

Little Bee



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF CHRIS CLEAVE

Chris Cleave was born in London on May 14, 1973, but spent the first eight years of his childhood in Cameroon, which shares its western border with Nigeria. Before becoming an author, Cleave attended the University of Oxford to study experimental psychology and worked in a variety of jobs, including as a barman, sailor, teacher, journalist, and early internet entrepreneur. Cleave's debut novel, *Incendiary*, won the 2006 Somerset Maugham Award and made the shortlist for that year's prestigious Commonwealth Writer's Prize and has since become a film. In 2008, Cleave published *The Other Hand*, titled *Little Bee* in American and Canadian editions. *Little Bee* suffered initially slow sales, but by 2009 word of mouth propelled it to the top of both the *Sunday Times* and the *New York Times* Best Seller lists. In 2012 Cleave published his third novel, *Gold*, and in 2016 published *Everyone Brave is Forgiven*, which immediately topped the *New York Times* Best Seller list. Cleave lives in London with his French wife and three children.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Little Bee flees Nigeria as a refugee due to the violence of an unnamed oil war. Although only referenced in the novel, this violence refers to the conflict in the Niger Delta that initially began in the 1990s when several of the Niger Delta's minority ethnic groups—primarily the Ogoni and the Ijaw—began to protest the presence of foreign oil corporations, who they felt were exploiting them and prompting the Nigerian government to force them off their land. The Ogoni formed their own political movement in 1992 to protect their rights, but by 1994 violence erupted and the Nigerian government began its campaign of military repression. The government stationed soldiers in Ogoni villages and unjustly executed nine Ogoni activists, framing them for murder, reportedly with cooperation by the oil and gas company commonly known as Shell. The executions prompted the US, the UK, and the EU to inflict punitive sanctions on Nigeria, though no one was willing to sanction Nigeria's oil exports. Tensions continued to rise through the 1990s, and the Ijaw ethnic group joined the opposition against the oil companies and Nigerian state. By 2003, due to escalating violence and easily available weapons, the entire Niger Delta was militarized, with many politicians forming their own mercenary militias to enforce their agendas and seize more oil territory. In 2004, the leader of the Ijaw declared open war on the Nigerian state and its oil allies, resulting in widespread and chaotic violence between numerous small armies and mercenary groups, including a

surge of piracy and kidnappings, even genocides. The violence continues to this day.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Little Bee is a story about refugees, cross-cultural relationships, and the enduring human spirit amidst horrific world events. In its portrayal of a young girl's survival amidst greater international conflicts, *Little Bee* shares much in common with best-selling novel [The Kite Runner](#) by Afghan-American author Khaled Hosseini. [The Kite Runner](#) tells the story of young Amir and his friend Hassan in Kabul, as they survive the chaos that ensues when Afghanistan's monarchy falls to the Soviet Union and the Taliban regime rises in its place, prompting scores of civilians to flee as refugees to the United States and Pakistan. Sharing *Little Bee*'s depiction of a cross-cultural relationship's difficulties and benefits, Helen Simonson's *Major Pettigrew's Last Stand* depicts the relationship between a retired British military officer and a Pakistani shopkeeper in the English countryside. Although the two individuals bond over literature and the recent deaths of their respective spouses, their quaint village desires to keep them each in their typecast positions as the venerated local man and the isolated foreign woman. Similarly, Anthony Doerr's Pulitzer Prize-winning [All the Light We Cannot See](#) depicts the illicit friendship between a blind French girl and a German boy in German-occupied France in the midst of World War II. Lastly, in the same way that *Little Bee* was inspired by the social attitudes Cleave witnessed in London towards refugees and the War in Afghanistan, his first novel *Incendiary* draws inspiration from his own horror and fear in the aftermath of 9/11 and the rise of terrorist strikes across Europe. The novel is written in the form of a grieving mother's letter to Osama Bin Laden after a London bombing kills her husband and young son.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Little Bee* (originally *The Other Hand*)
- **When Written:** 2007
- **Where Written:** London, United Kingdom
- **When Published:** August 7 2008
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Novel
- **Setting:** Nigeria; England
- **Climax:** *Little Bee* gives herself up to the Nigerian soldiers to save Charlie's life.
- **Antagonist:** Lawrence; British immigration authorities
- **Point of View:** First Person, alternating narratives between

Little Bee and Sarah

EXTRA CREDIT

Tragic Inspiration. Cleave's initial inspiration for writing *Little Bee* came from the heroic sacrifice of Manuel Bravo, an Angolan refugee who hanged himself on the morning that he and his 13-year-old son were meant to be deported back to Angola. Bravo had read that the British government had regulations against deporting unaccompanied minors, and reasoned that his death would allow his son to remain in the UK and enroll in school.



PLOT SUMMARY

Sixteen-year-old Nigerian refugee Little Bee has spent the past two years in an immigration detention center in Essex, England. In 2007, Little Bee is released from the detention center with three other women, none of whom have their papers or documentation granting them asylum status. However, Little Bee has a driver's license and business card belonging to Andrew O'Rourke, a white man she met two years before on a beach in Nigeria. She calls Andrew, who seems angry and hostile, and tells him that she is coming to his house because she doesn't know anyone else in the country, regardless of whether he wants her to or not. Little Bee and the three other women go outside to wait for a taxi.

Ten days later, Andrew's wife, Sarah, a magazine editor, and four-year-old son Charlie—who wears his **Batman costume** at all hours and will only respond to "Batman"—are preparing to attend Andrew's funeral. Five days after Little Bee contacted Andrew and told him she was coming, Andrew hanged himself. Little Bee arrives on the day of the funeral and attends with Sarah and Charlie, forming an instant bond with Charlie. Sarah briefly recalls her first encounter with Little Bee on the Nigerian beach, and notes that her only memento from that day is the **missing middle finger** of her left hand.

Little Bee recalls her escape from Nigeria, during which she stowed away on a cargo ship carrying tea. On the voyage, she has nightmares about the horrors she has seen, and after British immigration authorities lock her in the detention center she continues to suffer traumatic nightmares each night. She spends her first six months in detention fantasizing about different ways to kill herself, but she eventually begins to feel a sense of hope and teaches herself to speak English like the British.

Ending her recollection, Little Bee and the other women wait until a taxi comes to meet them, but the driver despises refugees and leaves them behind with no transportation. The four women begin walking down the highway until they meet a farmer named Mr. Ayres who gives them shelter in one of his farmhouses, even though he could face criminal penalties for

doing so. That evening, with shelter and food, one of the other three women, Yvette, reveals that she had sex with one of the detention center officers in exchange for her release, but the man wanted to release several women at once so it would look like a clerical error. However, without paperwork, Little Bee and the others realize they are now illegal immigrants, even though they had wanted to enter the country legally. In the middle of the night, one of the women, who was severely traumatized, hangs herself. Little Bee wakes to find her body and realizes that there will inevitably be an investigation and policemen, so she leaves on foot in the middle of the night to find Andrew's house.

Resuming Sarah's narrative, after the funeral, she, Charlie, and Little Bee return to her home and Little Bee recounts some of what happened to her on the beach and in the years since then.

Right before she meets Andrew and Sarah on the Nigerian beach, Little Bee and her sister Nkiruka see mercenaries for the oil companies slaughter their entire village so they can take their oil-rich land. Little Bee and Nkiruka flee to the jungle and hide until they hear hunters and dogs pursuing them. When Little Bee and Nkiruka see Sarah and Andrew on the beach, on vacation, they run to them and beg Andrew and Sarah to take them back to their hotel with them to hide. The hunters arrive to take Little Bee and Nkiruka, but the leader states that if Andrew cuts off his own middle finger, he'll let the girls live. Andrew cannot bring himself to do it, so Sarah takes the hunter's machete and cuts her own finger off instead. The hunter announces that Little Bee will live, but Nkiruka will die because of Andrew's failure, and takes the two girls away.

In Sarah's living room, Little Bee falls asleep for the night and Sarah calls her married lover, Lawrence, to ask what she should do. Lawrence is horrified that Little Bee is in Sarah's home, believing she is dangerous, and tells Sarah to turn her in to the police.

The next morning, Sarah asks Little Bee to continue her story. After Sarah and Andrew return to the hotel, the hunters take Little Bee and Nkiruka down the beach, where Little Bee hides under an overturned boat while the mercenaries rape, torture, and kill Nkiruka, cannibalizing her body. During the night, Little Bee slips away and goes back to the place where she met Andrew and Sarah and finds Andrew's wallet in the sand, with a business card and driver's license. Little Bee continues her flight until she finds a trading port, where she manages to stow away aboard a cargo ship bound for England.

When Little Bee concludes her story, Sarah thinks back to the events that brought her and Andrew to that beach in Nigeria: in 2005, Andrew and Sarah's marriage is lifeless and tense, so she begins having an affair with Lawrence, who works for the government's Home Office, which governs immigration. After six months of sleeping together, Andrew discovers Sarah's affair, which deeply wounds him. To make amends, Sarah convinces Andrew to take a holiday with her to Nigeria so they

can try to fix their marriage.

In the present, Lawrence arrives at Sarah's house unannounced, intending to stay for several days after he lied to his wife that he is on a business trip. Sarah does not want him to be there, since she is trying to figure out what to do with Little Bee, but after a brief argument decides that she wants Lawrence to stay. The next day, while Sarah is asleep, Lawrence and Little Bee have an argument—Lawrence threatens to call the police on Little Bee, but Little Bee warns him that if he does, she'll tell his wife about the affair and turn Sarah against him as well, effectively ruining his life. After establishing their stalemate, Little Bee confesses that she did not actually arrive on the day of Andrew's funeral, but several days before Andrew died. Little Bee had hid in the bushes in their garden until Andrew was alone. When she approached him, Andrew thought she was a guilt-induced hallucination and hanged himself. Little Bee tried to stop him but couldn't, and thought that she could save him by calling the police, but that would result in her own arrest and deportation. So, she let him die. The confession horrifies Lawrence, but he knows they both have much to lose, and they'll keep each other's secrets.

The next day, Sarah, Lawrence, Charlie, and Little Bee take a day-trip to South Bank in London. While Little Bee looks at the throngs of people in the city, she considers simply disappearing amongst them and takes her first steps until she realizes she cannot bear to leave Charlie behind, especially since she knows that Lawrence does not love him. Little Bee plays with Charlie next to the river, and Charlie reveals that he can't take his Batman costume off because he thinks that if he stops being Batman, his father will be truly dead. Little Bee assures him that this isn't true and reveals that her identity as Little Bee is a costume too. Charlie wants to know her real name, so Little Bee offers that if he'll take off his Batman costume, she'll tell him what her real name is, but Charlie refuses. While Lawrence plays with Charlie, Sarah tells Little Bee that she found thousands of pages of research in Andrew's study about the Nigerian oil wars and the refugee crisis in England and thinks he was planning to write a book on it. Sarah wants to continue his work herself, and calls her boss to tell him that she is quitting her job.

In a moment while nobody is watching him, Charlie disappears, prompting a frantic search in which they all fear that Charlie fell in the river and drowned. As they search, Lawrence gives Little Bee his cell phone and tells her to call the police. She does so, but Lawrence finds Charlie before they arrive. However, when the police do arrive, one of them suspects Little Bee of being an illegal immigrant and arrests her. That night in prison, Sarah visits Little Bee and Little Bee confesses that she did not save Andrew from his death. Surprisingly, Sarah is not angry, but confesses that she feels as if she did not do enough to save him either.

The police deport Little Bee three days later, but after she is

seated on a plane back to Nigeria, she discovers that Sarah and Charlie are on board as well. Sarah announces that Little Bee is her family now, and she is never going to stop trying to save her. Little Bee knows that since she witnessed the oil companies' genocides, her own government will try to illegally kill her when she returns. To prevent this, Sarah stays by Little Bee's side at all times, reasoning correctly that the Nigerian authorities would not dare commit such a heinous action in front of a British journalist. Sarah and Little Bee spend the next several weeks meeting survivors like Little Bee and recording their stories, and Sarah hopes that by publicizing what is happening in Nigeria, she might save Little Bee and other refugees' lives.

Sarah and Little Bee risk taking a trip to the beach so that Little Bee can bid Nkiruka a proper farewell. As they stand on the beach together, Charlie plays with the Nigerian children in his Batman costume. However, three soldiers start coming up the beach; Sarah knows they are looking for Little Bee. Little Bee runs up the shore to hide, but when the soldiers are talking with Sarah, pointing their rifles at her, Charlie runs towards Little Bee. One of the soldiers shoot at Charlie but misses, and Little Bee runs towards him scoops him up in her arms, revealing herself. As Little Bee holds Charlie, she asks him to take off his Batman costume so he can play freely with the other children. She tells him her real name is Udo, and Charlie, emboldened by her courage, takes off his costume and runs to play with the other children in his own skin. Even as the soldiers reach Little Bee, she thinks the sight of Charlie playing freely and being himself is so beautiful that she cries tears of joy.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Little Bee – Little Bee, whose real name is Udo, is one of the two narrators of the novel, and the main protagonist. Little Bee (a fake name) is a teenage Nigerian refugee who flees Nigeria in the midst of an oil war. When she is 14, Little Bee and her sister Nkiruka meet Sarah and Andrew while the young girls are fleeing for their lives, followed by mercenaries. Sarah cuts off her **middle finger** with a machete in exchange for Little Bee's life, though Andrew's inability to make the same sacrifice condemns Nkiruka to death. After the men brutally murder Nkiruka, Little Bee flees to England, where British authorities arrest her and place her in an immigration detention center in Essex for two years. When she is illegally released from detention, Little Bee calls Andrew and tells him she will be arriving at his house soon, since she does not know where else to go. When she does, Andrew believes Little Bee is a hallucination, a manifestation of his guilt, and hangs himself. Little Bee begins living with Sarah and Charlie, whom she forms a close bond with, and recognizes that Charlie's unwillingness to remove his **Batman costume** is much like her own unwillingness to live by her real name. However, immigration

authorities soon discover Little Bee and deport her back to Nigeria, where she knows her own government will kill her for what she has witnessed. Sarah and Charlie accompany her back to Nigeria to protect her, considering her to be family. When soldiers come for her, Little Bee hides until one of the soldiers threatens to kill Charlie. Little Bee reveals herself to save him. Before the soldiers take her, she tells Charlie that her real name is Udo, and in exchange he finally agrees to take off his Batman costume and simply be Charlie again. Even though she is presumably moments away from her own death, Little Bee finds the sight of him playing with Nigerian children so beautiful that she cries tears of joy, revealing the depths of her love for him.

