

Shelter: A Novel Study Guide

Shelter: A Novel by Jung Yun

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Plot Summary

NOTE: The following version of the novel was used to produce this Study Guide: Yun, Jung. Shelter; Picador, New York, 2016. Kindle AZW file.

In the family drama *Shelter: A Novel*, a third-person limited narrator introduces protagonist Kyung Cho, who is married to Gillian and is the father of Ethan. Kyung is also the son of traditional Korean parents, Jin and Mae. Kyung cannot forgive his parents for the violence that ruled his childhood. Jin beat Mae for every infraction, and Mae beat Kyung because he was the only aspect of her life over which she had control. Though Korean tradition dictates how he should act as the son of the family, Kyung does not fulfill those duties. He barely has contact with his parents at all, but he deeply feels the effects of his failure on that front.

Kyung also has to face the fact that he is failing as a father. He has a strained relationship with Ethan and can seldom offer any words of kindness or praise. While he is careful not to physically abuse Ethan, he has virtually nothing to say to his son and is uncomfortable with his role as a father.

Kyung is a college professor and makes a decent living for his family. However, he and Gillian have made a series of poor decisions that have left them in a serious financial situation. They have reached their credit limit on most of their credit cards and are behind on most of their bills. Kyung is angry when Gillian decides they have to sell the house, but he does hope that the realtor will provide them with a way out of the worst of their situation. However, she suggests a selling price that is far less than they owe. Faced with yet another impossible situation, Kyung does not know what to do. He can look back at trips and purchases that brought them to this point, but when his marriage is also in trouble, his only answer is to suggest they take another trip – one they cannot afford.

On the day they meet with the realtor, Kyung discovers his mother, Mae, walking behind his house. Mae is nude and Kyung sees that she has been brutally beaten. His first instinct is that his father has returned to the habit of beating Mae, and he tells the police his theory. But when Kyung accompanies the police to his parents' home, they discover extensive damage and that Jin and the maid, Marina, have also been beaten. The story emerges that two brothers, Dell and Nate Perry, broke into the house and held them captive for days before one of the brothers overdosed and died.

Mae, Jin, and Marina move in with Kyung and Gillian. The house is filled to overflowing and Kyung struggles to manage his emotions. When Jin and Mae invite the extended family to their vacation home at the Cape, Gillian accepts it as a good idea. Kyung begs off, asking for time to finish some work at the office before joining them. Molly, a Korean woman he has known since they attended school together, arrives to drop off food for Jin and Mae. Kyung recounts her wild attitudes when they were young, and tries to seduce her. She responds, but then rushes away. Kyung heads directly to the Cape.



There, Kyung decides he is tired of hiding his true feelings. He goes on a tirade to his parents in front of all the guests, including Gillian, Ethan, and Gillian's father. The next morning, they discover that Mae has taken Kyung's car and crashed it, killing herself and Marina. When they find that Mae left a detailed list of her possessions along with who should get which items, it becomes clear that she committed suicide. Gillian does not speak to Kyung until after the funeral, when she reveals that she found Molly's underwear and demands that Kyung leave. She calls on Jin to pay off their credit card debts, which Kyung sees as a betrayal.

When the police capture Dell Perry, they learn that Jin's account of the attack was false. Mae had told Jin that she was moving out to follow her dream of becoming an interior decorator. Jin attacked her, prompting Mae to run out of the house where she encountered the Perry brothers, who were actually planning to rob another house in the neighborhood. Mae had literally begged them to come inside, believing they would save her from Jin's wrath. Kyung wants to kill Jin when he learns that Jin's violence had caused the entire situation, but he realizes that he will be changed for the rest of his life if he gives into his own desire for violence.



Dawn: Chapter 1

Summary

As the first chapter of Part 1 opens, the four-year-old named Ethan is standing at the doorway of his parents, Kyung Cho and Gillian McFadden. Ethan gives Kyung the remote control and says, “battery” (3). Kyung knows that it is very early, but manages to get out of bed and go find batteries so that Ethan can watch cartoons. Kyung prepares fruit for Ethan for breakfast and notes that Gillian has written the name “Gertie” on their calendar. When Gillian joins them, Kyung makes it clear that he is not thrilled about seeing Gertie Trudeau, but Gillian says she has no intention of canceling yet another appointment with the realtor. Gillian has a list of things for Kyung to do before the realtor arrives. Kyung is not happy about the entire situation, and he focuses on fixing the garbage disposal instead of any of the things on Gillian's list. By the time Gertie arrives, Kyung has done nothing, including fixing the disposal.

Gertie tours the house, taking notes about the things that need fixing and the positive attributes of the house. Gillian suggests they list the house for \$365,000. Gillian says they refinanced the house and now owe \$480,000. Gertie suggests they can get the bank to accept a loss but they have not yet missed a mortgage payment, making Kyung doubt that is a possibility. Gertie says she has some potential renters if Kyung's family has somewhere to live in the meantime. He knows they could move in with his parents, but Gillian is the one who says that Kyung's parents own a house in the affluent neighborhood of Marlboro Heights, very near their own home. Gertie is looking out the kitchen window toward an adjacent piece of vacant land. When Kyung asks if Gertie sees something wrong, Gertie says there is a woman who seems to be nude.

Gillian believes the woman is Kyung's mother, Mae. Gertie mentions Alzheimer's disease, and says that spending more time with Kyung's parents could be a positive step. Kyung knows that Mae, who is 56, does not have Alzheimer's. Kyung is barefoot as he rushes to his mother, averting his eyes as he covers her with a towel. She asks for help and speaks in Korean, which Kyung does not understand. Gillian arrives as Kyung believes he hears the Korean words for “your father” and “hurt me” (16). Mae repeatedly asks for help and Kyung yells at her, saying he is trying to provide help.

The paramedics say Mae has apparently been wandering around since the previous night. Kyung remembers the violent nature of his father, Jin, when Kyung was younger, and the frequency with which he beat Mae. Kyung had eventually intervened. Jin became involved in a church and Kyung vowed he would kill his father the next time he beat Mae.

Gillian's father, Connie, is waiting at the hospital. He and Gillian's brother, Tim, are police officers. Connie introduces another man, Officer Lentz. Kyung reveals what he heard from his mother and insists he accompany the officers to his parents' home. Kyung confirms that his father is a mechanical engineering professor. Tim says that a



“professor ought to know better than to hit a woman” (22). Kyung is also a college professor, and he knows that Tim's comment is a test to see what Kyung says. Kyung responds that “everyone” should know better (23).

When they arrive in the exclusive neighborhood of Marlboro Heights, Tim is obviously impressed by Jin and Mae's home. Kyung says Jin earns money from his inventions in addition to his salary. The door is locked but Jin retrieves the spare key from under a flower pot. Officer Lentz does not want to enter but Connie says the fact that Jin knows where the key is, and has used it before, makes it an acceptable entry. While the police officers discuss the situation, Jin opens the door and immediately sees that the house has been wrecked. Kyung sees that many of the destroyed items in the living room belong to his father. While Jin is capable of violence, Kyung has never seen him demolish his own possessions. Kyung relates that thought to the officers.

The three police order Kyung outside and draw their weapons. Tim eventually leaves the house with Marina, Jin and Mae's housekeeper. She has obviously been beaten. Lentz emerges with Jin leaning on him. Kyung starts to go inside to get his father's glasses, but Connie refuses. A man named Lyndell Perry is dead in the bathroom of a drug overdose. Police soon assume that his brother, Nathan Perry, was also in the house, and that the women were raped while Jin was beaten. Marina was there days earlier, which means their ordeal lasted for days.

Gillian arrives, saying Ethan is with a neighbor. Kyung has never told her about the violence in the household, but she now knows some of the facts. Kyung says that Jin never struck Kyung, but beat Mae often. He says that, as a child, he felt Jin wouldn't have beaten Mae if she had behaved better. Gillian suddenly understands more about why Kyung hates to visit his parents and why he had considered moving away when they purchased the house nearby.

After a time, the doctor calls Kyung inside. He confirms that Mae's physical injuries are not too severe, but that she was raped. He describes Jin's injuries as well. He asks if Marina has family, but Kyung does not know. Kyung becomes angry when he hears details about Mae's injuries, and Gillian has to calm him. Kyung asks to see his parents. The doctor says Mae is “heavily sedated” and that Jin has declined visitors (39).

Analysis

The relationship between Ethan and other members of the family is one of the themes introduced in this opening section of the novel. That relationship is different with each person, and it clearly defines the issues, hopes, and focus of each person's life. The first two relationships are seen as Ethan briefly interacts and Kyung and Gillian on the first day described in the novel. Kyung is frustrated when Ethan wakes him very early on a Saturday morning, but he does not reprimand Ethan. Instead, he gets up and finds new batteries for the remote, just as Ethan requests. Then, Ethan acts very shy when the realtor asks his age. He does answer, but Kyung is frustrated again, thinking that Ethan acts shy because they allow him to. Kyung does not reprimand Ethan, but he seems to



believe that Gillian should. That attitude is also an example of the importance of culture, which is another of the novel's themes. In the Korean culture of Kyung's childhood, his mother was the disciplinarian.

Gillian and Kyung are married, but Gillian did not take Kyung's last name, Cho. Instead, she continues to use her maiden name, McFadden, which may have given Gertie a clue that Gillian was of Irish descent. The author does not go into the reasons Gillian did not change her name, and the reader is left to decide if it is important.

Kyung has never had a close relationship with Connie and Tim. He has the attitude that they dislike him because he is Korean. Later in the novel, Connie talks honestly to Kyung, saying that he never liked Kyung because Kyung always seemed to have a negative and defensive attitude. The relationship between Kyung and other people is often negative because Kyung is expecting the worst from people.

The language barrier is shown to be a problem when Kyung rushes to Mae in his backyard. The details for this language barrier are explained much later. Kyung and his parents came to America from Korea when Kyung was very young. He and his mother spoke only Korean when they arrived, but the family took English lessons together. Kyung recounts that Kyung learned more quickly than Mae, creating problems in the house because Jin refused to let them speak Korean and would become angry when they could not carry on full, correct conversations. When Mae talks to Kyung for the first time in the backyard, she speaks in Korean. Kyung says that he recognizes a few words, but that it is more instinctive than real comprehension. He believes she says that Jin hurt her, but, after talking with the doctor, he comes to the conclusion that she must have been saying that Jin is hurt. It is not until much later, after Nathan Perry is captured, that the reader learns that Kyung's first interpretation was probably correct.

Gillian is studying to be a school counselor. She is not working because they decided she should remain at home with Ethan until he begins school. Once she realizes that Ethan grew up in a home filled with domestic violence, she questions her ability to be a counselor, saying that she saw the signs in Kyung's actions and attitudes, but never put the clues together. Kyung would likely never have told her about the abusive childhood, but his interpretation of Mae's words – that Jin had hurt her – makes it clear that he is not surprised, which makes it clear that it had happened before.

The final paragraph of the chapter is an important look at characters and motifs. Kyung does not speak Korean but he almost instinctively understands that Mae says Jin hit her. He accepts that interpretation at first, which is why police go to the Cho home soon after Mae is taken to the hospital. When they discover that Jin has also been beaten, Kyung believes that he mistakenly interpreted his mother's statement, and that she might have been saying that Jin had been beaten. Kyung's attitude about his father is seen in his reaction to that new interpretation. He believes that Jin did not beat Mae, which should have been a relief, but that is not the case. Instead, Kyung is furious that Mae felt the need to try to protect and save Jin, even when she had been beaten. He says Jin should have been protecting Mae instead. That indicates that Kyung does not



believe that Jin is capable to protecting Mae, an idea that is presented again in coming chapters.

Discussion Question 1

Describe Kyung, Gillian, and Ethan. How would you describe the relationships between these characters?

Discussion Question 2

Who is Gertie? Why is the meeting with her so painful for Kyung?

Discussion Question 3

What details are revealed about Kyung's relationship with the various members of his family? Keep the list and add to it as more information is revealed.

Vocabulary

coddle, abuts, apathy, proximity, sprawling, harried, competent, disabused, motivated, degenerates, lacerations, recuperating



Dawn: Chapter 2

Summary

At some point years earlier, Jin began talking with a group of Korean Presbyterians. The church group is there when Kyung arrives at the hospital the next morning. Kyung is angry when he discovers his mother has already given her statement to the police with Connie, Tim, Jin, and the Reverend Sun in the room. Kyung is rude with Connie and Tim, saying he did not request their presence. Jin is rude in return, saying they got there early, unlike Kyung. Tim makes a rude comment but Connie chastises Tim, which shocks Kyung. Kyung says he wants to talk with Mae alone, but she becomes frantic. Reverend Sun says it would be difficult for Mae to talk about any of these things with her son, and Kyung realizes the Reverend Sun is right. Kyung tries to remain in the room to talk to Mae, but Jin refuses. Jin says Mae will “not survive” talking about it, and that no one is to ever mention it again (45).

