ernest Hemingway: Hemingway was an alcoholic, just like his father. However, with his father, Ajay had a distant relationship and did not learn anything of value. From Hemingway, however, he eagerly learned how to write. Though Hemingway was obviously far more distant than his father - geographically and emotionally - Ajay soaked up every word in the books he checked out from the library, finding solace and hope in having a goal. Even when he didn't understand something, Ajay would not be deterred from learning from Ernest Hemingway.



There were certain things I didn't tell her because they were humiliating - my father's drinking, my mother's irrationality and meanness. I expected to be judged based on my family, and not telling her about my parents, I felt as if I were pretending to be better than I was.

-- Ajay (chapter 10 paragraph Page 172, paragraph 3)

Importance: At this point, Ajay has fallen in love with his girlfriend Minakshi, a girl in his grade who attends his same school. Ajay tells Minakshi about Birju, the accident, and Birju's state, but he stops there. He is relieved to tell her about Birju, but does not want her to know any more. One of the themes that runs throughout "Family Life" is wanting to be as good as or better than others. In the case of having a brother who is in a permanent vegetative state, the sympathy garnered from others, especially a girlfriend, can be seen as acceptable to Ajay. Plus, since he is spending so much time Minakshi, telling her about Birju is like releasing a secret and not having to hold it to his chest any longer. However, because it's his family, he feels as though he can pick and choose which information he shares with his girlfriend. Sharing a significant part of his life and likely getting sympathy doesn't seem as bad as being humiliated by the state of his parents, both individually and as a married couple. The information about Birju does not embarrass Ajay; in certain ways it makes him feel more important than his peers. The truth about his parents, however, is embarrassing and would not help Ajay achieve any kind of superior social status with his girlfriend or with his peers.

To me, it seemed very American to call drinking a disease and therefore avoid responsibility.

-- Ajay (chapter 12 paragraph Page 191, paragraph 3)

Importance: One of the themes running throughout "Family Life" is the idea of cultural differences, and this statement is a perfect example of that theme. When Ajay's father enters rehab for his drinking problem, Ajay attends Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meetings with his dad. At the beginning of the novel, Ajay's mother says that American parents don't expect anything from their children, and that Indian parents do and that's why Indians work harder and achieve more than Americans. Here, Ajay seems to have taken on his mother's way of thinking, as he articulates (to himself, since this is a thought that goes through his head) his view that Americans don't take responsibility for their choices and for their actions. This would only serve to further the divide Ajay holds in his mind and in his heart between Indian people and Americans. Another thing to note about this quote is the fact that Ajay clearly wants his dad to take responsibility for his choice to drink excessive amounts of alcohol. He also wants his father to remain true to their Indian roots and not succumb to American habits or American tendencies, specifically that of shirking responsibility for one's choices.

I also got angrier and angrier at the thought that white people behaved in such ways and yet they were the ones who were important.

-- Ajay (chapter 12 paragraph Page 196, paragraph 2)

Importance: Ajay is again sitting in Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meeting with his father, listening to other members admit their addiction. He is also trying to understand, if



Indian people are not considered as good as whites, why were there so many white people at the meeting who had an addiction to alcohol? Ajay and both of his parents strive to achieve a superior social status, which they know is impossible with Ajay's father drinking as much as he was. However, it clearly angers Ajay that the race in America that is treated as superior and most important has the same problems as Ajay's dad, yet they continue to reign supreme. Ajay's anger at his father for having a drinking problem is likely playing into Ajay's attitude toward the other attendees at the AA meeting. However, his sentiment that white people have the same problems as Indian people and are still treated as better and more important seems like an observation Ajay would have had from the beginning of the story, since he frequently compares himself to his white peers, as well as his own experience as an Indian boy in America to his white peers' experience as white boys and girls in America. Another aspect of this quote to observe is the fact that Ajay is clear on his feelings toward the other people in his dad's AA group. As time goes on and Ajay gets older, even though his home situation is not changing very much, he is becoming more and more aware of his feelings and of himself. This heightened self-awareness will eventually lend itself to Ajay removing himself from the home and working to have his own life once he graduates from high school.

We were all a little shy about the lives we lived at home. At home we didn't eat the food that white kids ate. At home our mothers and sometimes our fathers dressed in odd clothes. Our holidays were not the same as white people's. Our parents worshipped gods who rode on mice. To attack someone based on his or her family brought up so much of our own shame that we didn't have the heart to be mean.

-- Ajay (chapter 12 paragraph Page 203, paragraph 1)

Importance: At this point in the novel, Ajay is almost graduated from high school. He is still dating Minakshi, but he is aware that many of the boys in his school dislike him for his attitude and for his high grades. However, Ajay has also found a distant kinship with other Indian students that go to his school. While at one time Ajay had zero friends and could not relate to anyone with whom he attended school, Ajay now has a table he sits at for lunch that may not contain close friends but provides him some kind of comfort and security, as he knows they experience a similar home-life culture-wise as he does. For a boy who has spent most of his adolescence struggling to know his place in his home and among his peers, having an underlying sense of understanding with a group of peers can only ease some of Ajay's inner tension. This quote also serves to show that even though Ajay is somewhat embarrassed by the life he lives at home, he knows he's not alone anymore, and he knows that while the situation with Birju is unusual it doesn't make him an outcast. This is an important revelation for Ajay, as, again, he spent much of his adolescence feeling like an outcast for the state of his home life. Also, this thought of Ajay's only lists cultural differences, not the fact that his father drinks, his mother is irrational, and his brother is in a vegetative state. Again, an important observation since Ajay's isolation always seemed to stem from his family's various states of being rather than cultural differences.