Sarah O'Rourke – Sarah is the second narrator of the story and the secondary protagonist, as well as Andrew's wife and Charlie's mother. At the beginning of the novel, she is the editor of a successful fashion magazine in London and puts great effort into maintaining her identity as a successful career woman and working mother. However, when her marriage with Andrew loses its spark, Sarah begins an affair with a man named Lawrence. After six months, Andrew discovers the affair and is deeply hurt. Sarah recommends they take a vacation in Nigeria—she doesn't know anything about the country, but a travel agency gave her free tickets. However, during their vacation, Little Bee and Nkiruka approach her and Andrew on the beach, followed by mercenaries. When Andrew cannot bring himself to cut off his finger to save the girls—which the mercenaries demand—Sarah cuts her own **finger** off instead, saving Little Bee's life. After the men take Little Bee and Nkiruka away, Sarah and Andrew return to England feeling both traumatized and numb. Sarah continues her affair with Lawrence while Andrew spirals into depression for two years until he hangs himself. Although Sarah knows she should feel sad for her husband's death, she initially does not feel anything. Little Bee moves in with her and recounts all that happened to her and Nkiruka, which both horrifies Sarah and breaks her numbness. Little Bee's story makes Sarah realize how pointless her life and career are, focused on all of the wrong things, and she quits her job to work on the research Andrew began into Nigeria and the refugee crisis. When immigration authorities deport Little Bee back to Nigeria, Sarah takes Charlie and follows her, hoping to save the girl's life by leveraging Sarah's identity as a British journalist. With Little Bee's help, Sarah spends weeks interviewing Nigerians who've suffered from the oil war, until Little Bee is arrested by Nigerian soldiers, where she will presumably meet her death.

Andrew O'Rourke – Andrew is Sarah's husband and Charlie's father. Andrew is a columnist for *The Times*, writing articles about public morality and the War in Afghanistan. Along with Sarah, Andrew meets Little Bee and Nkiruka on the beach in Nigeria when the sisters are running for their lives. When Little Bee begs for protection, Andrew initially does not believe they

are actually in any danger. When the hunters emerge, the killer tells Andrew he will spare the girls' lives if Andrew cuts off his middle finger. However, Andrew cannot summon the courage to do so, weakly trying to justify himself by claiming, "this is not our affair." Because of Andrew's failure, the hunters rape and murder Nkiruka—though Little Bee is spared because Sarah cuts off her middle finger for the girl. Although Andrew previously considered himself a virtuous person, his profound moral failure in Nigeria wrecks the way he sees himself and he slides into severe depression over the next two years. When Little Bee arrives at his house in England, Andrew is so stricken with guilt that he convinces himself she is a ghost. He tells Little Bee that he's seen who he truly is and can't live with it, so he hangs himself. Through his failure on the beach as well as his suicide, which he commits without regard for Little Bee, Sarah, or Charlie, Andrew is depicted throughout the novel as a hypocrite and a tragically self-interested figure.

Charlie O'Rourke / "Batman" – Charlie is Sarah and Andrew's four-year-old son. Leading up to and following Andrew's suicide, Charlie refuses to wear anything besides his **Batman costume** and calls himself "Batman." Charlie's identity as Batman makes him feel powerful, able to fight evil and understand the world, dividing it easily into "goodies" and "baddies." Since Charlie is too young to fully comprehend Andrew's death and all of the events that led up to it, his Batman costume helps him to feel safe and powerful in a world that is frightening and makes him powerless. Although his Batman identity provides Charlie a sense of safety, he tells Little Bee that he also believes that as Batman, he is responsible for keeping Andrew alive, even after he is dead. While Charlie's identity as a hero protects him from facing the pain of the world and his own helplessness as a child, it also burdens him with far more responsibility—for Andrew's death and all the bad guys in the world—than a four-year-old should have to bear. Little Bee ultimately helps Charlie to let go of his Batman identity and just be Charlie when she tells him her real name, thus letting go of her own constructed identity as well. In the final scene of novel, Charlie plays with the Nigerian children on the beach without his Batman costume, free to be a happy and healthy four-year-old.

Lawrence Osborn – Lawrence is Sarah's lover, whom she an ongoing affair with over several years, both before and after Andrew's suicide. Lawrence works for the Home Office, though he is incredibly cynical about the government and claims that it hardly operates at all. Although Lawrence claims to have Sarah's best interests at heart, he is openly selfish and tries to get rid of Little Bee, even when Little Bee's relationship with Sarah obviously helps Sarah to grow as a person. Sarah and Lawrence's affair is built on their mutual unhappiness and Lawrence's low self-esteem, so Lawrence does not want Sarah to grow as a person or make any changes to her life at all. He is also skeptical of Little Bee as a refugee, and often insinuates

that she is dangerous, a criminal, or a parasite that only wants to leech England's wealth and comfort. In his flagrant self-interest and disregard toward refugees, Lawrence represents the typical citizen of the developed world.

Nkiruka / Kindness – Nkiruka is Little Bee's older sister, who cares for her like a parent as well as a sister. After Nkiruka and Little Bee see the oil companies' mercenaries destroy their village, they flee together until mercenaries chase them down. When Andrew cannot bring himself to cut off his finger, the hunters take Nkiruka away, then rape, torture, and murder her while Little Bee, hiding nearby, is forced to listen.

The Leader / The Killer – The killer leads the hunters who chase down Little Bee and Nkiruka and meet Andrew and Sarah on the beach. When Sarah begs him not to kill the girls, the killer decides they can live if Andrew will cut off his middle finger and give it to him. When Andrew cannot, the leader and his men take Nkiruka away, though the leader does not participate in her rape or murder.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Clarissa – Clarissa is Sarah's friend and one her editors at the magazine. Whenever Sarah wants to run articles about refugees or the war, Clarissa tries to convince her not to because sexy articles sell better. Clarissa thus embodies the ethos of the magazine, which is shallow and glossy, without substance.

Mr. Ayres – Mr. Ayres is a farmer who offers shelter to undocumented refugees, including Little Bee. His farm is near the immigration detention center.

Albert – Mr. Ayres's farmhand.

Yvette – Yvette is a Jamaican refugee whom Little Bee leaves the detention center with. Yvette doesn't believe that she'll ever be granted asylum, so she has sex with an immigration officer in exchange for her illegal release.

Sari Girl – Sari girl is a refugee who leaves the detention center with Little Bee and Yvette. She cannot speak English and seems unintelligent.

The Girl with Green Trainers – The girl with green trainers is a refugee who leaves the detention center with Little Bee and Yvette. She is severely traumatized and hangs herself in Mr. Ayres's building.

The girl in the yellow sari A girl who is in the detention center with Little Bee at the beginning of the novel.

a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



THE REFUGEE EXPERIENCE

Little Bee tells the intertwined stories of a Nigerian undocumented refugee in England named Little Bee, and an upper-class magazine editor living in

London named Sarah, who form an unlikely bond with each other as Sarah copes with her husband Andrew's suicide. As a refugee, Little Bee seeks asylum in England after she sees her family murdered and witnesses the genocidal atrocities of an oil war in Nigeria. Despite Little Bee's desperate need for shelter and safety, both the United Kingdom's government and citizens treat her with disdain, skepticism, or outright cruelty. Little Bee's experience with England's immigration system and racism highlights the plight of modern global refugees who, though fleeing for their lives, are often demeaned, harassed, or simply ignored instead of treated with compassion.

Little Bee flees Nigeria for her life in the midst of an oil war and fears that if she is deported back to Nigeria, she will be killed—a situation, the novel implies, that is true for many refugees. Little Bee and her sister Nkiruka witness the government-sanctioned slaughter of her family village and many others by mercenaries working for oil companies who want the territory for oil. Little Bee ultimately escapes, stowing away on a boat to England, but not before witnessing mercenaries rape and beat Nkiruka to death. The horrific events that Little Bee flees makes it clear that her hope to immigrate to England is a life-or-death affair and the novel suggests that such is the experience of many refugees seeking asylum.

The Nigerian government wants to keep all testimonies of the oil war suppressed, and Little Bee knows that if she returns to Nigeria she will be immediately arrested and probably murdered by her own government. When Little Bee is about to be arrested by a British policeman who suspects her of being an illegal immigrant, she thinks that if she is deported, "I would be dead, but no one would have fired any bullets." Once again, the fact that Little Bee's deportation carries the likely threat of death suggests that refugees often face life-and-death consequences; returning to their home country is not a safe or feasible option. In spite of the horror and danger Little Bee flees, Sarah's lover Lawrence assumes that the girl simply wanted to live in a wealthier country. He asks, "Is it really death you're running from? I mean, honestly? A lot of people who come here, they're after a comfortable life." Lawrence's near-sighted misperception of Little Bee demonstrates the manner in which many people born in safe countries do not understand or believe the life-and-death stakes that refugees face.

While Little Bee applies for legal asylum, she is effectively locked in prison for two years and finds the legal immigration system inept and corrupt. Through Little Bee, the novel depicts how refugees often have great difficulty in getting processed



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have

for asylum or sticking to the legal route of immigration. When Little Bee arrives in England as a teenage girl trying to file for asylum, she is trapped in Black Hill Immigration Detention Center for two years—during which time she never once sees the sun—an underground immigrant holding center that operates like a prison, with jail cells, barbed wire, and guards. In the detention center, Little Bee and the other migrants are given no support or protection, and are simply stored away until the government decides to deport them. The refugees fleeing violence are treated inhumanly, like prisoners, by the very countries they seek protection in.

When Little Bee is deported back to Nigeria, one of the officers explains to her that England's immigration system is a for-profit business operated by "Dutch firms" who make money regardless of whether they detain immigrants or deport them. With this, the novel bleakly suggests that many immigration and asylum systems are not committed to helping refugees, but simply making a profit off of others' circumstances and pain. With all of the corruption involved in the legal immigration system, Little Bee knows that her chances of being accepted as a legal refugee are slim, and she only inadvertently enters the country illegally after a refugee woman from Jamaica has sex with a guard several times to bribe him to illegally release her and several other women. The novel highlights how even though there are plenty of refugees like Little Bee, who want to follow the law and get proper documentation, the immigration system is so slow and corrupt that it pushes desperate people to enter the country illegally, just for the chance to survive.

After Little Bee is illegally released into England—against her will, since she wanted to enter legally—British citizens treat her with suspicion, racism, and generally dehumanizing behavior, suggesting that along with the government's inhumane treatment of refugees, refugees also suffer from the ill treatment of native citizens. Little Bee faces constant skepticism that she is somehow a criminal: Lawrence thinks she must have done something to be locked away in the detention center and infers that Africans are less civilized than Europeans, cab drivers won't pick Little Bee up and refer to refugees as "scum," tabloid headlines in the newspaper warn of invading immigrants eating all of England's swans, all of which demonstrate and propagate a nativist, anti-immigrant sentiment among the general population, who have no sympathy for the dangers refugees face. Even citizens who privately give aid to refugees like Sarah or Mr. Ayres, a farmer who lets Little Bee and three other illegal refugee women hide in his barn, face criminal and financial penalties if they are caught, suggesting that the government discourages compassionate and sympathetic people from giving aid to refugees either.

Little Bee's depiction of the plight facing refugees suggest that refugees are merely ordinary people fleeing for their lives, faced additionally with unjust immigration systems, racism, and

skepticism from the people they are asking to shelter them.



CROSS-CULTURAL RELATIONSHIPS

Little Bee and Sarah represent two different worlds: war-torn Nigeria and sophisticated London.

Although they seem unlikely companions, both make a sincere effort to understand each other's life and culture, and thus model both the struggles and benefits of cross-cultural relationships. Although there is much that separates them, Sarah and Little Bee's relationship suggests that people from different worlds can learn from each other, and their shared human experience ultimately unites them.

Little Bee and Sarah come from contrasting worlds and experiences, which creates an initial divide between them. Little Bee is a teenage Nigerian refugee from a poor village who has never seen a city before her arrival in England; Sarah is an upper-class, sophisticated magazine editor from London. Little Bee's primary concerns are mere survival and the loss of her family; before Andrew's death, Sarah is primarily occupied with her career, the fashion world, and all the minor things about Andrew that irritate her. The first time that Little Bee and Sarah meet on a beach in Nigeria, the extreme cultural divide between the two women makes it difficult for Sarah to put herself in Little Bee's shoes. When Little Bee tells Sarah that mercenaries are trying to kill her and her sister and begs for protection, Sarah cannot even comprehend the weight of what Little Bee is saying because the concept is so far beyond her frame of reference. In the moment, Sarah thinks, "I was a modern woman and disappointment was something I understood better than fear. The hunters would *kill* her? My stomach lurched, but my mind still asserted it was just a figure of speech." Although Sarah eventually realizes that Little Bee is telling the truth, her reticence to believe what the girl is saying demonstrates the way in which such a sharp cultural divide can make it difficult for people to connect with one another or regard their experiences seriously.