After Reverend Sun leaves with the other congregants, Jin chastises Kyung for being rude. Kyung remembers that Reverend Sun “inherited” the congregation from his father. Kyung called on the elder Reverend Sun years earlier to intervene in Jin's violence. Jin sarcastically thanks Kyung for asking about him. Kyung counters, saying he can see how Jin is doing. Then Jin says that he never expected Kyung to save them. Kyung counters, saying he did not know about the attack, and Jin says that is his point. Kyung says he wants to be included the next time Mae talks to police but Jin loudly says the attack is not a reason to change things. A doctor summons Jin, saying Marina listed him as her emergency contact. She and Jin go to a private room to talk about Marina's condition.

Kyung goes home. Gillian and Ethan are playing with a puzzle in the floor. Kyung joins in for a time, but he is clearly uncomfortable with his role. As Kyung and Gillian talk, Kyung admits that rudely told Connie and Tim to leave his mother's hospital room. Gillian is clearly upset, saying they were trying to help. She suggests Connie could give her the full story, which Kyung will not get from either of his parents. They head for Connie's house but drive by Marlboro Hills and discover the neighborhood is filled with reporters.

Tim takes Ethan outside so Gillian and Kyung can talk with Connie. They sit in silence until Gillian says that Kyung is sorry for his rude remark at the hospital. Connie dismisses the apology. Connie hesitates when Gillian asks for information, saying the details of the attack are horrible, but Kyung knows he is already imagining the worst. Connie says Mae went outside on Thursday evening, as has become her habit since doctors told her she should walk.

Connie goes on to recount the story as he knows it. The Perry brothers followed Mae home, and pushed their way into the house. They imagined that wealthy people in a house like the Cho's must have a safe. At one point, Dell demanded Jin go to the bank



with him. Jin got all the money he could from the ATM, then drove Dell to a drug dealer's house where he got narcotics. When they got back to the house, Jin could hear Mae crying, but he was tied up downstairs. Nat raped Mae repeatedly. Jin's mouth was covered so he could not shout a warning to Marina when she arrived the following morning. Marina almost got his bindings off before the Perry brothers beat her and took her upstairs, where she was also raped.

Later, Jin and Nat went to the bank where Jin withdrew \$5,000. Dell pledged to kill Mae if Jin made any mistakes while they were gone. However, when Nat returned, Dell was dead in the bathroom of an overdose. Mae was unable to tell police how she got free of her bindings. Jin said his memories were also a blur after the trip to the bank. Mae believed she had gone to hell while she was walking through the woods toward Kyung's house.

Analysis

The confrontation between Kyung and his father at the hospital points out and explores the theme of cultural differences in Chapter 2. Jin says that he never expected that Kyung might step in during their days-long ordeal and save the family. Kyung counters, saying he did not know what was happening. Jin says that is his point – that Kyung, as Jin and Mae's son, was not likely to visit or wonder why Jin and Mae did not leave their home during that time. While many adults may not have that daily contact with their parents, Kyung's family bases their ideals on the Korean culture. In that culture, Kyung should have been spending a lot of time with his parents. The fact that he doesn't labels him as a failure in his duty as a son.

The introduction of the Presbyterian congregation is sparse at this point, but that group becomes more important as the novel goes on. When Kyung was a teenager, he contacted the older Reverend Sun about the violence in the home. The man prayed with Jin, and Jin seemed to change, though Kyung and Mae wondered if it would last. The elder Reverend Sun retired back to Korea and his son, also known as Reverend Sun, took over. (For the sake of clarity in this guide, the name Reverend Sun will refer to the younger, unless a distinction is made.) In an ironic twist, Kyung now hates Jin's connection to the church. He says they only care about Jin because he is willing to financially support any project the church has. The reader has to wonder if Kyung's financial situation has made him more jealous about the money than he might otherwise be.

There is some preliminary information about the relationship between Kyung and his in-laws in two of the main scenes of this chapter. First, Kyung is angry when he finds that Connie and Tim are already at the hospital, and that they were present while Mae made her statement to police. Kyung makes a rude comment about that, making it clear that he should have been present and that he did not need Connie and Tim to help. Tim responds, probably because he is the kind of person who cannot let a comment like that pass without making one in return. Based on the brief information the reader knows about them, none of this is a surprise. However, Connie then reprimands Tim. Connie



and Tim are very close. Tim lives with his father, and has for years. Kyung cannot remember a time when Connie took his side against Tim. There are a couple of points the reader should take from this scene. First, Connie is not heartless. He can see that Kyung is hurting and he wants to help, regardless of Kyung's attitude or the state of their relationship. The other point is that Kyung's Korean background should have made him polite to his father-in-law, but he justifies his rude behavior. When Kyung and Gillian go to Connie's house later that day, Gillian expects Kyung to apologize, but she winds up having to say the words for him. Deep down, Kyung knows that Gillian is right but he cannot get past his pride and attitude to make the apology himself.

Connie recounts the story as he heard it in the hospital. He does not reveal who offered up details of the story, and it will later seem likely that Jin either coached Mae or that he told his version of the events and Mae went along. The author intends for the reader to accept this version of the events, which is how the twist at the end is possible.

An important part of Jin's version of events is that he went to the bank with Nat, and that he considered ways of making the teller aware of his distress. The teller was training a new woman, so they were focused on the transaction and barely looked at Jin. Nat did not take a gun with him, but left it at home with Dell, who pledged to shoot Mae if Jin made any effort to get away. Jin apparently did not try to get away, and Kyung later admits that it took courage to simply return to the house with Nat, knowing that the two men had not hidden their faces or their identities, and probably planned to kill Jin, Mae, and Marina before they left.

Discussion Question 1

Who is Connie and what is his relationship to Gillian and Kyung?

Discussion Question 2

Who is Reverend Sun? What does Kyung think about him?

Discussion Question 3

What is Kyung's reaction when he discovers Mae talked to police without him present? How does Connie explain the reason Mae does not want to talk to Kyung about it? Does Connie's explanation seem reasonable?

Vocabulary

zealots, denomination, teeming, traumatic, tentative, account, considered, option, compartment, vaguely, transaction



Dawn: Chapter 3

Summary

Kyung carefully cleans the house in preparation of Jin's release from the hospital. He instructs Gillian to buy food, focusing on food he thinks his father might eat. He goes over the rules with her about how his father will expect her to act and suggests a "conservative" outfit to wear to the hospital (74). Reverend Sun is at the hospital when Kyung, Gillian, and Ethan arrive, and makes it clear that he and his wife, Molly, would welcome Jin and Mae as guests during their recuperation. Kyung objects.

On the way home, Jin asks Ethan if he has been riding his tricycle. Ethan is clearly confused. Jin and Mae had purchased an Italian tricycle for his birthday. They left it on the steps of Kyung's house. Kyung never showed it to Ethan and the tricycle is still in the box in the basement.

During the drive, Kyung thinks about his father. Kyung knows that Jin could have run away, or at least tried, when he was at the bank with Nat Perry. Kyung wonders if he would have chosen to return to the house, knowing that the Perry brothers were probably going to kill him.

Jin says he needs some personal items and they stop at Wal-Mart. Kyung worries that this is not the kind of place Jin would usually shop, but Jin says it will be fine for what he needs. He chooses sweat pants, underwear, and hygiene items. When they are checking out, Jin realizes he does not have his wallet. Kyung frantically tries to remember which credit card might be current on the payment but fears that he will choose one that is rejected. As he is about to pay, he realizes there is a toy caterpillar in the basket. Jin says he wants to get it for Ethan. Kyung does not want to. He feels that Ethan does not need a toy and that he does not like blocks, but he feels he cannot refuse. Gillian guides him and he is relieved when the card is accepted. He knows there is something disturbing about the fact that they are at a place in their lives when a purchase of \$90 is "terrorizing" (83).

In the parking lot, Ethan asks for his toy. Kyung hands it over and Ethan is obviously happy. Gillian is also smiling, and Kyung feels that she is always the first to recover from their issues. Instinctively, he picks Ethan up in a hug, realizing that Ethan is at a "very wonderful age" (83).

At home, Jin lies down on the guest bed. Ethan climbs up beside him and they begin to watch television. Kyung tries to start conversation and offers Jin all sorts of food and drink until Jin snaps at him to stop. Ethan seems about to cry. Kyung feels he wanted to say some things to Jin, but drops the idea and leaves the room.

Afterward, Kyung goes to a bar in town. He has \$20 that he has been saving for an emergency, but decides to spend it on alcohol. He winds up in an argument with the girl



tending bar. Outside, he sits in his car and a police officer arrives, threatening to give him a ticket. Kyung asks the officer to call Connie. Tim arrives instead. Tim believes Kyung has been at the topless bar nearby, and he tells Kyung that just being in the running car in an inebriated state is enough to get a ticket. Tim agrees to follow Kyung home, and he does.

There are no lights on at home. Kyung eats some expensive pate, though he knows it was purchased for Jin. Gillian enters. She says Tim called her. She is furious that Kyung left her alone because he did not want to deal with Jin. During their argument, Gillian announces that Marina is staying with them while she recovers. Kyung argues, suggesting Jin can pay for her to stay somewhere else. Gillian refuses to consider it, pointing out the horrible situation Marina endured and the fact that she has no family in America.

Gillian then asks Kyung if Ethan is in danger from Mae. With time to think about it, she has realized that Mae must have physically abused Kyung. Kyung assures her that Ethan will be safe. He points out that Jin and Mae are “careful” when they are with Ethan, and that they seem happy when they are with him, in a way they were never happy with Kyung (104). He says that Ethan and Gillian will be his top priorities if they encounter problems, though he secretly calls that an “American idea” that clashes with his Korean culture (105).

Gillian changes the subject. She says Jin moved \$3,000 into their checking account. He announced his plan before moving the money, and Gillian expected a smaller amount. Jin said the money was “for our trouble” but Kyung knows it is Jin's way of apologizing (107). Kyung remembers when Jin had brutally beaten Mae years earlier. Her legs were covered with bruises as she modeled a new mink coat, an apology gift from Jin. Kyung says he hates that Mae taught him – even at that young age – that “everyone had a price” (107).

Analysis

Kyung has a low opinion of his parents, and he feels that he has failed in his duties as a son, but he still tries to let his parents see only the positives. He refused to help Gillian clean up the house when the realtor was due, but he spends a morning cleaning everything on the day Jin is due to be released from the hospital. He also sends Gillian grocery shopping, and fills the refrigerator with food he thinks his father might eat. The bill is more than \$200 at a time when they can ill afford to spend that much extra money, but Kyung refuses to think about it and does not ask Gillian if they can afford it. The fact that Gillian tries to go along with everything Kyung asks, including reciting the rules he wants her to follow while Jin is visiting, is a statement of her dedication to him. By this point, the reader will realize that Kyung is a difficult person, and Gillian works hard to understand and connect with him.

Jin makes another comment that is an obvious jab at Kyung's failure to do his duties as a son. Kyung says the “guest room” is ready for Jin, and Jin repeats the words in a



sarcastic, biting tone (76). The modern-day American readers will see nothing wrong with Kyung providing his father with a guest room, but Jin and Kyung know that Kyung has purposefully cut himself off from his parents so that his father is truly a guest, and not really a welcome one. The relationship is a major part of Kyung's emotional problems, and his unwillingness to accept Jin's changes is one of the novel's themes.

Most readers will expect Kyung to be a true hero with the attributes of a hero, but that is not the case. He has a number of character flaws and has held onto hurts that he should have been willing to release years earlier. One of those is centered on his relationships with Jin and Mae. Kyung knows that he is failing to meet the duties of a son, especially when measured against Korean standards. However, he is immediately upset when Reverend Sun makes it clear that Jin and Mae are welcome to stay with the Suns at the church parsonage. Kyung recognizes that he is jealous that Reverend Sun would make the suggestion, and that Jin would consider it. He has never wanted to have the traditional role of son in Jin's life, but he is angry when someone else is offering to do some of the things a son would normally do.