As Little Bee and Sarah struggle to understand each other and make sense of the world the other person lives in, they each gain a new perspective that helps them understand their own lives better as well. Little Bee's background and life-and-death struggle help Sarah to realize how banal much of modern life is and how little she knows about the rest of the world. After Little Bee fully recounts the way that Nkiruka was killed, Sarah recalls mournfully how insane it was for her and Andrew to take a vacation to Nigeria for the sake of "being unconventional" and the gall of unwittingly wearing a bikini in the midst of an oil war, while Little Bee and Nkiruka were running for their lives. The new perspective that Little Bee offers Sarah though their relationship helps Sarah to recognize that all the things she'd once obsessed over, especially her modern sophisticated career, suddenly seem insignificant.

After spending time with Little Bee, Sarah attempts to return to

her magazine office, but the constant rushing of people and white noise of office machines “all seemed suddenly insane” in light of the fact that elsewhere in the world, people are suffering. This new perspective ultimately causes Sarah to quit her job to pursue more meaningful work. In a similar way, Little Bee’s relationship with Sarah offers her safety and support in the midst of an overwhelmingly painful and chaotic life. Sarah shows Little Bee the stability that the developed world affords, which is briefly symbolized by the icemaker in Sarah’s kitchen. Although it is a simple device, Little Bee finds herself entranced by the way it makes water into a solid, stable form, symbolizing the stability and dependability of modern life. This causes Little Bee to believe that “everything could be made solid again [...] of only I could find the center, the source of all these small wonders,” suggesting that she can now envision an actual stable life for herself, rather than just running as she always has. Little Bee and Sarah both grow from their relationship with each other precisely because they are so different, which ultimately suggests that such a connection between two people from vastly different backgrounds may be difficult, but it is also beneficial to both.

Despite their cultural and personal differences, Little Bee and Sarah discover that they are both united by common human experiences. Little Bee and Sarah bond over pain at losing loved ones—Nkiruka for Little Bee and Andrew for Sarah—and especially over their love for Sarah’s son, Charlie, whom Little Bee forms a close connection with. In the final scene of the novel, after Little Bee gives herself up to Nigerian soldiers to save Charlie’s life, she watches as he plays in the waves with a group of Nigerian children and cries with joy to see him so happy—even though she herself will likely die. Little Bee says, “[He] was beautiful, and this is a word [...] I do not need to explain to you, because now we are all speaking the same language.” Little Bee’s closing line suggests that although people from different parts of the world may seem utterly foreign to each other, as human beings there is so much that unites them just the same, such as the beauty of a healthy, happy child.



HORROR AND TRAUMA

As a Nigerian oil war refugee and genocide survivor, Little Bee witnesses numerous horrific events in her brief lifetime that shock both Sarah and the reader, though nonetheless reflect the bleak reality of many parts of the world. Through Little Bee’s narration, the novel suggests that the developing world suffers many horrors that the developed world conveniently turns a blind eye to, and that those horrors can lead to life-altering trauma.

The horrors that Little Bee and other refugees experience in a developing world compared with the relatively placid life they experience in England speaks to the way that people in the developed world have largely managed to shield themselves

from the chaos and suffering that abounds elsewhere in the world. As a 14-year-old girl, Little Bee listens as mercenaries rape and beat her sister Nkiruka to death and then cannibalize her body. She witnesses her entire family and countless other people die in a genocide for the sake of an oil war. Yvette, a Jamaican refugee, implies that she saw her children murdered as a political retaliation for an unknown action. As Little Bee looks around at the other women in the immigration detention center, including Yvette and two others that she is released with, she knows that each of them is from a different part of the world, and each has a horrific story that always begins with, “**The men** came and they...” That Little Bee and other refugees have witnessed and experienced numerous horrors around the world suggests that such horrors are far more common than people in the developed world may be prone to believe.

Little Bee thinks that the absence of such horror in a developed country like England is particularly evident in its citizens’ preoccupation with horror films, which allow them to briefly feel the terror that has gripped Little Bee for years, but then quickly rid themselves of it. She reflects, “Horror in your country is something you take a dose of to remind yourself you are not suffering from it,” confirming that developed countries like England are largely protected from the horrors of global conflicts in the developing world. At a gas station, Little Bee hears the whine of gasoline pumping into a vehicle and thinks of her family’s screams, suggesting that the oil her family died over powers the developed world. This further suggests that not only does the developed world conveniently ignore many horrors around the world, it may even benefit from them by importing resources that were won through horrific violence. However, Little Bee recognizes that isolated horrors still occur in the developed world as well. When Sarah briefly thinks that Charlie drowned in the River Thames, her terrified screams remind Little Bee of the first time she found a dead body in the jungle and realized that horror is a part of her world, suggesting that horror still exists in the developed world, though certainly not in the overwhelming manner it does elsewhere.

Little Bee’s traumatic nightmares and fixation with suicide suggests that even though she has physically escaped the danger of the horrors she saw and experienced, those horrors deeply traumatized her and thus live on in her mind. Although Little Bee escapes the conflict in Nigeria, she realizes that the horrors follow after her. “I stowed away on a great steel boat, but the horror stowed away inside me. When I left my homeland I thought I had escaped—but [...] I started to have nightmares. [...] It was a heavy cargo that I carried.” Even though Little Bee is able to physically remove herself from danger, the horrors of her past are burned into her mind. Beyond nightmares, Little Bee’s trauma makes her think constantly of suicide. To prevent the scenario of her ever being captured and tortured like Nkiruka if “the men” come for her, Little Bee makes a habit—even a private game—of imagining

how she would kill herself in any given situation. For instance, if someone tries to capture her while she was dining with the Queen of England, Little Bee imagines she could stab a sharp lobster claw through her neck. Little Bee's suicidal ideas seem to be a direct result of her traumatic past, a way to protect herself from having to experience more horror in the future.

Sadly, such trauma and suicidal ideas even follow Little Bee and other refugees into relatively safe places. After Little Bee, Yvette, and two other women are released from detention and meet Mr. Ayres, a kindly farmer who gives them food and shelter, one of the women hallucinates and then hangs herself during her first night of freedom, unable to cope with the things she has seen. Little Bee herself continues her private suicide fantasies even in locations that should be completely safe, such as Charlie's daycare center. The fact that such trauma follows characters even into completely safe environments suggests that traumatic experience often prevents people from ever feeling safe at all.

Little Bee's persistent trauma over events that happened years before suggests that such trauma is tragically long-lasting and not easily dismantled. When a psychiatrist in the detention center tells Little Bee she should "move on" and stop dwelling on the horrors she has seen, Little Bee laughs at her, thinking the psychiatrist must think letting go of trauma is as simple as climbing through a window. Likewise, when Little Bee recounts Nkiruka's brutal murder to Sarah, Little Bee tells Sarah that it took a full year before she felt like she was even able to think clearly, suggesting that the traumatic effects of witnessing such horror are often long-lasting, persisting for years if not decades. Little Bee's account of her horror and trauma has no clean resolution or happy ending. The novel instead depicts such trauma as a long-lasting, life-altering, tragic effect of experiencing the horrors that the developed world has largely closed their eyes to and shielded themselves from.



MORAL COMPROMISE AND SELF-INTEREST

After Andrew and Sarah have a traumatic meeting with Little Bee and Nkiruka in Nigeria, both Andrew and Sarah begin to question the manner in which modern society has led them to prioritize comfort over compassion, which ultimately leads them down very different paths; Andrew drowns in his guilt and eventually commits suicide because of it while Sarah reorients her life toward helping others. Andrew and Sarah's struggles with their own moral compromises suggests modern society is tragically self-interested and adept at keeping problems out of sight and out of mind, and that every person must decide whether they will accept their own compromise or change their ways.

Andrew and Sarah's initial idealism and society's close attention to the war in Afghanistan suggests that both society and people

start with virtuous notions of justice and sacrifice. Before his experience in Nigeria, Andrew writes political columns shaping public sentiment on the war in Afghanistan. The last column he writes before going to Nigeria with Sarah argues that "We are a self-interested society. How will our children learn to put others before themselves if we do not?" Andrew's writing suggests that he claims a high-minded idealism and believes in self-sacrifice. Likewise, in the early days of her fashion magazine, Sarah dreams of using her magazine to teach women about current affairs in the world—"bring [readers] in with sex and then immerse them in the issues"—suggesting that like her and Andrew, many young people desire to raise awareness about critical issues and make the world a better place. Society's awareness of the war in Afghanistan parallels Andrew and Sarah's early idealism. Sarah notes that in the first months of the war, it is a "shock and demanded constant attention," suggesting that society's awareness of conflict in other people's lives is initially high.

However, as time wears on, Andrew and Sarah settle into their own lives and dismiss foreign conflicts as other people's problems, suggesting that both people and society grow complacent over time, willing to compromise their idealism for the sake of their own self-interest. While Andrew and Sarah are vacationing in Nigeria, they meet Little Bee and Nkiruka running for their lives, hunted by mercenaries who want to kill them because they witnessed a genocide and are thus liabilities for the government. Little Bee and Nkiruka beg the couple for protection, but neither Andrew or Sarah truly believe they are in danger until the mercenaries catch up to them. The leader states that he'll spare both girls' lives if Andrew chops off his middle finger with his machete. Andrew cannot bring himself to do it, claiming that this shouldn't involve them and is "not our affair"—but his refusal condemns Nkiruka to death. Sarah, however, chops her own **middle finger** off, and the leader agrees to save Little Bee. Despite his idealism, Andrew's unwillingness to sacrifice a single finger to save someone's life suggests that any real altruism he may have had as a younger man has faded with age and comfort.

Although Sarah gives her middle finger to save Little Bee on the beach, Sarah participates in her own moral compromises, such as her magazine's transition from talking about serious issues to only running articles about orgasms because sex sells. Little Bee's arrival at Sarah's house two years later tests Sarah's former idealism—she has to decide how much she'll risk to help an illegal immigrant—and Sarah sadly reflects that it's withered with age: "You get a little bit older [...] you realize that some of the world's badness is inside you, maybe you're a part of it. And then you get a little bit older still, and a bit more comfortable, and you start wondering whether that badness you've seen in yourself is really that bad at all." Sarah's recognition of her own compromise suggests that as an individual grows older and more comfortable, they tend to shed idealism in favor of

convenience and compromise their own morals. The novel highlights how, over time, society's treatment of the war in Afghanistan changes—they pay less attention to it, only noticing it when it's particularly inconvenient. In a similar vein, while Little Bee watches Sarah put gasoline in her car, she realizes that the oil companies slaughtered her family and her village so that they could sell gasoline to countries like England: "The gasoline flowing through the pump made a high-pitched sound, as if the screaming of my family was dissolved in it." Dimming awareness of the war and Little Bee's observation suggests that society, driven by self-interest and convenience, makes its own moral compromises as well, such as buying consumer goods that cost the lives of people elsewhere in the world.

Andrew despairs at his own moral weakness while Sarah elects to make a change, suggesting that when one realizes the depths of their own moral compromise and gross self-interest, they can either respond with despair and cynicism, or decide to live a more purposeful, altruistic life. For the two years after Andrew fails to sacrifice his finger to save Nkiruka, he sinks into a guilt-ridden depression which finally ends in suicide. The last sentence he writes for his column says, "Certain attitudes which have been adopted by this society have left this commentator a little lost." Sarah notes that the sentence's passive voice reflects the passive manner in which they've slowly compromised their own morality, which leaves Andrew with a grim view of himself and the world. His suicide suggests that an individual facing their own moral weakness may drown themselves in despair. By contrast, Sarah's relationship with Little Bee drives her to change herself and end her compromises. Sarah quits her job and follows Little Bee back to Nigeria after she is deported, hoping to report the stories of people like her and protect Little Bee's life while risking her own. While Andrew gives into despair, Sarah's life change suggests that that an individual can also take steps to reclaim their former enthusiasm for helping others and lay aside self-interest, though this will neither be the safest or most comfortable option.



IDENTITY AND FEAR

Little Bee, Sarah, and four-year-old Charlie are all hiding from pain and trauma—Little Bee from traumatic memories and fear of returning to Nigeria, Sarah from guilt over Andrew's suicide which she feels she did not try hard enough to prevent, and Charlie from the loss of his father, which he cannot entirely understand. To cope with their burdens, each character adopts a constructed identity for themselves which helps them to hide from their pain. However, it also prevents them from simply being themselves and thus being vulnerable enough to love each other without holding back. Through Little Bee, Sarah, and Charlie, *Little Bee* explores the way in which an individual

develops their sense of identity to protect or hide themselves, but ultimately suggests that to truly and selflessly love someone, one must give up their self-protecting identity and be vulnerable.

Little Bee, Sarah, and Charlie all construct identities—or "costumes"—to protect themselves from the world and help them hide from pain. In the immigration detention center, Little Bee (which is itself pseudonym adopted while fleeing for her life) constructs an identity for herself as a sexless person so that she will be ignored by predatory men, flattening her breasts with a cotton wrap and wearing loosely fitting clothing to hide her female shape. To mitigate the racial prejudice of other people, Little Bee teaches herself to speak English like the Queen, adopting an aristocratic British accent. She makes herself "neither a woman nor a girl, a creature who had forgotten her language and learned yours, whose past had crumbled to dust" and holds onto this identity even while living with Sarah, since it helps her to cope with her fear of being deported and hide from traumatic memories.

Even before Andrew's suicide, Sarah feels guilty for their failing marriage and her ongoing affair and is haunted by her first meeting with Little Bee in Nigeria. To cope with her guilt and painful memories of a violent world, Sarah leans into her role as a successful career woman, working mother, and wife, though her heavy reliance on fashionable marriage and parenting advice columns suggests she is more concerned with fitting the identity than actually enjoying the act of being a wife or a mother. By focusing all of her energy on constructing her identity, Sarah avoids grappling with the pain of her failing marriage or memories of Nigeria.

Charlie hides from the pain and confusion of losing his father by spending the summer with Little Bee dressed in a **Batman costume**. As Batman, Charlie feels empowered to understand the world—which he breaks down simply into "goodies" and "baddies"—and this offers him a reprieve from the confusion of Andrew's suicide. Charlie's Batman costume symbolically represents his, Little Bee's, and Sarah's constructed identities and the manner in which it hides them from the world and shields them from their own pain. Reflecting on each of their identities, Sarah reflects, "We were exiles from reality, that summer. We were refugees from ourselves," suggesting that just as Charlie's belief that he is Batman helps him but is a denial of reality, so too are her and Little Bee's fabricated identities a denial of reality.

After the British government deports Little Bee back to Nigeria, Little Bee, Sarah, and Charlie each learn to let go of their constructed identities so that they can love each other honestly and selflessly. When Little Bee is arrested and deported, Sarah gives up her identity as a professional woman to follow Little Bee back to Nigeria and attempt to save her, telling Charlie, "We won't ever give up on Little Bee. Because she is part of our family now." More than simply following Little

Bee to Nigeria, Sarah stays close to Little Bee at all times, reasoning that the soldiers who want to kill Little Bee wouldn't dare to do so with a British journalist present. In shedding her identity as an upper-class career woman, Sarah reclaims her former idealism, the version of herself that cut off her middle finger to save Little Bee once before, which allows her to love Little Bee without regard for her own safety or well-being and live more boldly as who she is.

Similarly, when Little Bee realizes she sees the Nigerian soldiers shoot at Charlie, she realizes the only way to stop them is to reveal her true self as Udo the village girl—and give up her identity as Little Bee—whom they are hunting, so they will leave Charlie alone. Although the novel implies that Udo will quickly be arrested and probably killed, by sacrificing her identity as Little Bee, she not only saves Charlie's life, but also models the courage it takes to live truly as oneself, despite how fearful or vulnerable it may seem. Emboldened by Little Bee's courage to become Udo once again, Charlie takes off his Batman costume, shedding his own identity, and joyfully plays with the other children on the beach, existing simply and purely as Charlie, who may not understand his father's suicide but now can move and play and participate freely in society without hiding. Sarah, Little Bee, and Charlie each face risk in letting go of their fabricated identities, and yet within that vulnerability they are able to live freely and love selflessly, which ultimately suggests that although a developed identity may help one protect themselves from the world or hide from pain, it ultimately impedes their ability to fully live and love others.



SYMBOLS

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



SARAH'S MISSING FINGER

Sarah's missing middle finger represents her loss of innocence as she is forced to recognize that people around the world suffer many horrors while she lives her safe, comfortable, insulated life. When Sarah and Andrew meet Little Bee and Nkiruka on the beach in Nigeria, Sarah cuts off her finger in exchange for Little Bee's life. On the plane ride home, as Sarah feels the stump of her finger throb, she reflects that it feels like the end of her childhood, now that she has witnessed firsthand the kind of horror that goes on in the world. However, on her return to England, Sarah manages to hide herself from both the traumatic memories and their implications for her own life—namely that her career is meaningless and her lifestyle is selfish—by focusing herself on maintaining her identity as a career woman and a working mother. As Sara numbs her pain, her awareness of her missing finger dims; she sees its absence only as a minor inconvenience, reflecting the fact that she has

largely pushed the events in Nigeria out of her mind. However, when Little Bee arrives at her house and tells Sarah how Nkiruka was murdered after she and Andrew left, Sarah finds that her middle finger itches and throbs, suggesting that her loss of innocence is weighing on her mind once more, since Little Bee, who suffered many horrors, now lives with her. As Sarah's relationship with Little Bee develops and she begins to take steps to lead a purposeful life and help other people, Sarah stops mentioning her missing finger at all, though this time because she has dealt with her loss of innocence and decided that in response, she will do what she can to help people like Little Bee.



CHARLIE'S BATMAN COSTUME

Charlie's Batman costume represents the protective identities that Charlie, Sarah, and Little Bee construct for themselves to hide from fear and emotional pain. Although four-year-old Charlie does not fully understand death, he senses that the world is large and frightening and knows that he has somehow lost his father, Andrew. After his father's suicide, Charlie refuses to remove his Batman costume and will only answer to "Batman." Taking on the Batman persona allows Charlie to feel a sense of power and agency, rather than recognize his own powerlessness and fear. While this helps Charlie endure the months after Andrew's death, being Batman makes him believe that he is responsible for fighting the evil in the world, and especially that he is responsible for Andrew's death, since Andrew hanged himself while Charlie was *not* wearing the costume.

The Batman costume thus represents the way that a constructed identity can help a person cope, but may burden that person with greater responsibilities than they can bear, whether it be saving the world or fitting a particular ideal as a mother or a refugee, like Sarah and Little Bee try to do. At the end of the novel, Little Bee ultimately convinces Charlie to shed his costume aside and be freely and simply himself—as she sheds her "costume" as Little Bee and shares with him that her real name is Udo. When Charlie takes his costume off, he runs and plays as a happy four-year-old with other children, unburdened by responsibilities that should not be his. Charlie's freedom without his costume suggests though a person may protect themselves with a constructed identity, it becomes a burden that they are ultimately freer and happier without.



THE COLOR GRAY

In the novel, the color gray symbolizes the lifelessness, fatigue, and numbness which Little Bee and Sarah both feel throughout the story. Little Bee thinks that if she designed a flag for refugees, it would be gray, the color of worn-out clothing, to describe the sense of exhaustion she feels after running for so long. After the girl with green trainers

hangs herself, Little Bee walks to London in the gray pre-dawn morning, suggesting that her world feels lifeless and alone. However, as she nears London and the sun rises, the world turns from gray to gold, suggesting that Little Bee begins to feel hope and potential for her life. Similarly, Sarah describes the morning that she begins her affair with Lawrence as “gray, ominous” which represents her world’s unhappiness at that stage of her life, which leads her to start an affair.



THE MEN

Throughout the novel, Little Bee refers to anyone she feels she must hide from as “the men.” The men are the embodiment of Little Bee’s fear, representing any person who would wish to do her or people like her harm. After witnessing so much horror and pain, Little Bee feels as if the men could come to take her away at any moment, in any place. Although the men are a constant presence in Little Bee’s mind, they refer to different people at different times including immigration authorities, the oil companies’ mercenaries, the police, or even sexual predators. Regardless of who “the men” refers to at any given time, they always represent a clear threat to Little Bee’s safety and agency, from which she must hide herself or kill herself before they can touch her.

affirming who she truly is.

Additionally, Little Bee’s comment, “We are free to watch it go,” deftly brings up the fact that, as a Nigerian girl, globalization results in her watching money leave her country rather than enter it. This foreshadows her later reflections about how foreign corporations and corrupt politicians are constantly plundering Nigeria of its rich national resources. Although the world benefits from Nigerian oil, the Nigerians themselves are only able to watch their money leave their country.

“Once a week, I sat on the foam mattress of my bed and I painted my toenails. I found the little bottle of varnish at the bottom of a charity box. It still had the price ticket on it. If I ever discover the person who gave it then I will tell them, for the cost of one British pound and ninety-nine pence, they saved my life. Because this is what I did in that place, to remind myself I was alive underneath everything: under my steel toe caps I wore bright red nail varnish.”

Related Characters: Little Bee (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

In the immigration detention center, Little Bee wears loose clothes and heavy boots and flattens her breasts with a cotton band so that she will appear shapeless and not draw the attention of the older, predatory men. Secretly, she wears red toenail varnish to remind herself that she is still a girl. Little Bee’s need to remind herself that she is still a human, still a teenage girl, suggests that she commits herself so wholly to being sexually undesirable—as a form of self-protection—that she risks losing her own sense of self and her humanity. Although Little Bee’s fabricated identity successfully protects her from sexual assault, thus proving the usefulness of a constructed identity, her fear of losing herself suggests that a constructed identity also poses a potential threat. It seems possible that one can over-commit themselves to their fake identity to hide or self-protect, to the point that they lose their concept of who they truly are as a human being.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Simon & Schuster edition of *Little Bee* published in 2008.

Chapter One Quotes

“How I would love to be a British pound. A pound is free to travel to safety, and we are free to watch it go. This is the human triumph. This is called, *globalization*.”

Related Characters: Little Bee (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

Little Bee opens her own narration by wishing that she was a British pound rather than herself. This hints at the novel’s exploration of identity and fear, particularly how fear drives a person to create an identity that they can hide behind, rather than exist as themselves and be vulnerable. Little Bee’s wish that she was a British pound and not herself suggests that she values the freedom and safety being a pound would afford more than she values honestly

“ I felt that if I took one step forward, the earth itself would rise up and reject me. There was nothing natural about me now. I stood there in my heavy boots with my breasts strapped down, neither a woman nor a girl, a creature who had forgotten her language and learned yours, whose past had crumbled to dust.

Related Characters: Little Bee (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

As Little Bee opens the door of the immigration center and tries to step outside, above ground for the first time in two years, she finds that the smell of wet grass and clean air terrifies her. Little Bee’s terror at facing the natural world once again speaks both to the refugee experience and her own identity conflict. The world above ground, with trees and grass and clean air, is the natural domain of human beings, the environment in which they thrive. Little Bee’s removal from this world from two whole years suggests that for her and many refugees, the asylum and detention process is dehumanizing on a very deep level. Not only must they face the shock of a new culture, they also must face the shock of re-entering society. For an person like Little Bee who constructs an identity to protect herself, this shock seems to increase the negative effects of assuming such an identity for so long. Little Bee’s loss of her own self-concept as a teenage girl who should be living freely in the natural world is emphasized by the contrast between the natural smell of grass and her own wholly unnatural state.

Explanation and Analysis

Just as Little Bee’s narrative opens with a recognition of her own identity conflict, Sarah begins by speaking of identity and the way that it allows a person to run from themselves. Charlie and Sarah’s need to hide from reality just like Little Bee, even though they are not actual refugees themselves or in any physical danger, suggests that the practice of constructing an identity is common to human beings, regardless of race, culture, or social class. Everyone, the novel suggests, is running from something.

Interestingly, Sarah lists Charlie and his Batman costume first, even though he is the least significant character of the three of them. This establishes the Batman costume as an important symbol for identity, a lens through which to understand Little Bee and Sarah’s more complex identity crises. Faced with his father’s tragic death, Charlie wears his Batman costume to give himself a sense of power and the ability to understand the world. As Batman, Charlie can fight evil and cleanly divide the world into “goodies” and “baddies” (good people and bad people) which is far easier for a four-year-old to grasp than the complex dilemma that led Andrew to kill himself. The Batman costume and the constructed identity allow Charlie to believe he is powerful even when his powerless, protecting his mental psyche and shielding himself from the dark realities of the world he is not yet ready or willing to comprehend.

“ In place of my finger is a stump, a phantom digit that used to be responsible for the E, D, and C keys on my laptop. I can’t rely on E, D, and C anymore. They go missing when I need them most. *Pleased* becomes *please*. *Ecstasies* becomes *stasis*.

Chapter Two Quotes

“ That summer—the summer my husband died—we all had identities we were loath to let go of. My son had his Batman costume, I still used my husband’s surname, and Little Bee, though she was relatively safe with us, still clung to the name she had taken in a time of terror. We were exiles from reality that summer. We were refugees from ourselves.

Related Characters: Sarah O’Rourke (speaker), Andrew O’Rourke, Little Bee, Charlie O’Rourke / “Batman”

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 22

Related Characters: Sarah O’Rourke (speaker), Andrew O’Rourke, Little Bee

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

Two years after Sarah cuts off her middle finger to save Little Bee’s life, she describes the injury as only a mild inconvenience that occasionally interferes with her work as a magazine editor. Sarah’s mild annoyance with her missing middle finger suggests that the sacrifice she made to save Little Bee was ultimately not a great cost for her, even

though Andrew could not bring himself to make it. At the same time, the subtext of Sarah's statement suggests that her first experience of the real horror present in the world left her traumatized and numb. Although Sarah does not have nightmares like Little Bee, her mere recognition that the world is a horrific place and she is doing nothing to help it drain the energy from her life. Her loss of "pleased" suggests she no longer feels happiness, while the loss of "ecstasies" suggests she no longer feels joy. Rather, her life has become a pattern of compromise and getting by. Although she does not suffer evil in the same tangible, threatening ways that Little Bee does, her missing finger symbolizes her loss of innocence and the numbness that overtakes her life when she cannot quite reconcile the fact that she lives in comfort while others suffer.

●● He wouldn't give up, but if I am strict and force myself now to decide upon the precise moment in this whole story when my heart irreparably broke, it was the moment when I saw the weariness and the doubt creep into my son's small muscles as his fingers slipped, for the tenth time, from the pale oak lid.