One of the novel's themes is related to Kyung's financial situation. This theme is seen in the opening conversation between Jin and Ethan, when Jin asks if Ethan has been riding his tricycle. Jin and Mae purchased a tricycle that Kyung knows cost about \$600. Kyung and Gillian bought Ethan two small gifts for his birthday, and he chose not to give Ethan the tricycle. Most readers will find Kyung's attitude entirely selfish. He did not want Ethan to have the tricycle because it was an expensive gift from Jin and Mae at a time when Kyung and Gillian could not afford to give him an expensive gift.

Gillian was excited about the tricycle until she realized Kyung's feelings. It seems that she gives in to him on things that really matter to him, which is an important part of their relationship, and something that he does not value. He does, however, recognize that she is always willing to do things for other people, specifically for their families. Kyung knows that he might not have been very nice about the situation if it had been Gillian's father who needed a place to stay.

The cultural differences are just below the surface throughout the novel. Kyung seems to feel the pressure of those differences more than anyone else, probably because he was raised with Korean culture and traditions, but has lived his entire life with Americans and is married to an American. The clash of what he learned and observed at home against what he learned and observed in mainstream America has created turmoil in his life that might not otherwise exist. An important example of this theme is seen near the end of the argument between Kyung and Gillian at the end of this chapter. Gillian says that Kyung would be justified if he chose to completely sever ties with Jin and Mae. Kyung counters, saying that is an "American idea" (105). As they continue to talk, Gillian asks Kyung to promise that he will put Ethan's safety and her own above anything else during this time when Jin and Mae are living with them. Kyung verbally agrees, but thinks that this is yet another "American idea." He admits that his wife and child should be his first priority, but his thoughts indicate that he is not certain they will be. What becomes clear as the novel progresses is that Kyung is too caught up in his own emotions and scars to put anyone else first, including Ethan, Gillian, Jin, and Mae.



Discussion Question 1

What is the significance of the tricycle? What does Kyung do with it instead of giving it to Ethan? What does this seem to indicate about Kyung?

Discussion Question 2

What is the memory Kyung has about a mink coat?

Discussion Question 3

Who is Marina and why does Gillian insist she should stay with them during her recovery?

Vocabulary

vigilant, begrudgingly, precaution, hurtling, cordial, audacity, parsonage, wincing, balks, receded



Dusk: Chapter 4

Summary

Officer Lentz arrives at the house to find Jin and Ethan working on putting Ethan's bike together. He says the police have finished working at the Cho's house and they can return there whenever they want. Jin's car, which has been missing since the attack, has been found at Newport, Vermont, near the Canadian border. Lentz asks about Mae, who has been released from the hospital. She is staying in the guest room and has relegated Jin to a cot in Ethan's room. Mae does not leave her room and does not eat. Kyung is rude, saying that the police are not doing anything to actively search for Nat. Gillian apologizes for Kyung's attitude, which makes Kyung angry. He notices that Jin's expression has changed, indicating his father does not approve of the situation. Kyung shoves a platter of sandwiches across the kitchen counter. The platter shatters when it lands on the floor. Gillian chastises him for the action. Lentz says he understands that everyone is "on edge" (117). Kyung hates that his father witnessed Gillian taking the upper hand in their conversation.

Mae arrives in the room which surprises everyone. She asks Lentz if he has news about her house, and says she will handle the cleanup herself. She insists on making Lentz a sandwich to take with him, which is exactly how she would have behaved as the perfect hostess in any situation prior to the attack. After Lentz leaves, Mae says she is going to the house to begin the cleanup. Kyung urges her to eat something. Jin agrees. Mae becomes coldly furious, saying she does not want to eat and that she is going to her house. Kyung is surprised when Mae does not quell under Jin's stare and when Jin looks away.

Kyung remembers his childhood. He and Mae knew no English when they arrived in America. They were excited to learn together at first, but it was soon clear that Kyung was learning and retaining more quickly. Jin often berated Mae, saying she was so stupid that he was sorry he married her. That memory comes back to Kyung as they are driving to the Cho's house. Mae insists she wants to begin the cleanup. During the drive, she says she regrets never learning to drive. Kyung knows that she lacked the self-confidence to try new things. They arrive at the house. He offers to take her back to his home, but she gets out of the car without responding. He can see that they are falling back into their old routine of being rude to each other and becomes determined to change that. She uses Kyung's cell phone to call the lawn service, demanding that they arrive to clean up the yard immediately. Kyung does not believe the yard is in poor shape, as Mae claims.

Inside, she instructs him to begin cleaning up the living room. At first, he is confused about how she can stand to be in the house at all, but he realizes that this house has been her greatest joy and biggest "source of security" (128). She has decorated and renovated, and she is very proud of the house. He sets to work. Later, he checks on her and finds she is working on a list that she says is for the insurance claim. He sees that



the list contains items that are intact and she explains that she has to know what is still there and unbroken in order to list what is missing.

Neighbors, Carol and Mort Steiner, arrive. They give Mae a casserole. She says she has a gift for them and leaves, returning a short time later with a fork that she knew Carol was missing from a set. Carol cries and Mae says she called many antique stores to find it. When the Steiners are gone, Kyung says it was “just a fork,” which makes Mae furious (135). She slaps him, screaming that he does not understand anything. She goes to the kitchen and he hears her throw the casserole.

On the way home, Kyung quietly tells Mae that she can never hit Ethan, and that he will take his son away from her if she does. She does not respond. Kyung knows that Mae stopped hitting him when he was big enough to hit back. He never did, but he “allowed her to think” he would so that she stopped (136). Mae says nothing.

When they arrive at Kyung's house, the street is filled with cars and Mae realizes it is people from their church. Reverend Sun says the congregation decided to bring the church service to Jin and Mae. They provide food. Kyung's immediate concern is that the church members will be harsh with Ethan, trying to preach to him. That is not the case, and Ethan is happily sitting with Jin. Ethan notices how Mae acts with Jin and believes that Mae blames Jin for not protecting her during the attack.

Kyung watches Reverend Sun's wife, Molly. Kyung and Molly went to school together, so he knows that she was free with sexual favors as a teen. He watches Molly do all the things a Korean wife would do. While he had taught Gillian what his father expects of her, he knows that “deference doesn't come naturally to her” (141). Kyung watches as all the Korean wives take subservient roles as they serve the meal.

Kyung excuses himself and goes outside where he finds Gillian. She asks if Mae was alright while they were at the Cho's house, and Kyung consciously avoids saying that Mae slapped him. Gillian says she believes Kyung needs to talk through his feelings, which makes him angry. He says she is not yet a licensed counselor and cannot practice on him.

Gillian says she feels guilty because she has more time to herself since Jin is spending so much time with Ethan. She believes Jin is trying to make up for Kyung's childhood, and Kyung is immediately defensive because he feels Gillian is saying Jin is a “better father and provider” than Kyung (149). Kyung says Jin can never make up for his actions, but Gillian says people have the right to change. Kyung tells Gillian a little more about his childhood, but suddenly realizes it puts him in a poor light as well. She immediately asks if Kyung pretends that everything is alright, just as his parents did. He cannot bring himself to answer, and she takes his silence as an admission.

Analysis

When Officer Lentz stops by to update the family on the case, he gives them several pieces of information. They found Jin's car near the Canadian border. The police are



finished processing the crime scene and the family is free to return. A detective has been assigned to handle the case. Kyung begins to question Lentz about their progress, asking what they are doing to find Nat Perry and why the detective did not visit them in person. As has been the case in almost every situation since the attack, Kyung is rude and inhospitable. His defensive attitude is what Connie criticizes later. An important aspect of Kyung's character is that he exhibits this rude attitude with almost everyone except Gillian, and he seems to often want to avoid any sort of argument with her.

After Lentz leaves the house, Kyung asks Mae why she acted as she did toward him. Mae says that he was “nice to me that day” (122). She is referring to the day when the police first became involved in the case and Kyung can feel her disapproval toward him. She seems to be saying that Lentz was nice to her, but that Kyung was not. Kyung was frightened and angry, and his initial response toward Mae was not one of kindness and affection. Kyung's reaction was a mixture of surprise, embarrassment, and fear, but he simply does not have the natural ability to be kind to people. Understanding the details of his childhood makes it more understandable, but Kyung has not grown into an affectionate adult, and he was not a kind and comforting presence when Mae desperately needed one.

The fork that Mae bought for her neighbors seems insignificant, but it is actually symbolic of her talent. After Mae's death, her friend and interior designer, Elinor Hamel, says that Mae was often able to locate rare pieces that no one else could find. This fork serves as an example of that ability. Mae had worked hard to get the fork, and the gift upsets Carol because of the timing. It is clear that she wants to comfort Mae, but Mae is giving her a gift instead. After Carol leaves, Kyung says that the fork is insignificant, and he dismisses the work Mae did to find it. His action infuriates Mae to the point that she slaps him. To Kyung, the action is completely out of context. To Mae, Kyung has just belittled her future. This confrontation makes sense later when Kyung learns that Mae had planned to leave Jin and begin work as an interior decorator. Her new boss says one of Mae's talents is the ability to find rare items that other people cannot find.

Kyung's adult personality is deeply rooted in his childhood ideas and attitudes, which shows that he has not grown and matured as most people do. An example of this is seen when Officer Lentz is giving them an update on the case. Kyung remembers some children who had parents unable or unwilling to provide food, and Mae would always provide food and her kindness was such that they accepted. Kyung was grateful to Mae for her thoughtfulness, but he was later “saddened by the glimpse of something shameful about their lives” (116). He believes that the people who knew those children were in need were “burdened” by that knowledge (116). In other words, he believes that knowing about the need requires a person to take action, but he finds no pleasure in trying to help others. He also talks about the shame, which seems to indicate that the children had a reason to feel ashamed because of their home situations.

Mae seems to undergo a dramatic change in attitude when she and Kyung talk about her desire to learn to drive. She never wanted to learn in the past and Kyung feels it was because she lacked self-confidence. However, Kyung's own failures as a son come into play in the situation as well. In the past, Kyung never offered to teach her to drive



because he wanted to get out of that duty. Now, Kyung fears that she will say that is the only reason he wants to teach her. The complex relationship and emotional issues faced by the various characters adds dimension to the situation, which would be terrible but much simpler for other characters. The author's character development makes the situation more difficult, and the reader has to be willing to look into the depth of the characters to fully understand their issues and motivations. Mae's sudden willingness to learn to drive seems to be an acceptable change in her attitude. She may be thinking that she wants to gain abilities as a means of protecting herself from being a constant victim. The reader may consider all these factors, but the truth will be revealed when Mae later drives herself into a tree, committing suicide. At the end of the novel, it will seem apparent that she is planning to kill herself even from this point.

Kyung's comparisons of Gillian with the Korean wives at the Sunday meal again evoke the theme of cultural differences. The Korean wives, including Molly, are subservient to their husbands and to their roles as Korean wives. Kyung compares them to "foot soldiers" and says he would never want someone he cares about to be forced into that role (144). It almost seems that he is trying to convince himself that he feels this way and that he might be negatively comparing Gillian to the Korean wives. Kyung says he would not want someone he loves to have to live like that, but that may not be true.

Discussion Question 1

Who is Officer Lentz? What is Kyung's reaction to him? What is Mae's reaction to him?

Discussion Question 2

Describe the emerging relationship between Jin and Ethan. What is Kyung's attitude about it?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Mae slap Kyung?

Vocabulary

lavishes, enunciated, hermetically, tainted, serpentine, obvious, dispersed, tentative, deference, quaint, subservient, idyllic



Dusk: Chapter 5

Summary

Kyung's house has three bedrooms. Mae is sleeping in one. Jin and Ethan are sharing Ethan's room. Kyung and Gillian have the third. Marina arrives and begins sleeping on the couch. Her presence is disturbing on several levels. She sleeps a lot and is in obvious pain. Mae says Marina should go home. Kyung continues to help her clean the house but she does not acknowledge his help at all. She has begun to eat because the Korean ladies of the church drop off food every day. Kyung realizes that Mae was refusing to eat partly because she did not like Gillian's cooking.

After they finish cleaning the house, Mae asks for a driving lesson. They go to a parking lot on the college campus and Kyung gives her a lesson. Mae begins singing with a rock song, which surprises Kyung. He thinks what their lives might have been if she had ever been strong enough to leave Jin and his abuse. They are companionable at first, but Kyung makes comments that ruin that. Mae announces that they will sell the house, saying she can never live there again. She says she wants the family to move to the beach house she and Jin own at the Cape for the rest of the summer, including Kyung, Gillian, and Ethan. Kyung begins to feel frantic. She says Marina is not welcome. Kyung turns the conversation back to the driving, suggesting they try parking. Mae says she does not want to learn any more today.

In the middle of the night, Kyung hears continuing noise and goes downstairs to investigate. The hallway is lit by the nightlights he and Gillian purchased on their various trips. They spent untold amounts of money on these trips, but allowed themselves to only buy nightlights as souvenirs. This was their way of limiting themselves, as if buying only nightlights a souvenirs could somehow offset the amount of money they were spending on the trips.

In the kitchen, Kyung finds Marina cleaning the kitchen cabinets. She says she will make herself useful so that Kyung and Gillian do not send her away. Mae had told Marina that the family is going to the beach house and that Marina will have to leave before they return. Marina says her father did not want her to leave their home in Bosnia, predicting that bad things would happen to her. Marina has younger sisters and she predicts that her father will never let them leave if he sees Marina in this condition. Kyung feels a deep compassion for her and pledges that no one will make her leave. She promises that she will work, but also promises to be quieter.

Upstairs, Kyung finds that Ethan is sleeping with Jin. Kyung objects, saying they want Ethan to sleep in his own bed. Jin convinces Kyung to leave him for tonight, but Kyung insists that Ethan has to sleep in his own bed from this point on. They talk about Mae. Jin says they have to let Mae do "whatever she wants," which surprises Kyung (173). Kyung asks why Jin married Mae. Jin tries to put the question off, but Kyung persists. Jin says he was supposed to marry Mae's cousin, but her family was poor and Jin's



father refused the match. Jin asks Kyung to contact a realtor to sell the house, and says giving Mae a new house to decorate will be good for her.

Gertie meets Kyung at his parents' home the next day. He can immediately see that she is far more excited about this house than she was about Kyung's house. He soon realizes that she is out of her league with this house. He becomes very upset in the master bedroom, imagining Mae being raped there. When he explains why he is upset, Gertie says no one would buy the house until some time has passed for the story to die down. Kyung knows he sounds bitter when he points out that Gertie cannot sell any of the houses owned by his family. Gertie counters, saying that they at least “have each other,” and Kyung agrees (186).

Analysis

Kyung holds a grudge against Jin and Mae for his childhood, and he is angry at his father because Jin is wealthy. That wealth is the result of years of work, including trudging through years when Jin's alternative energy inventions were not popular. Kyung is a mediocre professor. He is not an outstanding teacher and knows that he got his job because of the money Jin brings into the university on an annual basis. Kyung has never published papers, despite the fact that his colleagues have outdistanced him on this front. He cannot stand on his own, but he hates the fact that he stands in Jin's shadow.

The nightlights are symbolic of the dark hold Gillian and Kyung have created with their expensive spending habits and their failure to pay off any of their debts. They traveled extensively during the early years of their marriage, paying for the trips with student loans and other forms of credit, and not paying off any of them.

Kyung is surprised when Mae says he should just throw all the damaged pictures away and keep only those things that have monetary value. He had not expected that because the portraits were mainly relatives who had died in years gone by. This is a piece of subtle foreshadowing. Like many, it is only clearly evident once the reader knows that Mae is already planning her suicide.

Kyung worries because fatherhood does not come naturally to him. At one point, he considers the situation of a man he considers to be a successful father, and he believes that parents who love their children and put the needs of the children first are able to raise good children who grow into happy successful adults who will also make good parents. An important aspect of abuse is that children of abuse are more likely to become abusers. However, Jin seems determined to change and to make amends. The fact that Kyung cannot accept change is one of the novel's themes.

Kyung was completely opposed to having Marina move in with them and he is uncomfortable with her presence. She spends a lot of time on the couch and is obviously in pain. She has some serious medical issues related to the attack. What is important is that Kyung changes his opinion after Marina begs him not to send her back



to her family in Bosnia. It seems that Kyung cannot connect to Marina until she pleads her case to him personally, but he cannot make those connections with most people, even after they try to get personal with him.

Religion is one of several underlying themes seen in the novel. Kyung asks Marina if she is religious. He has made it clear that he is not, but he finds himself hoping that she has something to believe in. It seems that he wants her to have some belief that will provide a support system so that he does not have to be part of that system. Marina, however, seems to feel that God has abandoned her and she is faltering on this subject.

Discussion Question 1

What does Marina explain to Kyung about her situation? How does he respond?

Discussion Question 2

What does Mae ask of Kyung after they finish cleaning the house? Why?

Discussion Question 3

What is Gertie's attitude about Jin and Mae's house? What does she tell Kyung about his situation?

Vocabulary

complicity, muted, unobtrusive, tenure, abysmal, emulate, proximity, empathy, flask, revitalizing, rifles, acrid, concoction



Dusk: Chapter 6

Summary

Kyung arrives at his office on the college campus. Jin, Mae, Gillian, Ethan, and Marina have all gone to the beach house. Connie and his new girlfriend have also gone along. Kyung does not know why Mae relented and asked Marina to join them. Kyung wanted some time to himself, and he claimed his department head was demanding his presence. That was not true. His department head arrives soon after Kyung. Over breakfast, he insists that Kyung join his family during this difficult time. Kyung accepts the order to leave campus and goes home.

There, he finds a car in the drive and expects that it is Reverend Sun. Instead, he finds Molly is delivering the daily food from the ladies of the church. She can tell Kyung is upset and is worried that he is going to be alone when she leaves. Kyung is furious about everything. He remembers that Molly was eager to have sex with anyone when they were teenagers and he points that out to her. She says that she has changed but he is skeptical and derisive of her explanation. He grabs her and kisses her, and she briefly responds. Kyung is sexually excited. He says that sex is supposed to feel “dangerous and unfamiliar,” unlike the predictable relationship he has with Gillian (204). Molly suddenly stops responding, and almost falls because her underwear is around her ankles. She says she cannot understand why she reacted. She is nearly hysterical. Kyung says he is not sorry for the encounter.

Kyung remembers that Molly's parents frequently fought when Molly was a teenager, and that her behavior worsened each time he heard her parent's fights turn physical. He admired Molly because she acted out, giving her parents the same level of grief that they gave her. She eventually enacted changes in her life, and Kyung feels that was a “betrayal” (207).

Molly leaves and Kyung knows that she will tell her husband the details of the evening, and that news will then spread to Gillian. He knows he is in serious trouble, but he also knows that this time he is in trouble because of something he actually did rather than being the victim of the trouble someone else caused. He has another beer, accepting that drinking is yet another choice he is making for himself at this moment.

Kyung arrives at the beach house and realizes that it is an example of his parents' wealth. Kyung knows that Jin could pay off all Kyung and Gillian's debts, and that Gillian would accept the help if Jin ever made the offer. Kyung, however, would feel that he could never turn down another invitation issued by Jin and Mae, and he cannot accept that price. Despite thinking that he would not accept their help, he is angry that they never offered.

Kyung briefly considers leaving but goes inside instead. He finds the family, including Connie and his girlfriend Vivian, preparing to eat dinner. No one expected him until the



following day, thinking that he was at his office. He lies, saying he “finished early” and decided to drive on up (212). Ethan says he and Jin searched for shells. Kyung finds himself jealous of the emerging relationship, which he sees as a “transfer” of affection. Mae and Marina arrive from the kitchen, carrying plates of lobster for the meal. Mae is flustered and upset because she does not have a lobster for Kyung. Gillian tries to smooth it over, saying they will share. Marina arrives a moment later, giving Kyung her lobster and saying that she does not care for it anyway.

Mae reveals that she and Vivian have been making a list of the items in the beach house, and Mae gives Vivian some items that Kyung knows are very valuable. Kyung immediately believes Vivian is an opportunist out to take advantage of Connie's steady paycheck and his pension. Ethan becomes upset, saying he does not like the lobster. Kyung insists he eat. Ethan immediately looks toward Jin, which makes Kyung think Ethan had expected his grandfather to give a different answer. Ethan says he does not want to eat it, but Kyung's voice turns menacing as he speaks and slaps the table. Several people try to quiet Kyung, and he becomes furious with Jin, saying he learned the behavior from Jin.

Vivian and Mae pick up small talk, trying to smooth the situation over. Kyung becomes more angry and vocal. Eventually, he points to Jin and Mae, announcing the violence that was present in their home when he was a child, and that it “ruined” Kyung (220). Jin grabs Ethan and runs from the room, and Mae slams down her knife and follows a minute later. Gillian says Kyung has to let Mae and Jin apologize and make up for their mistakes. She insists that Mae and Jin are trying to make amends. Kyung sees that as evidence that Gillian has become his parents' supporters, and that he no longer wants her. He slaps the table again, and demands that Gillian decide how much Jin should give them to make up for his childhood. Gillian leaves the room as well, leaving only Kyung, Connie, and Vivian. Kyung expects a lecture from Connie, but it does not happen.

Analysis

Kyung spends a little time talking to his department head. The man has twins who turned into productive, successful young adults. Kyung wonders if there is a secret to success. As his boss promises he will do anything to help Kyung's family, Kyung realizes that love is the secret in that family, with the adults always putting the “needs of their children ahead of their own” (197). With that understanding, Kyung says aloud that he “never really had a chance,” but he seems to be focusing only on his childhood without considering what he might be doing to Ethan (197).

Kyung does not explain why he admired Molly's behavior when they were teenagers, other than to say that she was getting into trouble which was what her parents deserved. He obviously feels that the actions of the child reflect on the parents, and that Molly was getting even with her parents for their physical violence. That part is reasonably understandable. Kyung feels that Molly was acting out in a way that he did not, probably because he lacked the courage to do so. However, the truly questionable



part of this is seen in Kyung's next thought, that Molly betrayed him when she stopped acting out and began to behave as expected. Kyung does not explain why he should feel betrayed by that. Earlier, Gillian said that he needed to let Jin change, and this seems to mimic that situation. It seems that Molly was probably miserable and constantly in turmoil when she was fighting against her parents, and that she is happier now that she is settled and living as Reverend Sun's wife. Kyung, however, feels betrayed because Molly is no longer lashing out at the world – which is something that he never dared to do. That shows again the incredible self-centeredness that colors almost everything Kyung does.

The financial issues continue to be an issue for Kyung, which is one of the novel's main themes. He has never been to the beach house until he goes there after his failed attempt at seducing Molly. The house is elaborate and decorated in light colors. Kyung can imagine Gillian's first look at the house, and he believes that she would probably have been in awe. When he goes inside, Kyung says the house is decorated mainly in white, indicating that Mae has created a showpiece instead of a warm, inviting home.

There are a couple of important points seen in the scene at the dinner table. First, it is Jin who picks up Ethan and rushes out of the room to keep Ethan from seeing Kyung in his drunken, angry state. When Kyung thinks about it later, he regrets that he let Ethan see that, but he is not sorry that he spoke out. Another is that Kyung comes full circle with regard to Gillian, saying that he no longer wants her in his life because she has taken his parents' side. It seems more likely that he is trying to justify the end of his marriage. Finally, it is significant that Kyung judges Vivian on what he knows of her after a few minutes of conversation. Later, Connie reveals that Vivian makes him happy in a way he had not expected. Kyung, however, is so judgmental that he does not care whether this relationship is good for Connie.

The relationships between the various characters is an underlying theme and it drives a great deal of the action. The relationship between Connie and Kyung is an important part of this. Kyung thinks Connie dislikes him because he is Korean. If Connie dislikes Kyung, he has had several opportunities to make that clear. He could lash out at Kyung after everyone else leaves the table following Kyung's drunken tirade, but he does not. As is typical for Kyung, he cannot see past his own self-centered attitude to accept that anyone else could have positive thoughts or motives.

Discussion Question 1

Who is Molly and what did Kyung think of her when they were teenagers?

Discussion Question 2

What happens between Kyung and Molly? Considering the characters of Kyung and Gillian, should readers be surprised to learn that this is the event that ends their marriage?



Discussion Question 3

Why does Kyung decide he is going to tell his family how he really feels? Describe the scene at the dinner table.