Related Characters: Sarah O'Rourke (speaker), Andrew O'Rourke, Charlie O'Rourke / "Batman"

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 43

Explanation and Analysis

At Andrew's funeral, when Charlie realizes that the coffin laying in the open grave holds Andrew's body, he jumps into the hole, screaming, and tries to pry the lid off of the coffin to retrieve his father. Charlie's tragedy operates on two different levels in this scene. On the most obvious level, Charlie grieves his father's sudden, unexplainable death. On the deeper level, when Charlie begins to realize that he cannot open the coffin lid, his constructed identity as Batman fails him. Throughout the novel, Charlie takes on his Batman identity to feel powerful and capable in spite of his own powerlessness, to protect himself from the fact that he cannot understand or prevent Andrew's death. When even "Batman" cannot rescue Andrew from the grave, Charlie must recognize that the power he feels as Batman is only a façade, suggesting that the safety or power that any person feels from their assumed identity is flimsy and fleeting. Thus, at the same time, Charlie faces both the reality of

death and the reality of his own powerlessness in a frightening world, which explains Sarah's particular grief in this moment and arguably makes it the most tragic scene in the story.

Chapter Three Quotes

●● I stowed away in a great steel boat, but the horror stowed away inside me. When I left my homeland I thought I had escaped—but out on the open sea, I started to have nightmares. I was naïve to suppose I had left my country with nothing.

Related Characters: Little Bee (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Little Bee recalls her journey to England, stowing away on a British cargo ship, and states that although she physically left the horrors of her country behind, they live on in her mind as traumatic memories. Little Bee's recognition that her own horror comes with her suggests that even when refugees escape the immediate threat in their own country, they are often left traumatized by all they have seen and experienced. Such trauma is particularly insidious because it cannot be easily escaped. Although Little Bee is in relative safety aboard the cargo ship—the captain gives her a private room for her own protection—her nightmares persist, taking her back to the killing in Nigeria every single night. Regardless of how far she runs, those memories will still be in her mind. The fact that Little Bee recalls such images as nightmares while she sleeps suggests that the trauma likely fills her mind during the day as well, though she is perhaps consciously able to repress it. All of this together suggests that through trauma, horrific experiences can practically overtake one's mind, pushing out any other thought.

●● They told us we must be disciplined to overcome our fears. This is the discipline I learned: whenever I go into a new place, I work out how I would kill myself there. In case the men come suddenly, I make sure I am ready.

Related Characters: Little Bee (speaker), Nkiruka / Kindness

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

While Little Bee is in the detention center, she starts imagining all the ways she could kill herself in any situation, just in case the men ever come for her. She even makes a game out of it, imagining how she would do it in obscure situations, such as while having dinner with the Queen of England. Little Bee's constant dwelling on suicide is a symptom of the traumatic horrors she witnessed. However, her suicide fantasies also allow Little Bee to feel some amount of agency and control over her fate. After seeing mercenaries destroy her village and family, Little Bee has little belief in her ability to protect herself if the men come for her, which makes her feel powerless. However, in planning her own suicide in every possible situation, Little Bee gives herself the agency to choose her own death, rather than be tortured or raped as Nkiruka was. Ironically, contemplating suicide allows Little Bee to feel a sense of agency for the first time in years, which gives her enough control to begin to confront her fear and trauma.

“Yu nivver notice dey interview rooms didn't have no windows? Me swear to yu, dat man's ooman mus kept her legs cross for da last ten years, de way he took me up on me offer. An it wasn't jus on de one day, mind. It took de man *four interviews* fore he was certain me papers was in order.”

Related Characters: Yvette (speaker), Little Bee

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 71-72

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Yvette explains that she had sex with one of the immigration officers in exchange for their release from the detention center, which she claims is far less painful than whatever would happen to her if she is sent back to Jamaica. Yvette's exchange encapsulates several aspects of the refugee experience all at once. Since she is fleeing for her life, Yvette is desperate enough that she'll barter with her own physical body to secure her release, demonstrating the desperate position many refugees find themselves in. Unfortunately, this makes them prime targets to be

exploited by corrupt officials, as Yvette was herself. Her note that the interview rooms don't have windows even suggests that such corrupt practices are commonplace, nearly expected by the state. Little Bee—who should be a prime candidate for asylum status—waited for two years in detention and is only allowed out through illicit means. This suggests that the immigration system is often so corrupt and inefficient that such illegal measures as Yvette takes may be the only possible way of entering a country as a refugee.

Chapter Four Quotes

“How calm my eyes were, since that day on the beach in Africa. When there has been a loss so fundamental I suppose that to lose just one more thing—a finger, perhaps, or a husband—is of absolutely no consequence at all.”

Related Characters: Sarah O'Rourke (speaker), Little Bee, Andrew O'Rourke

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 91

Explanation and Analysis

On the day of Andrew's funeral, Sarah struggles to understand while she feels no emotion over her husband's death—no pain, no grief. The day on the beach that Sarah references is the day that she cuts her own finger off to save Little Bee after Andrew fails to. Sarah's missing finger symbolizes the loss of innocence that occurs on that day, when Sarah is forced to recognize that the world is a horrific place and that her virtue-touting husband is powerless to confront it. The existence of such evil in the world challenges Sarah's beliefs about her career and her environment, causing her to wonder what the actual value of a glossy fashion magazine is or how she can live in such a safe and comfortable life while young girls like Little Bee face mortal danger. However, rather than lean into these questions and faces the pain that she briefly glimpsed, Sarah runs from them for two years, hiding herself in her identity as a career woman and working mother until she is numb, so she no longer has to grapple with the pain and trauma of what she saw. In this way, Sarah's missing finger not only symbolizes her loss of innocence, but also of her loss of passion and emotion.

●● So, I realized—life had finally broken through. How silly it looked now, my careful set of defenses against nature: my brazen magazine, my handsome husband, my Maginot line of motherhood and affairs. The world, the real world, had found a way through. It had sat down on my sofa and it would not be denied any longer.

Related Characters: Sarah O'Rourke (speaker), Andrew O'Rourke, Little Bee

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 95

Explanation and Analysis

With Little Bee sitting in her living room, Sarah realizes that the traumatic memories she's been running from have come to meet her, and she must face them. The day that Sarah meets Little Bee on the Nigerian beach marks Sarah's loss of innocence, since it is the first time she is forced to recognize that many human beings suffer unimaginable horrors while she lives in safety and comfort. However, rather than using this traumatic experience to find new purpose in her life, Sarah instead chooses to block it out. Her "defenses against nature" suggests that she shields herself behind her carefully maintained identity as a working mother and fashion editor, apparently hoping that the traumatic memories and awareness of other people's suffering will someday disappear. Although Sarah has not yet realized that this identity keeps her from being a loving mother or friend, Sarah demonstrates that such a carefully managed sense of identity is a defense against having to confront the real world and all of its darkness.

●● "I just think this is not our affair and so..."
"Ah," the killer said. "Not your affair."

He turned to the other hunters and spread his arms.

"Not his affair, him say. Him say, this is black-man business. Ha ha ha ha! [...] First time I hear white man say my business not his business. You got our gold. You got our oil. What is wrong with our girls?"

Related Characters: The Leader / The Killer, Andrew O'Rourke (speaker), Sarah O'Rourke, Nkiruka / Kindness, Little Bee

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 112

Explanation and Analysis

When Andrew and Sarah first meet Little Bee and Nkiruka on the beach in Nigeria, pursued by the hunters, Andrew tries to absolve himself of responsibility for Little Bee and Nkiruka's lives by claiming that they are "not his affair." Although the leader is a vile sadist, both a rapist and a murderer, he makes a very reasonable point to Andrew. Andrew lives in England, a society that has a long history of exploiting countries like Nigeria and black people in particular, robbing them of their independence and natural resources at various times. For much of British history, Andrew's country and his people viewed this as their right. Now, however, when Andrew has the opportunity to save two African girls' lives, he suddenly wants to deny any responsibility or involvement. This is hypocritical not only because Andrew writes a moralistic column for *The Times*, but also because Andrew has the opportunity to hide himself in a wealthy country in large part because that country made its wealth by taking from places like Nigeria. The leader of the hunters aptly points out that for centuries, the developed world has exploited and consumed the developing world. The hunter suggests that every endangered child in Nigeria should be Andrew's affair, as a beneficiary of so much stolen wealth.

●● I met Andrew O'Rourke when we were both working on a London evening paper. Ours seemed to perfectly express the spirit of the city. Thirty-one pages of celebrity goings-on about town, and one page of news from the world which existed beyond London's orbital motorway—the paper offered it up as a sort of memento mori.

Related Characters: Sarah O'Rourke (speaker), Andrew O'Rourke

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 123

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Sarah recounts the way that she and Andrew's relationship began. Her statement that their newspaper was 31 pages of celebrity gossip and one page of news, which encapsulates London's general ethos, suggests that all of society makes the same sort of moral compromise as Andrew and Sarah do. As a whole, society spends all of their energy on entertainment and flashy, meaningless news while ignoring the glaring fact that the rest of the world is riddled with suffering. In particular, Sarah names their single

page of world news—which is not enough space to adequately explain any event anyway—a “memento mori,” which is a token reminder that everyone will someday die used in some religious traditions. The idea that the rest of the world’s suffering is a mere memento mori to Londoners is tremendously cynical, since it suggests that the only thing the developing world is good for is to look out at and appreciate that at least one isn’t in their position; things could always be worse.

Chapter Five Quotes

☞ Then I listened to my sister’s bones being broken one by one. That is how my sister died. [...] When the men and the dogs were finished with my sister, the only parts of her that they threw into the sea were the parts that could not be eaten.

Related Characters: Little Bee (speaker), Andrew O’Rourke, Nkiruka / Kindness

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 132

Explanation and Analysis

Little Bee recounts Nkiruka’s gruesome death, which she was forced to listen to while hiding under a boat next to Nkiruka and the men. Nkiruka’s death is disturbingly graphic, depicting the horrors that many refugees like Little Bee face in the countries they flee.

The graphic details in Nkiruka’s death are particularly important because she dies after Andrew refuses to cut off his finger to save Nkiruka’s life. Andrew claims “this is not our affair” and a part of him seems to believe that the violence the hunters threaten against Little Bee and Nkiruka will not actually happen. Andrew seems able to convince himself that the danger is not real so that he can rationalize his way out of making a small sacrifice. The disturbing depiction of Nkiruka’s death assures the reader that the consequences of Andrew’s glaring moral failure are very real, and ultimately suggests that one does not know what the true consequences of their own moral compromises will be, nor how much pain they may bring someone else.

Chapter Six Quotes

☞ I think [Andrew] truly started to believe that Britain was sinking in to the sea. [...] Now that Charlie was almost two I suppose I was looking into the future my child would have to inhabit, and realizing that bitching about it might possibly not be the most constructive strategy.

Related Characters: Sarah O’Rourke (speaker), Lawrence Osborn, Andrew O’Rourke

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 151

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Sarah recalls how her affair with Lawrence began when she went to the Home Office to conduct interviews, determined to find something optimistic to write about since Andrew’s column had become terribly pessimistic. By Sarah’s account, Andrew only bemoans the state of society but never proposes solutions or tries to fix it himself. He passively observes and complains about the state of the world, but his actions end there. Andrew repeats this behavior on the beach in the greatest moral failure of his life: faced with a dire situation and the chance to do something about it, Andrew only complains and refuses to act. Andrew’s cynical column, which presumably paves the way for his moral failure, thus offers a strong warning against cynicism. If one will only talk about how bad the world is but will not make any constructive effort to change it, perhaps it would be just as well that they did not speak at all.

☞ “I’ve spent two years denying what happened on that beach. Ignoring it, letting it fester. That’s what Andrew did too, and it killed him in the end. I’m not going to let it kill me and Charlie.”

Related Characters: Sarah O’Rourke (speaker), Lawrence Osborn, Andrew O’Rourke, Charlie O’Rourke / “Batman”, Little Bee

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 172

Explanation and Analysis

When Lawrence tries to convince Sarah to abandon Little Bee or turn her into the police so she will be somebody else’s problem, Sarah decides she is done with running from

the traumatic memories and burden of guilt for leaving Little Bee behind on the beach in Nigeria. For Sarah, this turn from running from what happened with Little Bee to facing it marks a major development in her character. Sarah is taking the first steps towards letting her protective identity fall away (which her affair with Lawrence is a part of) and leaning into real action involving real people. Sarah's statement that Andrew ran from the problem and let it "fester" until it killed him suggests that running away from such heavy issues and even from one's own integrity will ultimately destroy a person; they may keep such thoughts below the surface for a time, but that can only lead to so much numbness before they cease to exist altogether, like Andrew did. Sarah's decision to face Little Bee and the world that she represents so she can understand how to help her marks a critical step in Sarah's development as a person, even though she will still hesitate and compromise at various points in the future.

Chapter Seven Quotes

☞ The gasoline flowing through the pump made a high-pitched sound, as if the screaming of my family was still dissolved in it. The nozzle of the gasoline hose went right inside the fuel tank of Sarah's car, so that the transfer of the fluid was hidden.

Related Characters: Little Bee (speaker), Sarah O'Rourke

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 181

Explanation and Analysis

On a trip to the grocery store, Sarah stops at a gas station to fuel up her car. Little Bee's thought that the gasoline's whine sounds like her family's screams highlights the fact that the gasoline and other consumer goods that citizens of the developed world enjoy often come through the exploitation or death of people in the developed world. The goods and products that can make one country appear wealthy and operate their vehicles, their homes, their computers, come at a very real human cost, such as all of the people slaughtered in Nigeria's oil war. Little Bee's observation that the fuel transfer goes directly into Sarah's car (a sign of wealth) and is hidden from view reflects the fact that people like Sarah are often unaware of the human cost that's paid for their lifestyles. Although Sarah certainly could find out about such atrocities, she does not make the effort to, and the gasoline and the blood that was spilt for her to just fill up

her own tank are conveniently hidden from view. The novel suggests that this is one of the greatest atrocities of globalization.

☞ "Is it really death that you're running from? I mean, honestly? A lot of the people who come here, they're after a comfortable life."

"If they deport me to Nigeria, I will be arrested. If they find out who I am, and what I have seen, then the politicians will find a way to have me killed."