Vocabulary

atrophy, version, consolation, periphery, haphazard, insolent, conversion, ridicule, veneer, indenture, daunting, siphoning



Night: Chapter 7

Summary

Kyung wakes the next morning to find everyone is frantic about his missing car. Kyung feels that the alcohol he consumed helped him say things he wanted to say. He feels a sense of relief at having said everything he'd wanted to say for a long time and pledges that he will no longer avoid the truth. Connie makes some phone calls and finds that Mae was in a wreck. Kyung admits that he gave Mae a driving lesson. Jin is furious at Kyung, and says he has "no respect for anyone" (229). Connie, Kyung, and Jin go to the scene and discover that the car is totaled, and that Mae and Marina are both dead. Jin says Kyung caused Mae to take this step. Kyung believes that is the truth. Kyung is frantic, partly because he knows that Mae was never willing to leave Jin but ran away when Kyung confronted her. Jin begins to strike and kick Kyung while he is on the ground until Connie intervenes. Connie says the preliminary examination of the scene indicates that Mae had the wreck on purpose. She did not touch the brake and witnesses said she accelerated as she drove toward the tree. She also left a note. That note turns out to be a list of all the valuable items, and she had indicated who was to get each. The final note was that anything left over should go to Gillian, which Kyung takes as a final slap in the face. Kyung has to accept that Mae had planned to kill herself all along, but that does not eliminate his guilt.

They return home in complete silence. Gillian and Jin do not speak to Kyung at all as they plan Mae's funeral. Connie drives them to the church. Reverend Sun approaches and Kyung quickly discovers that Molly did not tell their secret. He is "both relieved and disappointed" to learn that "even the devout have their secrets" (240). It occurs to Kyung to ask where Marina's funeral is being held. Gillian says her body was sent home to her family. Kyung believes that Mae must have thought she was doing the right thing for Marina, "ending their suffering together, the same way it began" (241). As Kyung listens to Reverend Sun's faltering words, he again thinks that he drove Mae to her death.

The Reverend's message is halting and awkward, and he quickly hands the pulpit over to others who plan to speak. One of those is Elinor Hamel. She was Mae's decorator and considered Mae as her friend. After the service, everyone goes to the parsonage for the reception. Kyung finds himself in the study and is relieved to be alone but people soon begin trooping in to give their condolences. At one point, Elinor Hamel arrives. She gives Kyung the key to an apartment over her shop, saying Mae had planned to move in there and was going to work for Elinor. Kyung is confused but Elinor insists that Mae was a talented decorator, and that she was exciting about beginning work. Elinor says the apartment was a place for Mae to stay during the workweek so that no one had to make the two-hour commute with her every day. Kyung is confused but thanks Elinor for her kindness to Mae.

Reverend Sun comes in and explains that Jin told him Mae killed herself, which is why he was unable to say all the things he planned to say at her service. Kyung realizes the



Reverend was simply unwilling to lie. By this time, Kyung has come to accept that everyone is “pretending in some way” (255). Reverend Sun makes it clear he knows about the violence in Kyung's home. Kyung says he was horrible to Mae shortly before her death. Reverend Sun correctly guesses that Kyung is more upset because he will now never have a chance to rectify his relationship with Mae. Reverend Sun says that Kyung is not responsible for whatever steps Mae chose, and Kyung is surprised that this man is the first person to offer words that actually comfort him.

Analysis

There are a lot of complex emotions during the first part of this chapter. One of these is that Jin blames Kyung even before they know that Mae committed suicide. Jin has often beaten Mae, and his idea of making up for that has been to buy Mae gifts. Now, however, he is furious because Kyung spoke out and hurt Mae. Another is that Kyung accepts the blame for Mae's suicide. He believes for the coming days that his words drove Mae over the edge. The reader should also notice that Kyung is furious with Mae for running away when he confronted her, while refusing to run away all those years when Jin was beating her. Kyung seems to believe that Mae would have been a different kind of mother if she had not been forced to endure Jin's beatings. The author presents all these emotions as a means of building each of the characters to their fullest potential, making them more believable and complex. This forces the reader to begin identifying with each, whether the characters are likeable or not.

Kyung makes an important comparison between Mae's funeral and what would likely happen at Marina's funeral. He is appalled by the excessive amount of expensive flowers that are present at his mother's funeral, and he believes that will not be the case at Marina's funeral. Kyung also remembers that Marina had not wanted to go home because she did not want her parents to know about the attack. Kyung says that “death made it easier,” and that her parents would never know her secret now (241). This is one of several places where the author uses comparisons as a literary tool.

The first clue that there might have been something going on with Mae is seen when Elinor Hamel announces to Kyung that Mae was planning to begin a job. Elinor says that Mae was very talented, and that she was going to be a big asset to Elinor's company. Kyung is obviously skeptical, which prompts Elinor to defend herself. She insists that she has a legitimate company, and that Mae was a talented designer. She says the job she offered Mae was a full-time position that included benefits. Kyung does not put the rest of the story together until later, including that Mae could have told Jin about the job, prompting him to beat her. Because the Perry brothers undoubtedly beat and raped Mae, it never crosses anyone's mind that Jin might have hit her before the Perry brothers attacked them.



Discussion Question 1

Why do police assume that Mae committed suicide? What is the significance of Mae's list?

Discussion Question 2

Who is Elinor Hamel and what does she reveal about Mae's future plans?

Discussion Question 3

Describe the conversation between Kyung and Reverend Sun that takes place in the parsonage after Mae's funeral. What is significant about this conversation?

Vocabulary

inclination, liberated, pebbly, coiffed, pathetic, aspiration, embellish, interpretation, sanctuary, grotesque, excess, gilded, benign, condescension



Night: Chapter 8

Summary

The day after the funeral, Gillian asks Jin to take Ethan out for the day. She goes to her room and remains there for a time, though Kyung expects them to have the argument that he believes has been brewing for days. Instead, he finds that she is packing his clothes. She shows him a pair of women's underwear, which he recognizes as Molly's, and says she cannot live with him knowing that he has had an affair. She asks for the identity of the woman, but Kyung says it is someone Gillian does not know. Kyung realizes that he and Gillian had a "utilitarian" relationship that they entered mainly because it was the accepted and expected next step, but that she would not tolerate infidelity (265).

Gillian says that Jin has paid off their credit cards, meaning Kyung has the money to get a motel and buy whatever he needs. Kyung tries to defend himself, but then changes tactic, saying that Jin had "bought" them (266). Gillian says Jin did not seem to mind and did not balk at the amount. Kyung has to admit to himself that he does not know that amount. Gillian says Kyung cannot change this, and that it is for Ethan's sake. With her words, Kyung has to admit that he has not been doing his duty toward his family, including his financial duty.

Before he leaves, Kyung asks how Gillian could have taken this step. She says she did it because she knew Kyung would never forgive her for it, meaning their relationship is truly at an end. Kyung asks how long Jin is staying with Gillian, and she says he is welcome as long as he wants. Kyung, in a hateful remark, says that Jin will be welcome "as long as he's willing to pay the bills" (269). Gillian insists that he leave before Ethan returns.

Kyung rents a car and begins to travel aimlessly. He racks up charges, thinking about the fact that his father is going to have to pay the expenses. He meets a trucker and tells a story about making a new life in California. The trucker tells him about a beautiful view he should take in before getting back on the road. By the time Kyung has seen it, he admits that his plan to go to California is ridiculous, and he heads back.

Kyung goes to Elinor Hamel's business, called Hamel Interior Design. He knows he looks rough, having not taken time to shower or change since he left home. Elinor tells him that Mae had paid the rent on the apartment in advance, and Kyung asks if he can live there for a while. Elinor seems reluctant, but agrees.

The apartment is beautifully decorated, and Mae did it all. He finds records, explaining how Mae knew the rock song that came on the radio during their driving lesson. Elinor says the workmen were quick to do whatever Mae asked, but they did so because they wanted to please her, not because they were afraid of her. As Kyung studies the apartment, he realizes that Mae was on the verge of building a new life for herself. After



Elinor leaves him, Kyung calls home. He tries to make Gillian agree that they will spend some time together with Ethan. Gillian finally says that she was not supposed to tell him yet, but that police have Nat Perry in custody.

Analysis

When Gillian is packing Kyung's clothes and telling him he has to leave, his first thought is that they should go away together on a trip. This is typical. At this point, he does not know that Jin has paid off their credit cards and he believes Gillian is angry with him for his tirade at the beach house dinner table. He does not stop to consider where they will get the money to pay for the trip, which is typical of his irresponsible attitude and his unwillingness to face problems head on.

Both Gillian and Kyung seem to have decided that their marriage is over by the time Gillian is packing Kyung's clothes. That is an important part of the character development the author has carefully crafted throughout the novel. Kyung knows that Gillian has never really required anything from him other than fidelity, but he was very excited when he thought he was about to have sex with Molly. Some readers might think that he should have argued with Gillian over the situation, because he did not actually have sex with Molly. He might have lied, saying that he did not know where the underwear came from, but he does not even try to talk his way out of the situation. This seems to indicate that he is ready to walk out on his marriage. Financial issues are often a cause of marital strife, but in this case, Gillian's decision to ask Jin to pay off their bills causes even more strife than when they were drowning in debt.

Kyung's childish attitude about money is seen again in the scene in which he is pretending he is going to California. He has rented an expensive car that he admits is a ridiculous extravagance, but he chose it because of the cost and appearance. He plans to charge everything he can so that Jin will be left with the bill. He cannot see that Jin paying off his credit cards is a gift that he should embrace, and he only wants to get even with his father. When Gillian tells Kyung about it, she says that she has done something he considers unforgivable, but that at least she and Ethan have benefited from it. She is obviously comparing that to the fact that Kyung slept with someone else, which ensured that his marriage would end but did not gain him anything.

The apartment above Elinor's business is symbolic of Mae's plan to leave Jin. Elinor describes the situation differently, saying that Mae had planned to spend her weeks there so she did not have to depend on anyone to take her back and forth to work every day, but Kyung immediately sees the apartment for what it is – Mae's escape plan. The apartment has a lot of nice touches that showcase Mae's talent. This is really the first time that Kyung understands that Mae was talented. It seems he had always believed that Jin's money was the reason their home was so elegant, but he now realizes that Jin's money only allowed Mae to indulge her talent.



Discussion Question 1

Why does Gillian ask Kyung to leave?

Discussion Question 2

What is the significance of Gillian's announcement that Jin has paid off their credit cards?

Discussion Question 3

What are the things Kyung learns about Mae when he visits her loft apartment?

Vocabulary

exiled, mitigated, disorients, loathing, redeeming, utilitarian, fidelity, flicker, carafe, lethargic, flourish, clutches, folios, marital, gravitated, perceived, legion



Night: Chapter 9

Summary

Kyung goes directly to the police station, despite the fact that he needs clean clothes, a shower, and sleep. Tim says Kyung looks “like hell” and Connie asks when he slept last, but they give no indication Gillian has told them about the split (292). Jin is not present, though a detective has asked him to make an identification. Kyung predicts that Jin is afraid of looking at Nat Perry. Connie says Nat was in no condition to talk when he was arrested, and they had not contacted Kyung because they did not want him to have to wait around for Nat to sober up. Kyung is skeptical but can find no indication that Connie is lying.

Kyung, Connie, and Tim watch the interview from a closet-sized observation room normally used for lineups. The detective guides Nat Perry through some basic information, including the fact that his girlfriend took Jin's car out of town to throw police off his trail. He then says he and Lyndell had been watching the house next door to Jin and Mae for several days. They never saw the owner go to the bank, so assumed he had a large amount of cash in the house. They planned to say their car broke down, ask to use the phone, and then demand that the couple hand over their cash. But just as the Perry brothers were approaching the house, Mae ran from her house, yelling for help. Nat says Mae was already beat up because “her husband was beating the crap out of her” (300).

The detective pauses and Connie says Kyung should not be present for the rest of the questioning. Kyung, however, refuses to leave. The detective continues the interview. Nat says he and his brother followed Mae inside and that the house had been wrecked. He says he and his brother consumed some drugs and did some damage, but that most of the wreckage was there when they arrived.

As the interview continues, Kyung begins to leave the room. Connie asks where he is going, and Kyung says he is going to make good on his promise from years earlier, to kill Jin if he ever hit Mae again. While Connie tries to reason with him, Kyung finally sees why Mae was so angry with Jin after the attack. He had literally forced her to invite the Perry brothers into their home.

Connie convinces Kyung to go for a ride. He continues to ride around town, refusing to let Kyung out of the car until Kyung pleads for a bathroom. Connie then takes Kyung to his house. Tim has been following but he goes to bed when Connie assures him that he has Kyung under control. Vivian is there as well, and Kyung sees that Tim is not very nice to her. Connie tells Vivian he plans to remain in the living room with Kyung, and she goes to bed.

Kyung tries to sneak out the bathroom window, but it has been caulked closed and he cannot open it. Connie continues to try to convince Kyung to wait before he takes any



action. Kyung argues that time will not change anything. Kyung tells Connie that Gillian kicked him out. He says Connie should be happy about that, and reveals that he believes Connie is prejudiced because of Kyung's ethnicity. Connie says he has never cared for Kyung, but because Kyung acts defensive all the time. He also says that he had an indifferent relationship with Gillian's mother, who died years earlier. They never argued, but they lacked a passionate connection, and he saw that Gillian and Kyung would have that same kind of relationship. He compares that to how he feels about Vivian, and says he has never been happier. Connie says that Kyung might be able to repair his relationship with Gillian. Kyung just wants Connie to stop talking, so he says that he had an affair, which prompts Connie to stop talking. Kyung says he plans to "let Gillian get on with her life" (312). He then says he wants Connie to get out of his way. Connie makes it clear he will not let Kyung leave. Kyung suddenly has an idea. He grabs a candle and knocks Connie out with it. Kyung is afraid of how hard he hit Connie. He raises Connie's head and Connie briefly regains consciousness, long enough to call Kyung an "idiot" before passing out again (315).

Kyung goes to his father's house, instinctively knowing Jin will be there. Jin asks if Nat Perry expressed any remorse. Kyung says Nat did not, and he asks if Jin has remorse. Jin says he does not. Kyung asks Jin about a specific time when Jin brutally beat Mae. Jin says they were at a faculty social event, and that he had sent Mae to buy herself something new to wear. She was uncomfortable spending money, so she found something on sale and forgot to remove the tag. The other women laughed about it. Jin says Kyung cannot possibly understand how difficult it was when Jin was the only Asian on the faculty, and how hard he had to work to be accepted. Kyung then asks whether Jin would have been happy if he had married Mae's cousin instead. He says he would likely have beaten her, just as he beat Mae. Kyung knows that, as Jin's son, he was destined to be affected by violence.

Jin goes on talking, saying that he had made mistakes but had spent years with Mae "on a pedestal" while trying to give her every financial advantage (321). At the end of that effort, Mae had still planned to take a job, move into a loft apartment, and leave Jin behind. Jin then says that Ethan allowed him to be a different kind of person, but that Mae and Kyung were never going to forgive him for his actions years earlier.

Kyung feels that Jin is saying horrible things as if he is trying to make Kyung react. Jin then comes out and begs Kyung to kill him in order to make the pain stop. Kyung thinks about the moment of power he felt when he hit Connie, but knows that feeling of power lasted a second. What he had not realized is that he has to live with that moment of violence for the rest of his life. Kyung thinks about Ethan, who loves Jin because of the person Jin is now. Kyung knows that hitting his father, or killing him, will not make his own pain go away. He says as much to Jin, adding that he does not know how to make their pain stop.

Jin lies down on the rug and Kyung watches as he falls asleep. Eventually, Kyung joins him, knowing that it will soon be daylight, and that "morning will reach them" if they simply wait for it to happen (326).



Analysis

While waiting for the interview with Nat Perry to begin, Kyung thinks about his current situation. He believes that his life was “far from perfect” before the attack, but that he now “has even less than what he started with” (295). He also believes that his life could have gone on the way it was for an indefinite period of time if the Perry brothers had not attacked his parents, which forced changes. Kyung, in typical self-centered fashion, is looking only at what has happened to him. He does not blame Nat Perry for his mother's death or for his father's injuries and losses, but sees only what Nat's actions cost Kyung.

Kyung reveals to Connie that he and Gillian have decided to split up, and that Gillian will not take him back because of his infidelity. Kyung's first reaction is fear. He notes that Connie is a large man and could easily beat Kyung. It's important to see that Kyung's first reaction is a fear of violence, but he does accept over the course of the conversation that his relationship with Connie has taken a turn for the worse. Kyung admits only now that he has a level of respect for Connie that was furthered by how Connie has handled the situations after the attack. Kyung has never realized that he had the ability to have a better relationship with Connie if he took the step, but he realizes now that he has killed any hope of that.

As Kyung talks to Jin after learning the truth about the Perry brothers' attack, he asks Jin to explain some of his actions, including a specific time he beat Mae. There are some important pieces of information in that conversation. First, Kyung asks about some specific memories and seems to want to truly understand what motivated Jin. When Jin explains how mortified he was because Mae bought an outfit on sale and then forgot to remove the sale tag, Kyung can actually relate, at least to a degree. He had often been the only Asian in a group and he felt alienated because of that, so he does understand that aspect of Jin's behavior. He also knows that Jin had set standards that no one could meet. An equally important aspect of Kyung's emerging understanding is that he will never know whether Jin was “cruel to Mae because she couldn't help him cope, or if she didn't try to help because he was cruel” (319). The fact that Kyung is listening to his father and that he can identify with some aspects of his father's life is a sign that Kyung might be reaching a new level of acceptance and understanding. That is a typical coming-of-age scenario, which is one of the minor themes of the novel.

Some readers may be disappointed that the novel leaves so many unanswered questions, such as whether Connie presses charges against Kyung and whether Jin faces charges for beating Mae. The entire tone of the novel has been one of fear and uncertainty, and it seems appropriate that it should end that way.

Discussion Question 1

What does Kyung learn when he watches Nat Perry's police interview? What is his immediate reaction? Why does he fail to carry that out?



Discussion Question 2

How does the relationship between Kyung and Connie change in the hours following Nat Perry's police interview?

Discussion Question 3

What is the significance of the titles of the three sections: Dawn, Dusk, Night? Why does the author include two titles that hint at darkness?

Vocabulary

vestibule, medicinal, warren, stasis, elicit, optimism, consecutive, indicts, incite, dread, semblance, trajectory



Characters

Kyung Cho

Kyung is a young American college professor of Korean ethnicity. Though he grew up in America, Korean culture has played a huge role in shaping his life. His father, Jin, is a college professor who has struggled to become an accepted and celebrated inventor and professor. His mother, Mae, has lived her entire life under Jin's brutal rule. Kyung grew up watching Jin beat Mae. Though Jin never struck Kyung, Mae often beat him. Even as a young man, Kyung recognized that his mother had control over nothing in her life other than Kyung, which is why she often struck him.

As an adult, Kyung is self-centered, unsure of himself, and unable to make adult decisions. He has spent money he is not able to repay and the family is drowning in debt. His lack of self-esteem is largely due to his brutal childhood and Jin's constant disdain. The traditional Korean background is not important to Kyung in most cases, but he does believe he has failed in his duties as a son. While he believes he should do more for his parents, including spending more time with them, he cannot bring himself to actually do those things.

Kyung's frustrations finally come to a breaking point which prompts him to tell his family how he really feels about them and their relationships. When Mae kills herself, Kyung believes it is his fault. When he realizes that Jin had beat Mae again, Kyung fully intends to kill Jin, and he has to come to terms with the effect that violence has on everyone involved, including the person perpetrating the violence. While Kyung apparently comes to terms with himself and his parents, the novel ends before the reader can discover what long-term effect that will have on Kyung.

Gillian McFadden

Gillian is Kyung's wife, Ethan's mother, and Connie's daughter. She is American with an Irish heritage, and she does not fully understand Korean culture. She can recite the rules Kyung imposes when Gillian is with his parents, such as ensuring that the men are served first during a meal, but it goes against her nature to actually follow those rules. That means that she often forgets what Kyung and his parents expect, and she embarrasses Kyung in front of his parents. It is more difficult for her because Kyung only expects her to follow these Korean traditions when his parents are present.

Gillian is a thoughtful, giving person, and she is heartbroken when she discovers Molly's underwear, knowing that it means Kyung was unfaithful to their marriage. Gillian is the one who insists that they take Marina in, even though they do not really have the space or the means to support her during her recovery. Kyung admits that he might not have been as understanding if members of Gillian's family had needed to move in with them.



Gillian is as irresponsible with money as Kyung, and it is their combined habits that have placed them in such a poor financial situation. However, she has come to terms with the need to do something to change the situation as a whole. She is the one who sets up the appointment with the realtor and who calls on Jin to pay off their credit cards in order to get them back on even footing.

Jin Cho

Jin is Mae's husband and Kyung's father. He is Korean and well-educated. He holds a position as a professor at a university, and brings in a lot of money for the university, which is why Kyung gets a job as a professor without having an outstanding career. Jin has made a lot of money for himself through inventions, mainly related to the alternative energy that has become so important in recent years.

Jin is a violent man who beat Mae regularly during the early years of their marriage. He apparently changed when Kyung called on a local preacher for help, but he resorts to beating her again when he discovers that she plans to move out and begin a life of her own.

Mae Cho

Mae is Jin's wife and Kyung's mother. She is Korean but lacks in formal education, which is one of many reasons her husband and son do not respect her. Kyung sees her as quiet and reserved with the exception of her tendency to beat Kyung, her only child. Kyung knows that is Mae's way of exerting some tiny measure of control over her world.

Mae seems to support Jin's story that the Perry brothers broke in on them, but she soon begins planning to kill herself. She convinces Kyung to teach her to drive so that she can commit suicide by wrecking his car. She takes Marina's life as well. The fact that she kills herself is significant because she seems to believe that suicide is a sin that condemns a person to hell. Kyung recognizes that her pain must have been severe for her to choose that path.

Connie McFadden

Connie is Gillian's father. He is a police officer and has an active part in the situation involving Mae and Jin, partly because he is related to Kyung and partly because of his role as a police officer in the area. Connie dislikes Kyung, and Kyung believes the feeling is based on race. Connie explains that it is actually because Kyung acts as if he has a chip on his shoulder. Connie steps in and actually helps throughout the events, and he continues to try to keep Kyung out of trouble even when Kyung is rude and angry.



Marina

Marina is the maid who works for Jin and Mae. She arrives at the house as usual on the day the Perry brothers are holding Jin and Mae captive, and she is immediately captured, raped, and beaten. Her injuries are serious, which is why Gillian insists that Marina come back to their home for her recovery time. Marina explains to Kyung that she cannot return to her family home in Bosnia, partly because of the shame and partly because her father would never let any of her sisters leave. Marina is in the car with Mae when Mae wrecks, and she is also killed. There is no indication that Marina chose to commit suicide with Mae.

Molly Sun

Molly is a Korean woman who is married to the Reverend Sun. She and Kyung knew each other when they were high school students, and he cannot get past her reputation during those years. When he has time alone with her, he challenges her and almost has sex with her. She is bitterly ashamed and upset that he pushed her to that point, and she leaves her underwear behind, which is how Gillian learns about Kyung's infidelity.

Nathan and Lyndell Perry

These are the two men who beat and raped Mae and Marina, and held Jin captive for several days. Lyndell Perry dies in the Cho's bathroom, and Nathan runs away but is caught a few weeks later. Nathan is the one who reveals that Jin had beaten Mae, prompting her to run out of the house looking for help, which is how the Perrys first entered the Cho home.

Elinor Hamel

Elinor is Mae's decorator, and she recognizes Mae's talent, even though Kyung and Jin dismiss it as a hobby. Elinor reveals to Kyung that Mae was coming to work for her, which is how Kyung figures out why Jin beat Mae on the day the Perry's attacked them. Elinor is a kind woman who runs a successful business.

Ethan

Ethan is the four-year-old son of Kyung and Gillian. The relationship between Ethan and Kyung is strained, and Kyung is jealous of the emerging relationship between Ethan and Jin.

Symbols and Symbolism

Mae's List

Mae's list of items she owns is symbolic of her decision to commit suicide. The list includes all the items that survived the rampage at their home in Marlboro Heights, and all the items at their beach house, along with which of Mae's friends was to get that item. The list is also symbolic of Mae's feelings for Gillian, which says that Gillian can have anything that is left over.

The Fork

This object is symbolic of Mae's ability as a decorator. She presents the fork to Carol, who was missing the piece from her set, after spending hours finding it. The fact that Mae was capable of finding the missing piece shows her dedication to detail as well as her kindness toward others.

The Korean Language

The Korean language is symbolic of the Cho's ethnicity, and the fact that Kyung no longer speaks it is evidence of his family's effort to acclimate to their American home. Kyung and Mae spoke only Korean when they arrived in America, but Kyung was a very young child and he learned English easily. The family did not maintain their Korean language and Kyung has only a rudimentary knowledge by the time Mae speaks to him in Korean in the first chapter of the novel. The fact that Kyung does not understand Mae's words is evidence of his lost language, and the confusion helps the author build the twist that is revealed near the end of the novel. The language is also seen as a barrier in the first scene of the novel involving Kyung and Mae. He does not understand what she is saying, which is symbolic of the lack of understanding that remains between them their entire lives.