Related Characters: Little Bee, Lawrence Osborn (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 187

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Lawrence asks Little Bee if her life is actually in any danger or whether she is not simply trying to latch on to the UK's wealth. Lawrence embodies the typical native-born citizen, skeptical of refugees and intent on only considering his own self-interest. Lawrence's question is depicted as a common argument made by anti-refugee people. However, Little Bee's situation, and, by extension most refugees' situations, is deadly serious. She is not in the UK because she wanted to be—she even states once that she'd rather be home—but because her life depended on her escaping. Lawrence's question is rooted in ignorance and privilege, and he subtly accuses Little Bee of being a parasite, feeding off of the UK's considerable wealth and luxury. While such an implication is atrocious on its own, it's also ironic, since Lawrence himself enjoys such luxury and convenience though he did no more than Little Bee to earn such a lifestyle. Lawrence's question and character thus embodies the skepticism many people express towards refugees, rooted in ignorance and selfishness, and Little Bee's answer very clearly suggests that refugees are not merely wealth-seeking immigrants, but people who are running for their very lives.

Chapter Eight Quotes

☞ I closed my eyes and listened to the hum of the fluorescent lights, the buzzing of the fax machines, and the fluid chatter of the editorial girls on their phones to fashion houses. It all seemed suddenly insane, like wearing a little green bikini to an African war.

Related Characters: Sarah O'Rourke (speaker), Little Bee

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 201

Explanation and Analysis

Weeks after her husband's funeral, Sarah returns to work at the magazine office for the first time. Sarah's sudden realization that all of her work for the past decade as a fashion editor seems suddenly pointless is directly tied to her growing relationship with Little Bee. Little Bee's life experiences, which are completely different from Sarah's, offer Sarah a broader perspective with which to look at the world and the suffering in it. However, a consequence of this broader perspective is that compared to Little Bee's life-and-death struggle or the plights of refugees all around the world, editing a fashion magazine that runs articles about sex and orgasms rather than people seems futile by comparison, a waste of space. Sarah's note about wearing a bikini to a war recalls how foolish she was to think that she could simply vacation like a tourist in the middle of a brutal conflict, and suggests that in the same way that a green bikini is both inappropriate and ineffective clothing for a warzone, Sarah's current career appears both ineffective and even inappropriate use of her time in the midst of a suffering world.

“Save [Little Bee] and there's a whole world of them behind her. A whole swarm of Little Bees, coming here to feed.”

“Or to pollinate.”

Related Characters: Sarah O'Rourke, Lawrence Osborn (speaker), Little Bee

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 207

Explanation and Analysis

While Sarah is thinking of quitting her job to pursue something more meaningful, Lawrence tries to talk her out of it and even out of helping Little Bee at all. Lawrence's argument that if Sarah can't save every person, she shouldn't save any obviously falls flat. However, this brief exchange between Lawrence and Sarah highlights one of the fundamental differences between them. Lawrence's description of a “swarm” again suggests that he sees Little

Bee and refugees like her as parasites, people who leech off of a healthier host country. In Lawrence's mind, every additional refugee that arrives is another burden, weakening the country as a whole. He views them only as self-interested, negative actors. Sarah, by contrast, sees what Little Bee and people like her have to offer. This suggests that obviously there will be some cost in harboring refugees but that is paid back by the cultural richness and perspective they can offer their new country. In Sarah's mind, refugees bring new life into a country, not death. While Lawrence cynically assumes that every person is as selfish and destructive as he is, Sarah (and, by extension, the novel as a whole) believes in human goodness and the opportunity for refugees to contribute to society.

“You start off thinking you can kill all the baddies and save the world. Then you get a little bit older, maybe Little Bee's age, and you realize that some of the world's badness is inside you, that maybe you're part of it. And then you get a little bit older still, and a bit more comfortable, and you start wondering if the badness you've seen in yourself is really all that bad at all.”

Related Characters: Sarah O'Rourke (speaker), Little Bee, Charlie O'Rourke / “Batman”

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 209

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Sarah mourns the way that growing up causes one to morally compromise and lose their idealism and sense of virtue, as age and comfort overtake one's desire to make the world a better place. The process Sarah describes is arranged as a continuum between Charlie, Little Bee, and herself, revealing that the author intentionally arranges their trio of characters to describe three different age demographics and their response to horrors in the world. Although Sarah describes her own response as the most morally compromised, believing that perhaps the world's “badness” is not so bad as it once seemed, Charlie's response is not necessarily the best either. Although Charlie is full of idealism and the desire to fight bad guys, that idealism blinds him to the complex realities of the world, especially the fact that some people are both good and bad—there's at least a little bad in everyone. Of the three, Little Bee engenders the healthiest response to horror in the world, in spite of her deep-seated trauma. Little Bee recognizes that such horrors exist but also recognizes that the seed of such evil and selfishness exists in herself as well.

She never tries to vanquish all evil from the earth, so she knows her own limitations, but she makes efforts to help the people around her like Sarah and Charlie. Little Bee mixes a certain level of idealism with her own real-world experience, which seems to offer the most measured response to the horrors of the world.

Chapter Nine Quotes

☛ The boy's father had dark skin, darker even than my own, and the boy's mother was a white woman. They were holding hands and smiling at their boy, whose skin was light brown. It was the color of the man and the woman joined in happiness. It was such a good color that tears came into my eyes.

Related Characters: Little Bee (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 218

Explanation and Analysis

In London, Little Bee marvels at an interracial couple and their young son. Little Bee's life has thus far been defined by rigid distinctions between "us" and "them," "white" and "black," "European" and "African," "refugee" and "native-born." For Little Bee, the outcome of such distinctions has always been discrimination. As an African refugee, she is always treated worse than a white British person. These constant distinctions explain why witnessing an interracial couple and their biracial son would bring Little Bee tears of joy. The young boy's light brown skin represents the bridge between worlds, the union and equality of two people from two different races and cultures. For Little Bee, the light brown skin suggests that a world exists where she as an African girl can be valued and respected and loved just as much as a white British man, where anyone from any culture or country can belong, not limited by who they are or where they originate from. That such a world can exist at all—and it has only existed for the last 100 years, at most—suggests that in spite of all the world's horror and people's self-interest, humanity is taking steps forward and making progress towards a freer, brighter future.

☛ "If I is not in mine costume than I is not Batman."
"Do you need to be Batman all the time?"

Charlie nodded. "Yes, because if I is not Batman all the time then mine Daddy dies."

Related Characters: Little Bee, Charlie O'Rourke / "Batman" (speaker), Andrew O'Rourke

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 223

Explanation and Analysis

When they are playing by the River Thames in London, Little Bee asks Charlie if he will take off his Batman costume so he does not overheat in the sun; he's obviously too hot already. Charlie believes that his father will die if he stops being Batman, but Andrew already died while Charlie was at the nursery, not wearing his costume. Charlie's misguided belief suggests that when one takes on the identity of a hero, someone who must fight evil and save others, they ultimately take on a much greater burden than they can bear. While Charlie's desire to fight evil is noble and should not be quashed, it is wrong for him to believe that he is responsible for all that happens in the world, or even for Andrew's suicide. Although Charlie feels responsible, Andrew made his own choice. Charlie has no control over Andrew's life or death, just as a single person embracing an identity as a hero has no control over the majority of evil in the world. Charlie's crushing burden of responsibility for Andrew's life warns the reader against viewing themselves as the singular hero, so responsible for saving the world that they cannot even take a day off. That is an unrealistic view of the world and a far greater burden than anyone can bear, let alone a young child.

☛ "Inside, you know, I am only a village girl. I would like to be a village girl again and do the things that village girls do. I would like to laugh and smile at the boys. I would like to do foolish things when the moon is full. And most of all, you know, I would like to use my real name."

Related Characters: Little Bee (speaker), Charlie O'Rourke / "Batman"

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 225

Explanation and Analysis

When Little Bee asks Charlie to take off his costume by the

River Thames, she tells him that she is wearing her own costume as Little Bee, and it is as much a burden for her as Charlie's Batman costume is for him. Although Charlie's constructed identity gives him the feeling of power to fight evil, Little Bee's identity functions entirely to protect her and help her hide from her painful past. However, even though Little Bee does not feel Charlie's weight to fight all of the evil in the world, her wish to simply be a "village girl" again suggests that it still weighs her down. She is not able to be the carefree girl that she wants to be; she is not able to simply enjoy her youth and live by her own name. Little Bee's wish for a life where she didn't have to be Little Bee suggests that although her constructed identity protects her and offers her a way to hide from the world, it prevents her from living freely, since her energy is always consumed by upholding her identity.

Chapter Eleven Quotes

☛ I smiled and watched Charlie running away with the children, with his head down and his happy arms spinning like propellers, and I cried with joy when the children all began to play together in the sparkling foam of the waves that broke between worlds at the point. It was beautiful [...] and that is a word I do not need to explain to you, because now we are all speaking the same language.

Related Characters: Little Bee (speaker), Charlie O'Rourke / "Batman"

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 266

Explanation and Analysis

As the men are coming to take Little Bee away on the beach, Little Bee holds Charlie and tells him that her real name is Udo. In response, Charlie decides he is ready to take off his Batman costume, and he runs away to play with the Nigerian children simply as himself, no longer as Batman. The men are the object of Little Bee's fear and the reason she's kept up her identity as Little Bee for two years. Even so, Little Bee's joy at watching Charlie play without his costume, even as she is (likely) about to die, suggests that sacrificing her own protective identity to help Charlie relinquish his is worth dying for. Little Bee's sacrifice ultimately allows Charlie to live as his own self, unburdened by the horrors of the world that should not yet be his responsibility. The fact that Little Bee can only help Charlie to let go of his identity by also giving up hers suggests that a person's identity may help them to hide, but it also prevents them from vulnerably and selflessly loving others. Additionally, Little Bee's statement that the beauty of a happy and healthy child needs no translation between cultures suggests that such things transcend race, culture, and time. The joy that comes from seeing a healthy child unites all people, regardless of the differences between them.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

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

CHAPTER ONE

Little Bee often wishes she was a “British pound coin instead of an African girl,” because people are always happy to see a pound coin. A coin can travel easily between people and even between countries as a result of “globalization,” to wherever it thinks it will be safest. An African girl gets held up by immigration authorities, but a coin can pass right on through. Also, the coin has the Queen’s face on it and speaks “the Queen’s English”—the grammar and voice that carries so much weight and authority in England.

In the two years that Little Bee lives in an immigration detention center in Essex, England, she teaches herself to speak “the Queen’s English,” because the older women tell her the only way to avoid deportation is to be pretty or well-spoken. On the day she leaves the detention center, a detention officer hands her a transport voucher and points to a phone on the wall where she can call a cab. Three other girls are in line to use it before her. The hallway with the phone “was dirty but it smelled clean,” because the officers soaked it with bleach. Little Bee thinks “that is a good trick.” An officer at his desk reads a newspaper with a topless girl on the centerfold, which Little Bee knows would shock the “girls back home.”

The detention officer stares at the topless girl in the newspaper, though Little Bee thinks he ought to be watching the girls in line for the telephone instead, in case they run. However, the detention center is simply letting the girls go, which Little Bee does not understand. Two years before, when she was 14, Little Bee arrived in England without papers, so they threw her in detention with the adults. However, during the day, the men were mixed in with the women, and the older men watched her with “hungry eyes,” so Little Bee made herself as undesirable as possible, wearing loose clothes, refusing to bathe, and strapping a cotton band around her breasts to flatten them. Once a week, at night in her cell, Little Bee took off her heavy boots and painted her toenails red to remember that she is “alive underneath everything.”

Little Bee’s opening statement that she wishes to be a coin rather than herself establishes identity as one of the story’s major themes. Her wish to be a coin rather than herself suggests that Little Bee values safety and mobility far more than authenticity; she is willing to set her own true self aside for the sake of protection and escape.



Little Bee’s ability to speak the Queen’s English contributes to her constructed identity, which helps her to survive as a refugee and makes her more like the British pound and less like an African girl. The dirty hallway that smells clean because it’s soaked with bleach symbolizes the UK’s immigration system as a whole, since it is shown to be corrupt and cruel yet most British people think it is safe, just, and genuine in its efforts to provide asylum. Little Bee occasionally speaks to “the girls back home” as a way to emphasize the cultural contrast between her childhood home and England.



This section demonstrates both the benefit and risk of employing a constructed identity. Little Bee transforms herself from a girl to a sexless person to protect herself from predatory men. However, Little Bee’s need to paint her toenails red to privately remind herself that she is “alive underneath” suggests that though her shapeless identity protects her from men, it also diminishes her own sense of self and humanity.



Little Bee's older sister Nkiruka "became a woman" under the African sun; Little Bee becomes a woman beneath fluorescent lights in an underground detention center where it is cold regardless of season. Little Bee feels that, though an African girl is somewhere deep inside her still, she was "reborn [...] in captivity" and emerged as something unnatural, a strange hybrid of the developing and developed world. She looks like a disheveled African girl in cast-off clothes but speaks like the "leader column of *The Times*." She admits, "I would cross the street to avoid me." Little Bee is lonely as a refugee, feeling as if she belongs nowhere. Her life seems colored "gray."

On the morning of Little Bee's release, the officers give her and the three other girls all of their possessions in clear plastic bags. Little Bee has **gray** socks, gray briefs, an English dictionary, and a business card and UK driver's license that belong to a white man named Andrew O'Rourke, whom Little Bee met on a beach once. Holding her plastic bag, Little Bee steps into the line of girls at the telephone. A tall pretty Jamaican woman with a pink scarf and plucked eyebrows is speaking into the phone, trying to explain where she is to the cab driver, though she doesn't know the name of the detention center. The girl behind her is extraordinarily beautiful, wearing a yellow sari, but she has nothing in her bag and she never speaks.