The Nightlights

The nightlights are symbolic of the poor spending habits that have put Kyung and Gillian in such a bad financial situation. They have traveled extensively, even when they could not afford the trips, and consoled themselves by buying only nightlights as souvenirs of their trips, as if spending so little on souvenirs made up for the other expenses of the trips.



Ethan's Bicycle

Ethan's bicycle is symbolic of the relationship Jin and Mae want to have with Ethan, and of Kyung's inability to provide for his family. Jin and Mae leave the gift at the house, and Kyung and Gillian do not give it to Ethan because it is a much larger gift than they are able to give him. When Jin comes to stay with them, he and Ethan assemble the gift, and that is again symbolic of the relationship Jin wants to have with his only grandson.

Kyung and Gillian's Credit Cards

Kyung and Gillian have a series of credit cards that have come to represent one aspect of their poor spending habits and their financial difficulties. Most of the cards are either at their limit or they are in arrears on the payments. Kyung is worried about paying for his father's purchases at Wal-Mart because he fears the credit card will be denied. The fact that Gillian asks Jin to pay off their debts is evidence of his sound financial situation and of Kyung's belief that he will owe Jin more than the money it takes to pay off the credit cards.

Molly's Underwear

Molly's underwear is symbolic of Kyung's infidelity and of his attempt to seduce her. They are also representative of Kyung's desire to stop pretending. He believes that Molly really is the person she was in high school, and that her actions and attitudes as an adult Christian are lies. He pushes her to be as she was when she was young, and she briefly gives in, but then refuses to fully succumb.

Wal-Mart

Wal-Mart is symbolic of cheap items purchased by people who have no means to buy nicer things. Kyung takes Jin there to buy some necessities after Jin is released from the hospital, and Kyung is surprised that his father is willing to buy things there, and upset that he is frantic over the cost of their purchases.

California

Kyung briefly considers going to California after Gillian forces him out of their house, and that possibility symbolizes a new start for him. He comes to accept that it is an empty, impossible dream, and he returns home.

The Ability to Drive

The ability to drive represents a level of freedom and accomplishment that Mae never achieved, which is why Kyung agrees to give her the one driving lesson in the college parking lot. The ability to drive is an important part of Mae's plan to commit suicide.



Settings

Marlboro Heights

This is where Jin and Mae live. It is an upscale neighborhood that is considered the best in the area. It is filled with nice homes, including the one owned by Jin and Mae, and there is very little crime. That makes the attack on Jin, Mae, and Marina even more shocking.

Kyung and Gillian's House

Kyung and Gillian's house is in an upscale neighborhood, but the house is falling into disrepair. The house is representative of their financial situation, which is in serious trouble. At the beginning of the novel, Kyung is trying to fix the garbage disposal, which is one of many things wrong with the house. The realtor says the house is worth thousands less than they owe, and Kyung admits to himself that the house was more expensive than he should have bought. This is where Jin, Mae, and Marina live for a short time following their releases from the hospital.

The Beach House

This is a vacation home that Kyung sees as pretentious and another way to show off wealth. It is a lavish, beautiful home, filled with decorator touches that Mae created. This is where Kyung speaks his mind to his parents and where they are when Mae kills herself and Marina.

Mae's Loft Apartment

This is the apartment Mae decorated above Elinor Hamel's business. Mae has created an elegant space in the building, and is planning to live there once she leaves Jin. She never has the chance to make that move, but Kyung realizes how important this was to Mae when he goes there after her and Gillian break up.

Connie's Home

Connie's home is a stark contrast to Mae's home, with none of the designer touches. It looks more like two men live there alone, but Kyung notices small touches when he goes there after Nat Perry is arrested, and he correctly attributes them to Vivian's presence.



Themes and Motifs

The Effects of Domestic Violence

Kyung grew up in a home filled with violence, and that violence left its mark on each of them, including the abusers, to the point that it altered how they lived and felt for their rest of their lives. The effects of domestic violence are a very real problem for millions of people, and Korean culture impacts how the violence is a long-term problem for the family.

Jin routinely beat Mae during the early years of their marriage. Jin hated many things Mae did and he recounts a time when he had wanted her to buy herself a new outfit to wear to a faculty event. Jin was embarrassed when Mae bought an outfit on sale and forgot to remove the sale tag. He was furious over her mistake and beat her brutally when they got home. The beating was so severe that it stood out in Kyung's mind and Jin has no trouble remembering it when Kyung asks about it.

Kyung carries the scars from the abuse all his life. He feels that he is a failure as a son because a Korean son should be doing many things for his parents, and he does not. He has distanced himself from his parents because of the bitter feelings over the violence. That distance affects Kyung because it makes him feel he is failing in his duty, and that bothers him greatly. Kyung also finds that he cannot forgive either his father or his mother for the violence in their home, but he seems more willing to forgive Mae for beating him and seems completely unable to forgive Jin for beating Mae.

Molly is another example of this theme. Molly's parents often fought when she was a teenager, and Kyung recognized the sounds because he heard them so often in his own home. Molly acted out as Kyung never did. She became a troubled teen, known for her promiscuous actions. Kyung admired her for acting out as she did, giving her parents the same amount of trouble that they gave her. Kyung is disappointed when Molly changes her life. Kyung is very different. He never acted out as Molly did, but he distanced himself and feels that the violence in his childhood home altered the kind of adult he grew up to be. He points out his department head at the college as an example of how a parent is supposed to act. Through that example, he believes a parent is supposed to love the child enough to put the child's needs first. Kyung believes his life would have been different if his parents had behaved with those values, but he finds himself unable to fully connect with his own son.

Another aspect of this theme is seen in the fact that Jin was beating Mae, which was how the Perry brothers' attack began. Mae ran out of the house, screaming for help, and the Perry brothers were the first people she saw. She called on them for help, and literally invited them into the house. The brothers were actually targeting the house next door, and Mae, Jin, and Marina might have been spared the attack if not for Mae seeking help. Mae had never had the courage to leave Jin while Kyung was a child, and



Kyung was never able to forgive her for that, but she does find the courage to leave him when she lands a job with an interior designer.

The Importance of Culture

Jin, Mae, and Kyung arrived in America when Kyung was very young, and they spent their lives caught between the American cultures and their Korean roots. This clash hurt their abilities in both cultures, and each came to struggle in their own way to survive in that middle ground.

Jin struggled because he was the only Korean in the university department and wanted to make a good impression. That was why he was so furious when Mae purchased an outfit on sale and forgot to remove the sale tags. This struggle to fit into the new culture is one of the catalysts for the domestic violence in the family, which is another of the novel's themes. Kyung can understand the feeling, if not the reaction. He has also felt that he was very much alone on many occasions. He has spent years believing that Connie does not like him because he is Korean. Connie corrects that misconception, saying that he never liked Kyung's selfish and defensive attitudes, and that he wanted Gillian to marry someone who could truly make her happy.

Kyung thinks Ethan is shy because they “coddle” him (9). He seems frustrated that Gillian does not correct Ethan who hides behind his mother's legs when he is meeting the realtor, but Kyung does not correct Ethan either. In Kyung's childhood, his mother was the disciplinarian. Kyung also goes over rules with Gillian, trying to make her understand the subservient attitude expected from Korean women. While Gillian can recite the rules, the attitude does not come naturally to her and she does not seem to understand when she embarrasses Kyung or takes actions that would gain disapproval from Jin and Mae.

Kyung evaluates himself as a son based on the traditions of the Korean culture, though the family has lived in America for decades and has basically embraced all aspects of their American lives. As a Korean son, he should have been paying a lot of attention to his parents. The fact that he does not want to be around them makes him feel that he is a failure, and it does not matter whether he can justify his absence by the years of abuse.

The Reverend Sun and his congregation are mainly of Korean ethnicity. It is clear that Jin has a connection to Reverend Sun, and Kyung is somewhat jealous of that, even though Kyung has never wanted to take on the traditional responsibilities of a Korean son. He tries to make the house clean and buys food that he believes Jin and Mae will like, but when the women of the church begin to provide food, Kyung realizes that Jin and Mae did not like Gillian's cooking, and they eat more when the Korean women of the church begin providing food on a daily basis.

Another minor example of this theme is seen in Gertie's reaction to her first meeting with Gillian and Kyung. She says that Ethan is “gorgeous,” and that “biracial children are



always so beautiful” (9). She goes on to ask about their ethnicity, guessing that Kyung is Chinese and prompting him to tell her that he is Korean. The exchange makes it clear that Gertie sees them, not just as a couple, but as a biracial couple. She does not seem prejudiced either for or against them, other than her comment about biracial children being “the best of both parents,” but her comments make it clear that she notices the cultural mixture (9).

Ethan's Relationship with Members of the Family

While Ethan is a secondary character in terms of his acts in the novel, his importance is elevated because of his impact on other characters. His relationship with each of several other characters drives much of the action and the way Kyung and Gillian see his relationships are also vital to the story line.

The most important of these relationships to the novel are between Ethan and his parents, and between Ethan and his paternal grandparents. Ethan sees each of these relationships differently, but the way Gillian and Kyung see the relationships is more important than how Ethan sees them. Kyung is very worried that his parents will behave inappropriately with Ethan because of the violence that was prevalent in their home during Kyung's childhood. His worry is focused more on Mae than on Jin, but there seems to be a twisted logic to that focus. When Kyung was a child, Jin routinely beat Mae, but he never beat Kyung. That seems to make Kyung believe that Jin will beat no one but Mae. Mae routinely beat Kyung, which makes Kyung fear that Mae might hit Ethan.

Kyung is upset when he sees Jin and Ethan bonding. There are two facets to his feelings. The first is jealousy. Jin and Ethan work together to put a bicycle together. Kyung would struggle to put the bicycle together, but he also does not have the kind of relationship with Ethan that would prompt them to spend that kind of time doing something together. The other side of his concern is that Kyung had a brutal childhood. While Jin only beat Mae, the violence in the household makes Kyung worry about Ethan's safety.

Gillian's relationship with Ethan is more like that of a traditional, loving mother who focuses almost solely on Ethan. She clearly loves him. She praises him often and wants to be certain that everything in his life has a positive impact. She dislikes the relationship Kyung has with Ethan. While the reader does not see conflicts between Kyung and Ethan, he talks about the fact that she has told him that he is too often the disciplinarian and too seldom the loving father. Kyung is not comfortable in the role of loving father, which he attributes at least partly to the lack of affection in his own childhood. The violence in Kyung's childhood is a related theme.

Because of the limited perspective, the reader does not see the thoughts behind Ethan's relationships with people other than Kyung. Therefore, the reader cannot be certain about Jin's motivations as he interacts with Ethan. Gillian believes that Jin is trying to make up for his failures in Kyung's childhood and the fact that Jin and Kyung have a



strained, limited relationship. It may also be that Jin is merely feeling the pangs of a grandparent who has limited contact with a grandchild. Regardless of his motivation, it is clear that he is pleased to have more time with Ethan and he settles into the role of doting grandfather with apparent ease.

Finances and Money

Money can cause problems or ease problems, but people ultimately have to be responsible for how they use money if they want to lead happy lives. Kyung and Gillian are in serious financial trouble as the novel opens, due to years of poor decisions and a tendency to ignore the growing problem. Jin's wealth is a stark contrast to Kyung's situation, and that contrast puts additional strain on the relationship between Kyung and his father.

Kyung and Gillian lived extravagant lives as a young married couple. They often went on trips that they could not afford but they justified the expenditures by purchasing only small nightlights as souvenirs. In their way of thinking, the small amount spent on the nightlights – as their only souvenir purchase – eliminated the other expenses of the trips. These vacations were a major part of what put them in such dire financial straits, but their lifestyle choices, including their house, contributed as well. They do not live in the most exclusive neighborhood in the area, but they are only one small step down from that. Kyung admits that the house was more expensive than they could afford, but they bought it anyway. As a college professor, he makes a decent living, but they owe thousands more than the house is worth. They have also depended heavily on student loans and credit cards to support their lifestyle and their purchases. Those decisions have all added up to put them in a serious situation where they are in danger of losing everything.

An important aspect of their attitudes about money is seen in the fact that they were in serious trouble before they made lifestyle changes. At that point, they scaled back on spending, but they are so far gone that they can barely remain current on their house payment while other bills are overdue.

When they stop at Wal-Mart for Jin to purchase a few items, Kyung knows that his father would never choose to shop at Wal-Mart under ordinary conditions. Kyung panics with the realization that he is going to have to pay the roughly \$100 cost of the purchases. He knows he will be horribly embarrassed if his father sees Kyung produce a credit card that is declined. At the same time, Kyung feels superior to the people who normally shop at Wal-Mart. He lumps them into two groups. One group is simply trying to find cheap items and the other is too poor to afford anything better. An important aspect of Kyung's attitude is seen in the fact that he is angry that he has no choice but to shop at Wal-Mart because he cannot afford anything more expensive.

Another aspect of this theme is seen in the fact that Kyung refuses to ask his parents for help, though they can clearly afford it. When Gillian forces Kyung to leave, she announces that she has asked Jin to pay off their credit cards to give them some



financial relief. He is furious because he believes that makes him indebted to Jin, something he has avoided up to this point. Gillian points out that Jin did not seem surprised or concerned by the amount of their credit card debt, which shows the vast differences between their financial situations.

Allowing People to Change

Jin feels forever scarred by the domestic abuse that occurred during his childhood, and he is unable to forgive his parents. More importantly, he is unable to allow Jin or Mae to make it up to him or to allow them to show that they have grown and changed. Both Gillian and Jin point this out to Kyung, but he is simply unable to let go of the past.

An important aspect of this theme is seen in Kyung's jealousy over the emerging relationship between Jin and Ethan. Ethan quickly becomes attached to Jin and chooses to spend time with him. That is not the kind of relationship Ethan has with Kyung, which is only part of the reason Kyung is jealous of the budding relationship between Jin and Ethan. The other part of that jealousy is that Kyung feels he was cheated out of having a good relationship with Jin. Jin never took time to be interested in Kyung or to bond with him but he is spending time with Ethan. As the novel comes to a close, Kyung asks Jin why he is different with Ethan. Jin says that Ethan has no expectations, but that Kyung and Mae will never treat Jin as if he has changed. He feels that Kyung and Mae will never be able to forgive Jin of his past.

The Presbyterians represent the changes in Jin's life but Kyung hates their presence. Kyung first went to the older Reverend Sun to try to put an end to Jin's violence. Jin embraced the church and all it stood for, but Kyung hates the congregants as a whole. He feels they are taking advantage of Jin's willingness to financially support any program or project, and he is jealous of the younger Reverend Sun's willingness to take in Jin and Mae during their convalescence. Again, Kyung is not willing to accept that Jin could have changed, and he hates anything that is part of that change.

Another aspect of this theme is seen in Kyung's attitude toward Molly. Molly was an angry teenager who was dealing with domestic violence in her own home. She acted out, giving her parents a great deal of trouble in return. Kyung admires that about her, even though he is not willing or able to act out in similar fashion. However, Molly grows up, gets past her childhood, and moves into a traditional, happy life as an adult. She is married to Reverend Sun and seems to be settled into that role. Kyung hates that she has changed. When he has an opportunity to be alone with her, he pushes her into a sexual situation. He is angry when she puts a stop to it. He says she is denying her true nature. The irony is that he is angry when Molly is denying her true nature but he does not believe that Jin is capable of denying his true nature.



Styles

Point of View

The novel is presented from a third-person narrator focused on the limited perspective of Kyung Cho. The limited perspective means the reader knows only what Kyung knows, and only makes new discoveries as Kyung makes them. The main example of the limited perspective is seen in the fact that Kyung and the reader believe Jin's account of the attack. He believes that the Perry brothers broke into the Cho's house with the plan to rob them, and that the brothers were responsible for all of Mae's injuries and all the damages done in the house. After police arrest Nat Perry, Kyung learns that Jin had been beating Mae and that she actually ran to the brothers for help. The limited perspective allows the author to keep that information secret until the moment of the revelation. That twist is necessary for the reader to go through the events from Kyung's perspective, and to imagine his experiences as he is feeling them.

The limited perspective also means the reader does not fully understand Gillian's anger toward Kyung until she explains it to Kyung. Gillian barely speaks to Kyung following his mother's death. Kyung believes she is angry because of Kyung's words to his parents just hours before Mae kills herself and Marina. The reader continues to believe that as well, until Gillian breaks her silence on the afternoon after Mae's funeral. At that point, Gillian tells Kyung about finding the panties, and that is the first inkling the reader has that Gillian found them.

The limited perspective plays a role in other aspects of the novel as well. The reader does not know what Mae is planning and, because Kyung never knows all the details of her motivations, the reader does not know either. That is appropriate since that would be the case in a real-life situation.

Kyung's perspective may not be entirely honest or reliable. For example, he thinks about the fact that he would not want a woman he loves to be subjected to the subservient life of a Korean wife, but that may not be true. He seems to envy the men who have wives who are traditional, subservient, Korean women. This makes Kyung's perspective suspect and prompts the reader to evaluate what Kyung says.

Language and Meaning

The novel is presented in modern-day American English, which is appropriate to the time and place of the novel. Though Kyung and Mae knew no English when they arrived in America decades earlier, they have abandoned the Korean language entirely. With the exception of one scene, there are no Korean words or phrases in the novel. In that scene, Mae is out of her head with pain and fear, and she reverts briefly to Korean. Kyung says that he instinctively understands at least some of what she is saying, but he is quickly frustrated by the language barrier.



The reader with an average vocabulary will probably find few unfamiliar words. Most of those are explained through context, meaning most readers will have no trouble understanding the conversations and events.

In an interesting twist, the novel is written in present tense. That is an apparent effort by the author to put the reader in the immediate midst of the action. The effort is effective and most readers will pay little or no attention to the tense.

The novel is divided between dialogue and narrative, though there is probably slightly more narrative because of the limited perspective. The author uses traditional punctuation and language, to present the story in chronological order with historical information presented as memories and conversations.

The overall tone is mixed. There are some points of hope and love, but Kyung's fears, lack of self-confidence, and anger colors most of the novel.

Structure

The book is divided into three parts that represent the beginning, middle, and end of the story line. They are titled to mimic the parts of the day: Dawn, Dusk, and Night. Each part is further divided into chapters that are titled by number only. Chapters 1-3 appear in the first part, Dawn. Dusk contains Chapters 4-6. The final three chapters are in the third part, Night. The titles of the parts are indications of what aspects of the story line will appear in each part, but do not prompt ideas about specifics. The chapters are identified by number only, meaning they do not offer clues.

The story line is presented in chronological order, with historical background presented through memories and dialogue. For example, Kyung had never told his wife, Gillian, about the abuse in his childhood home. He reveals that information to Gillian during a conversation. Some of his thoughts contain that kind of information as well, and those are presented as narration only from Kyung's memories.

The novel opens as Kyung and Gillian are trying to figure out their financial difficulties, hoping they can sell their house. During their interview with a realtor, Kyung's mother arrives, beaten and naked, behind their house. The story line goes from there to the hospital and through Kyung's struggles as he tries to deal with decades of secrets and emotions, ending when he discovers that his father had resorted to beating his mother because she was planning to leave him.



Quotes

He was raised to believe that owning a home meant something. Losing a home like this – that would mean something too.”

-- Narrator (chapter 1 paragraph 70)

Importance: Kyung is talking with Gertie and realizing that the realtor is not going to be able to help them as he and Gillian had hoped. The attitude about money is one of the novel's themes and the values Kyung has is partly impacted by his father's wealth.

His father often refers to Gillian's family as bigots – poor working-class white people, jealous of anyone with a little money to their name. Now he's defending them as if they're old friends.”

-- Narrator (chapter 2 paragraph 17)

Importance: This is again from Kyung's perspective, and is one of several cultural and financial situations that occur in the novel. Kyung had arrived at the hospital after Mae gave her statement to police, and Kyung felt betrayed that they did not call him to be there. His dislike for Connie and Tim continues to be a problem for them, but Jin's nature makes him unable to make any concessions to Kyung, or to show anything other than disdain.

Thirty-six years old, and he's still behaving like a child, trying so hard to please someone whose standards have always been too high.”

-- Narrator (chapter 3 paragraph 3)

Importance: Kyung is getting ready to pick up Jin from the hospital, and he is being very careful about how he, Gillian, and Ethan are dressed. This is an example of how Kyung is trying to be what Jin wants him to be, but how he is unwilling to actually commit to the duties that are really expected of him by his Korean culture.

He helps out his parents when asked and visits when invited, but not too often, and never as much as he should. It's the most he's willing to do, the absolute minimum he can get away with and still be considered a son.”

-- Narrator (chapter 3 paragraph 24)

Importance: This is part of the scene when Kyung is picking Jin up from the hospital. Kyung's focus on his failures as a son continues to be a problem for him. He is caught between his hatred for how his parents treated each other and him when he was a child, and the cultural expectations that he will be a good son.

He was always grateful to Mae for offering them food, for encouraging them so kindly to take it. Kyung, however, regarded them differently afterward, saddened by the glimpse of something shameful about their lives.”

-- Narrator (chapter 4 paragraph 43)



Importance: This is an important look at the characters of both Kyung and Mae. Mae always reaches out to other people. She is the consummate hostess, working hard to ensure that everyone is properly tended and that they have anything they want or need. She was the same with the youngsters of their neighborhood who were living with poor or neglectful families, unable or unwilling to ensure the children were properly fed. However, Kyung's attitude shows that he is not at all like Mae. He is glad she fed them, but he feels that he is “burdened” by what he knows about them, and he hates that feeling (116).

Despite the state of his finances, Kyung doesn't worry about losing his job; he worries about what it would mean to keep it.”

-- Narrator (chapter 5 paragraph 33)

Importance: Kyung has just thought about the amount of money Jin's research and patents bring into the university on a regular basis, and that Kyung was hired because he is Jin's son. Kyung has not published nearly as much as his colleagues, and he does not win grants. That all means that Kyung is really only employed because of Jin's influence. The relationship between Kyung and Jin is so strained that Kyung is bound to feel obligated to his father and this is one more reason to for him to feel resentment.

Good, decent people who always put the needs of their children ahead of their own. It was never more complicated than love, one generation raising a better version of the next.”

-- Narrator (chapter 6 paragraph 89)

Importance: Kyung has been talking to his department chairman, and he comes to this realization about being a good parent. The next thought out of Kyung's mouth is not that he still has a chance to be a better parent to Ethan, but that he “never had a chance” with his own parents (197).

He can't explain the relief he felt as he watched his family pile into Connie's car and drive away. It was like a gift, especially his mother's last-minute decision to take Marina along with them.”

-- Narrator (chapter 6 paragraph 107)

Importance: Kyung lied to have time to himself, which is an indication about his character. It does seem reasonable that he would want to be alone for awhile, but the fact that he is so willing to abandon his family at this point is the height of selfishness.

All the weight he's been carrying around for years – it's as if he threw it into the bay last night and now here he is, blinking at this newer, lighter self in the mirror.”

-- Narrator (chapter 7 paragraph 6)

Importance: Kyung is thinking about the previous night when he told Jin and Mae how he felt about the years of abuse. He has pledged to himself that he will be truthful with everyone from this point on. It takes only a few days for him to realize that everyone is telling different versions of the truth, and that most people cannot be honest.



You did this,' he says. 'You and your drunk ranting last night ... in front of your own child, in front of our guests. You have no respect for anyone.'"

-- Jin (chapter 7 paragraph 48)

Importance: The family has just learned that Mae and Marina were in a wreck, but they do not know the details yet. From this moment, Jin blames Kyung and Kyung blames himself. Even when it becomes clear that Mae took her own life, Kyung cannot get past the fact that he was horrible to her during their final conversation.

He has no idea why he's saying this, or how to pay for such a trip, although money – or the lack thereof – never stopped them before. Their sense of want was always more powerful than their sense of reason."

-- Narrator (chapter 8 paragraph 8)

Importance: Kyung has just suggested that he and Gillian get away for a few days. She has actually already packed his suitcase and is about to tell him to move out. The financial issues are one of the novel's themes, and the fact that Kyung wants to run away is typical of his way of dealing with things.

The plan was to say our car broke down, ask to use their phone or something, but just as we were about to go up the front steps, this little Oriental lady came flying out of the house next door saying 'Oh, help me, help me.' So we figured, why not?"

-- Nat Perry (chapter 9 paragraph 83)

Importance: This is when everyone learns that Jin had been beating Mae, prompting her to run out of the house at the moment the Perry brothers were about to break into the house next door.