The third girl in line, wearing green trainers, is neither pretty nor well-spoken but her bag is full of official documents that detail her story and journey to the UK. Her story starts like every woman's story in the detention center: "**The-men**-came-and-they..." The Jamaican woman asks her the name of the detention center and Little Bee reads "Black Hill Immigration Removal" off of a plaque on the wall. The Jamaican woman is impressed that she can read and tells the man on the phone. He calls her "scum" and hangs up immediately. Neither the Jamaican woman nor Little Bee understand what this word means.

The girl in the yellow sari steps up to the phone and begins whispering into it in a foreign language. The Jamaican woman taps her on the forehead and tells her she must speak English. The girl in the sari slowly recites a memorized sentence stating that she wants to go to England. In frustration, the Jamaican woman takes the phone to speak herself, but realizes the other girl has been speaking to a dial tone. The Jamaican woman hands the phone to Little Bee to try calling someone. Little Bee calls the cab company and tells the dispatcher that she needs a cab for four women at the detention center, but they are cleaners, not refugees. They need to go to Kingston-upon-Thames in Surrey. They'll pay cash on arrival.

Again, Little Bee's sense of being reborn suggests that because of this new identity she takes on in the detention center, which protects her from deportation and from men, she feels that she has lost the child she was back in Africa. Little Bee's admission that she'd even want to avoid herself suggests that she struggles with self-contempt. The color gray repeatedly symbolizes lifelessness, numbness, and fatigue throughout the story.



Both women's physical beauty reinforces Little Bee's earlier statement that women must be either pretty or well-spoken to survive in the detention center. Compared to Little Bee's bag, the other girl's empty bag suggests not only that she has no possessions, but also that she has no tools for survival once she leaves the detention center.



"The men" is used throughout Little Bee's narrative to represent anyone who poses a risk to her or women like her, thus forming an embodiment of Little Bee's fear. Although in this instance, the men represent people who commit violent acts against women and force them to become refugees, the men later represents police, immigration authorities, or even people who would seek to depose the Queen of England.



The girl's speaking into the dial tone suggests that she is either mentally traumatized or so unfamiliar with the way that the developed world works that she cannot make her way through it on her own. In either case, the girl in the sari seems ill-equipped to navigate a new country, which reflects the emptiness of her plastic bag, which has no tools for survival in it (by contrast, Little Bee's bag contains an English dictionary and the phone number of a person she knows in the country). The fact that Little Bee must lie and tell the cab dispatcher that they are not refugees demonstrates the prejudice refugees must contend with.



Next, Little Bee calls Andrew O'Rourke at the number on his business card. When he picks up, Little Bee introduces herself as the girl he met on the beach two years ago in Nigeria. She tells him that she is in England now, and she is coming to Andrew and Sarah's house because she does not know anyone else in the country. Andrew first thinks she is a scammer, then acts angry, insisting that that day on the beach "happened a long time ago." Little Bee tells him she is coming either way, she just wanted to let him know ahead of time.

When Little Bee hangs up the phone, she tells the girls that a cab is coming for them and they should wait outside. The Jamaican woman introduces herself as Yvette, and thinks Little Bee is a silly name. The other two girls remain silent. As they walk past the security desk, the detention officer reading the magazine opens his mouth as if to say something. Little Bee thinks he is about to tell them there was a mistake, and wonders if they should flee. Instead, he pauses, then wishes them good luck.

Little Bee opens the door, but the sudden smell of wet grass and fresh air frightens her—she has not been outdoors in all the time that she was detained. Yvette is impatient to leave and gives Little Bee a shove out the door, knocking her on the ground. Both women laugh at her "glorious" entrance into the free world. As the girls walk, Little Bee reaches under her shirt and unwraps the cotton band from her breasts, letting it fall to the dirt. The "whole world was fresh and new and bright."

CHAPTER TWO

Sarah recounts that from the spring of 2007 to the end of the summer that Little Bee lived with them, her son Charlie only takes his **Batman costume** off when he bathes and answers only to "Batman." Four-year-old Batman spends his days fighting criminals in the house or in the yard. Sarah never tries to explain to Batman that his father, Andrew, died, because she doesn't think it would fit with his notions fighting bad guys. She reckons that everyone is wearing their own costumes that summer and do not want to take them off; they are running "from reality" and "from cruelty."

Andrew's disbelief followed by anger and rationalization suggests that whatever the event in question was, he feels guilty about it even two years after it took place. Although Little Bee is thrusting her and Andrew's reunion upon him, this parallels the manner in which all of the trauma and pain Little Bee endured was thrust upon her by events beyond her control.



Where Little Bee makes every effort to sound as authentically British as possible, Yvette's thick Jamaican accent immediately marks her as a foreigner.



Little Bee's shock at meeting the natural world once again suggests that refugees are often mistreated by the government systems, not afforded basic dignities like the chance to be outside and breathe clean air. Additionally, Little Bee's ungraceful landing onto English soil parallels her entrance into English society, which she falls into with a mixture of humor and pain.



Charlie's Batman costume symbolizes the constructed identities that Sarah, Little Bee, and Charlie all assume throughout the story. In the same way that Little Bee uses her identity to protect herself, Charlie's Batman costume allows him to feel powerful during a traumatic and confusing time as he tries to comprehend the loss of his father.



Five days after Little Bee calls Andrew to let him know she is coming, Andrew hangs himself. Little Bee arrives at Sarah's house on the day of the funeral, two hours before the undertaker. When the undertaker arrives to take the body, Batman sees his sharp suit and figures he must be Bruce Wayne. Sarah, Batman, and Little Bee follow the undertaker's vehicle and walk the short distance to the church, looking like an odd assortment. Little Bee, wearing Sarah's black raincoat over her brightly colored, ratty detention center clothing, holds Batman's hand while Sarah walks beside them in a sophisticated skirt, jacket, and gloves. Sarah feels faint as they walk, so Little Bee holds her by the elbow. Sarah thinks it odd that Little Bee should be the one supporting her in this moment.

The three of them sit in the front row of the church. Sarah feels overwhelmed by the sudden change in her life. Last week, she was a career woman and working mother; "Now I was sitting at my husband's funeral, flanked by a superhero and a Nigerian refugee." Batman asks where his father is, but Sarah does not know how she could possibly explain the confusing circumstances that led to Andrew's death.

Andrew's depression began in 2005, after they met Little Bee in Nigeria. Until now, the only reminder that Sarah had of that day was the **missing middle finger** of her left hand, taken off by a machete. It's a minor nuisance, though it occasionally causes typos when Sarah is making last-minute additions to her magazine on publishing deadlines. Beyond the thousand subtle markers of depression, the only warning sign Sarah might have had that Andrew was about to kill himself was that his column for *The Times* that day was written in passive voice and held a veiled but "measured goodbye." Sarah wishes she'd paid him more attention.

Sarah finds Andrew after he hangs up the phone on Little Bee, tears in his eyes. When she asks who the call was from, he doesn't answer. Since it is early morning and Charlie is sleeping, Sarah leads him to the bedroom and they make love. They do this only as "a maintenance thing," a household chore. Andrew moves in her like a worn-down machine, and Sarah knows he is suffering. But then Charlie walks in on them, reporting that he has pooped in his **Batman costume**. Sarah looks at him in the doorway and sees poop on the carpet, the doorframe, the wall, even Charlie's face. Resentfully, Sarah gets out of bed to clean him up.

Andrew's sudden suicide again suggests that he feels guilty over his connection to Little Bee. Similar to Charlie's Batman costume, both Little Bee and Sarah's attire speak to their sense of identity. Little Bee's bright but dirty clothing covered by Sarah's rain jacket reflects her position as an impoverished refugee trying to blend into upper-class English society. Likewise, Sarah's sophisticated clothing reflects her identity as a modern professional woman who is put together even in the wake of her husband's death.



Sarah's transition from working mother to widow in odd company suggests that her identity, her costume as a professional woman, is beginning to crack, particularly since it seems inadequate for helping Charlie to understand the loss of his father.



Sarah's missing finger has a violent backstory, which the novel briefly alludes to here. At this point in the story, Sarah's missing finger is a minor inconvenience, just as her awareness of suffering in the world beyond England is a minor inconvenience, though not something she is will to dedicate much time or energy to.



Andrew's unwillingness to share his pain with Sarah and their attitude towards sex as a "maintenance thing" suggests that their marriage is devoid of any intimacy or even trust between them. Charlie interrupting their sex reflects how Sarah's experience of being a mother has disrupted her love for Andrew and taken her attention and energy away from him. Andrew's low energy suggests that he does not do anything to change the situation.



Five days later, the last time that Sarah sees Andrew alive, he watches her as she dresses for work. He opens his mouth to say something, but she is in a rush and leaves before he can. She rides public transport for 90 minutes to her magazine office in London. As she emerges from the metro and steps into her building—which has their name *Nixie* erected in tall neon letters—she feels excited about wrapping up their issue for June. Sarah recalls that before they'd met Little Bee, Andrew always had plenty to say. She also recalls memories of their honeymoon together and how she'd once loved him more than anything on earth.

Sarah walks through the *Nixie* lobby, which is pointedly unkempt, and meets her features editor, Clarissa. As Sarah and Clarissa debate about whether to run a feature piece about a refugee from Baghdad or a new type of orgasm, Sarah sees news of the war playing silently on the TV on the wall. Charlie and the war entered her life in the same month, and both of them received less and less attention the older they got. Through her office window, Sarah sees two police officers getting out of their car on the sidewalk below. Sarah wants to run the story about the woman in Baghdad, but Clarissa thinks they should run the orgasm piece, since it's tough to sell "morality tales while the other majors are selling sex."

Sarah's receptionist calls and tells her that the policemen are there to speak with her. Sarah returns to the lobby to meet with them. They are very serious, and ask if they can speak privately, so Sarah shows them to a conference room. She does not regard them seriously. Her phone signals a text message and she reaches for it. When one of them stares at her **missing finger**, Sarah assures them that it's no big deal, though sometimes she dreams that she has her finger back. She misses it, in an odd way. The policemen tell her that Andrew was found dead at their home this morning. Sarah looks at the text message, which is from Andrew: "I'm sorry."

Sarah does not know how to react to the information and falls into a long "silence" that lasts while she speaks to the police, when she picks up Charlie from nursery school, when she calls her parents, and all the way to the church and the funeral. She cannot comprehend that Andrew, who'd once taken up so much of her world, is dead. Charlie asks again where his father is, just like he has so many times a day every day since Andrew died. Sarah tells him he is in heaven, and describes a little bit of what heaven might be like for him.

Sarah's recollection that before Little Bee, Andrew was more vocal and opinionated again suggests that Andrew's interaction with Little Bee fundamentally changed him and crushed his spirit. Meanwhile, Sarah's walking out on Andrew even as he seemed finally about to say something suggests that she prioritizes her career over her relationship with her husband, even using it as an excuse to pay him less attention.



Sarah and Clarissa's debate suggests that Sarah's work and identity as a career woman lead her to compromise her morality for the sake of money and professional success. Although Sarah knows that the refugee piece is important and worth running, it does not sell as well as sex. Sarah's moral compromise is also reflected in society's attitude towards the War in Afghanistan, which seemed shocking and important at first but has grown mundane with age.



Sarah's inattention to what the police are trying to tell her suggests that in her upper-class English life, she feels almost immune to such hardships as death. While Little Bee constantly faces death, to Sarah, it seems almost unreal. Sarah's dream of longing for her missing finger confirms this, suggesting that some part of her longs for the time when she did not have any real awareness of the horrors present in the outside world.



Again, Sarah's reaction to death contrasts with Little Bee's. Although Little Bee's loss of her sister is no less painful than Sarah's loss of Andrew, Little Bee never recounts feeling that it isn't real. Death is a constant presence in her life. Sarah, however, safe in the developed world, finds it difficult to even comprehend the thought of someone dying, demonstrating how removed she is from the world's horrors.



The funeral proceeds outside to the gravesite, where undertakers lower the coffin into the ground. Charlie asks where heaven is, and whether his father will ever come back, and why that box is being put in the ground. When Charlie realizes that Andrew is in the box, he panics and jumps down into the grave, landing on the coffin, yelling frantically for his father and trying to pry the lid off. Charlie attacks the coffin lid with a fury and an initial belief that Batman cannot be bested. However, as the onlookers panic, Charlie's faith begins to falter and his movements look defeated. Sarah regards that look of defeat as the moment when her "heart irreparably broke."

Sarah tries to climb down into the grave with Charlie, but funeral-goers hold her back. The attendees crowd around the edge of the hole, looking as if they will do something but failing to. Little Bee climbs in herself and hoists Charlie up to waiting hands. After she climbs back out, she holds Charlie in a tight hug while he shrieks and protests as the funeral-goers take turns tossing a handful of earth down into the grave. Sarah cannot bring herself to throw any in. As the attendees file off, Sarah—holding an exhausted and limp Batman—and Little Bee remain by the grave site, staring at each other. Sarah thanks Little Bee for acting when nobody else did. They try to smile at each other.

CHAPTER THREE

Little Bee reflects that the word "horror" means different things to different people. In the developed world, people watch horror movies to remind themselves that there is no horror in their real lives. For girls like herself, horror is a constant presence, an "illness" which cannot be recovered from. When Little Bee stows away on the cargo ship to travel to England, her horror follows her in traumatic nightmares. She cannot escape it. When men carry her from the ship into the detention center, her horror follows.

Little Bee advises the reader that there are "things men can do to you in this life" that are so horrid, it would be better to die. Knowing this, Little Bee makes a practice of figuring out how she will kill herself in any situation with whatever is at hand, in case "the men come suddenly" to take her away. For her first six months of detention, Little Bee spends her nights screaming in terror and her days working out how to kill herself in every corner of every room in the center. When she thinks they will deport her, she imagines how she will kill herself in Nigeria, which she thinks will be similar to killing herself in detention but with much nicer scenery. Imagining it almost becomes an enjoyable preoccupation.

In this moment, Charlie is suddenly forced to face Andrew's death and the inescapable reality of it. This moment is also tragic because of his inability to pull the lid off of the coffin and save his father, which signifies a failure in his constructed identity as Batman. Although Charlie wears his Batman costume to feel powerful and capable, even "Batman" is unable to save Andrew, forcing Charlie to realize that he is ultimately powerless amidst a frightening world.



The funeral attendees crowding around the hole, feeling as if they should do something but failing to, reflects how modern society often speaks about helping others but ultimately fails to act. Little Bee's rescue of Charlie suggests not only that she makes herself immediately useful, but also that she has not been weakened by decades of comfort and privilege like those who only stood and watched. Little Bee's survival for the last several years has required constant action.



Little Bee's reflections suggest that the developed world has effectively insulated itself from the horrors unfolding in other parts of the world. Little Bee's nightmares also suggest that even if one removes oneself from immediate danger and the environment where such horrors take place, that horror often lingers in the form of trauma.



Once again, "the men" represents anyone who would wish Little Bee harm. Once again, Little Bee's night terrors suggest that her experiences have left her extremely traumatized, while her constant dwelling on suicide suggests that her traumatic memories cause her to place little value on her own life anymore, since she would rather destroy it than experience more horror.



After spending an entire day carefully planning how she will build a tower in the jungle to hang herself from, Little Bee realizes that she could simply climb a tree and dive headfirst onto a rock. Her own silliness makes her smile, and it's the first time she's smiled since leaving Nigeria. She starts eating without fuss, and watching TV and reading newspapers to teach herself the Queen's English. Little Bee still screams at night, but not quite so often. She still fantasizes about suicide, but with a humorous edge to it. Alongside her horror, Little Bee realizes that hope is growing: "I had killed myself back to life." As she reads, Little Bee discovers that she's fond of Queen Elizabeth, and imagines the two of them killing themselves together, since so many bad things have happened to queens in the past.

Little Bee feels frightened when she eventually steps out of the detention center, but she smiles because she knows she is ready to die, if necessary. She notices that Yvette is nervous and asks what is wrong, since Yvette normally laughs and jokes. Yvette whispers that they are illegal immigrants now—she played some sort of trick to win their release, but she cannot explain so close to the center. This makes Little Bee nervous, but she decides not to think about it. The girl with green trainers asks where they will go and Yvette points through the open gates and out to the horizon. Beyond them is an empty road and open fields. Two farmers and a tractor work in the nearest field.

As they wait for the taxi, Yvette asks Little Bee what sort of men she likes, but the question makes Little Bee uncomfortable. She finally says that she wants a kind man who speaks many languages and could protect her. Yvette thinks this unrealistic. The girl with green trainers says Little Bee is obviously a virgin, and that Yvette should just leave her alone. Yvette and the girl bicker until the taxi pulls up. Little Bee approaches the cab driver and tries to complement his permed hair but mistakenly insults him instead. The cab driver slanders refugees and then drives quickly away, leaving the four girls standing on the empty road.

Without transportation, the girls decide to simply start walking down the road, though they worry that the farmers in the field might try to stop them. As they walk past the field, the farmers call out to them until Yvette pauses to speak with them. The larger of the two men asks if the girls escaped the detention center. The girl with green trainers insists that they are legal refugees, even though they don't have papers, and the farmers can call the immigration office to confirm. Yvette tells her not to do that, and the girl with green trainers realizes that they are not legal immigrants. She is furious at Yvette, but falls silent.

Little Bee's mixture of horror and humor allow the author to explore extremely dark aspects of the human experience, such as the trauma that results from horrific events, while still maintaining just enough levity in the narrative to carry the reader forward. Every horrific event in the book relates to something that actually occurred in history—the Nigerian oil war in the novel is based on the real-life conflict over oil in the Niger Delta, for instance.



Little Bee becomes an illegal immigrant despite her best efforts to obtain legal asylum status. This suggests that many illegal immigrants and refugees attempt to gain legal citizenship and go through the legal process, but the system is too slow or events beyond their control lead to their status as undocumented migrants. The empty road and open countryside in front of the girls represents the potential of their new lives in England but also the uncertainty, since they don't know where they will go or how to get there.



Little Bee's accidental insult toward the taxi driver demonstrates the difficulty of crossing language and cultural barriers, suggesting that such cultural conflict is yet another challenge that refugees face. Meanwhile, the taxi driver's slander and immediate rejection of the girls suggests that native citizens of a country often lack understanding or any graciousness towards refugees, instead assuming the worst about their character from the outset.



Again, the girl's claim that they are legally released and anger at Yvette when she realizes they are not suggests that she did not want to simply escape into England, but wanted to go through the legal asylum process. This again suggests that many refugees do not enter other countries illegally by choice, but are compelled by unavoidable circumstances.



The two farmers refer to themselves as Albert and Mr. Ayres. Mr. Ayres gently asks if the girls have any relatives or any place for them to go, and notes that it would be illegal to let them stay on his farm. Yvette fears Mr. Ayres is threatening to turn them in, but he laughs and tells them they can stay anyway. Albert will show them where they can sleep in the seasonal workers' dormitory for a week, and his wife will find some extra food for them. As soon as Mr. Ayres offers this, the girl with green trainers bursts into tears, and Yvette explains that she's just not used to people treating her kindly.

Albert leads them across the farmyard to the dormitory. As they walk, Little Bee notices that the hens cower nervously together at the sight of strangers. Their anxious movements and sounds recalls memories of hiding with Nkiruka in the jungle, watching their village burn and listening to the villagers scream in pain as they died. Albert shows the girls to a long building with bed and clean mattresses lined along the side. Long chains hang from the ceiling, connected to skylights so that they can be opened or closed from the ground. Albert tries to joke with the girls as he shows them where towels and sheets are, but they stare at him blankly so he leaves them in peace.

The girls stand together in the center of the dormitory. Albert left the door partway open, and a few hens wander in to peck at the floor. When the girl with green trainers sees them, she screams and jumps onto a bed, cowering behind a pillow. Yvette tries to calm her and remarks that she's in bad shape. Yvette and Little Bee sit and talk about what to do next. Little Bee shows Yvette Andrew's driver's license and says she might find him, though she's not sure if she should. Yvette thinks it's odd that Little Bee wants to find a white man and asks how she knows him, but Little Bee refuses to reveal anything more than that she met him on a Nigerian beach.

Yvette is annoyed that Little Bee won't talk about the day she met Andrew. Little Bee asks if Yvette doesn't have things in her life she doesn't want to talk about either, and Yvette admits she does, and hints that someone murdered her children in Jamaica. Yvette tearfully explains that she had sex with one of the immigration officers to secure her release from detention. The man needed to make her release—without paperwork or approval—look like a clerical accident, so he released three others at the same time, which is why they are all illegal immigrants now. As far as Yvette is concerned, that is the only way for them not to be deported anyway, and both her and Little Bee will be murdered if they return to their home countries.

Although the girls—and likely the reader—assume that Mr. Ayres and Albert are villainous figures, they are actually compassionate and generous people. The girls' mistaken assumptions suggests that just as native citizens often make negative and wrong assumptions about refugees, refugees in turn may make similarly wrong assumptions about native citizens.



The fact that simple chickens cause Little Bee to recall horrific memories of fear and destruction demonstrates the manner in which her experienced horrors follow her even into safe places such as Mr. Ayres's farm. Although Little Bee is no longer in danger and has lived a full two years since the men destroyed her village, simple images from daily life are enough to bring such painful memories to the surface, suggesting that trauma is long-lasting and easily triggered.



The girl's terror at seeing chickens suggests that she carries similar trauma to Little Bee, though seemingly more extreme. This further suggests that such trauma is a common occurrence among refugees, all of whom fled from danger and many of whom witnessed such horrors as Little Bee has. In addition to the many challenges already facing refugees, managing such trauma seems a particularly heavy burden.



Yvette's hint that her children were murdered suggests that like Little Bee and the girl with green trainers, she carries her own traumatic memories. This furthers the depiction of refugees as people fleeing horrific violence, rather than people who simply want a more comfortable life in a wealthier country. Yvette's deal with the immigration officer suggests that the legal immigration system itself is corrupt, prone to making under-the-table agreements and exploiting vulnerable people who fear for their lives.



The girl with green trainers stands on a bed and starts screaming again. Yvette stands and starts to chase the chicken out of the building until the girl points out a shaft of light and begins hallucinating about her daughter standing there. Little Bee plays along with the hallucination and convinces Yvette to as well, talking to the girl as if she were standing there.

Little Bee lies back on her bed and stares at the **gray** chains. She decides that if the head of the United Nations ever called on her to make a flag for refugees, she'd make it gray, like the detention center, like worn-out clothing, like the moral gray area she inhabits as an illegal refugee. Little Bee decides that the flag wouldn't even need to be a flag; it could just be a worn-out, gray brassiere hanging from a pole. Looking at the chains, Little Bee imagines she could easily hang herself from them.

In the afternoon, the farmer's wife arrives with food and chats pleasantly with Yvette and Little Bee. She tells Little Bee how to get to Surrey, but warns her not to go; the suburbs are not a good place for a refugee. That night, Little Bee dreams about her village before **the men** destroyed it, before they realized an oil field lie beneath it that they wanted to take. Some boys found an old tire and made a tire swing out of it, and children would sit on it and bicker and swing and sing together. Little Bee watches Nkiruka swing happily back and forth in her dream.

Little Bee wakes to see something swinging back and forth in front of her bed. As she wipes tears from her eyes, she sees that it is a green shoe. The girl in the green trainers hanged herself in the night. A puddle of urine pools on the floor beneath her body. Little Bee touches the girl's leg and feels that it's cold. She knows that she must leave, since a death brings policemen and questions that are impossible to answer without papers. Little Bee gives Yvette a small kiss on the cheek, and wanders outward through the farmyard, in the direction of London which glows on the horizon. As she walks, she feels that Nkiruka walks beside her so she is not alone.

The girl's hallucination, first about chickens and then about her daughter, suggests that her trauma has left her with serious mental and emotional damage, which again demonstrates the manner in which trauma can plague an person long after they've escaped physical danger.



This passage establishes gray as a symbol for the hollowness, fatigue, and even ambiguity that refugees can feel, particularly after years of trying to survive and find a safe place to live. Little Bee's thought that refugees don't even need a flag, just a worn out piece of clothing, suggests that they are without country, nation, or home, and the only thing they possess is their own fatigue and the clothes on their backs.



In the novel, the suburbs represent the most homogenous, nativist representation of modern life in a developed society. Compared to the cities, which cultivate diversity, people in the suburbs are presented as primarily white, upper class, narrowminded, and preoccupied with status and wealth rather than caring for refugees like Ayres and his wife do.



The girl's suicide again suggests that trauma can still plague a person even when they are physically safe. Tragically, Little Bee decides to continue on alone for the sake of her own survival, even though she briefly had companions for the first time in two years. This again depicts the difficulty of life as a refugee, since fear and the possibility of arrest cause one to constantly uproot themselves from their environment and their community.



As Little Bee walks, the night fades and turns to the **gray** of dawn, which gives way to gold as the sun rises over the horizon. The world suddenly seems beautiful, and Little Bee thinks that she will never be lost in gray again. She hears a rumble in the distance that sounds like a waterfall, but is actually a freeway. Waiting for a gap in the heavy flow of traffic, she sprints across each lane. Little Bee notes the freeway in her mind as another place to easily kill herself, should she need to. She wanders across more fields until she finds a smaller road with houses that look nearly identical to one another. There are shiny cars parked out front each house, much nicer than her father or uncle's broken down cars, which they'd had until "the afternoon when **the men** came and shot them."

As Little Bee continues walking, the buildings grow larger and the crowds of people thicker. The noise and the traffic seem overwhelming, and she sees many shocking sights: nearly naked women on billboards, double-decker buses, cranes lifting heavy loads. Little Bee finds the River Thames, and she whispers to Nkiruka that they are finally going to be safe. She knows that if she follows the river bank, she will find Kingston-upon-Thames in Surrey, where Andrew lives. Little Bee smiles as she walks, though the crowds scare her; in her village, if one ever saw more than 50 people at a time, it meant they'd died and gone to the "city of the spirits." The throngs of people make Little Bee feel "so very, very alone."

CHAPTER FOUR

Early in the morning of Andrew's funeral, before Little Bee arrives at her front door, Sarah watches the world through her window and thinks about how futile it seems. She listens to radio commentators talk about the stock exchange and finds herself saying out loud, "Yes, but I have lost my husband." Sarah knows she should feel pain for Andrew's death, but so far she has not felt anything. She considers fleeing the suburbs, taking Charlie and her credit card and disappearing on a plane until her life and grief disappear in the distance. But then Little Bee knocks on her door. Sarah and Little Bee stare at each other for a moment, and then Sarah brings her inside. Little Bee looks exhausted. Sarah thought she was dead.

After exchanging a few sentences, Sarah leaves Little Bee in the living room, grabs her phone, and calls Lawrence, her lover. Sarah tells Lawrence she feels conflicted but does not mention Little Bee. She tells him that she keeps thinking about that day on the beach with Africa, but Lawrence tells her she needs to move on. Sarah can hear him swearing at his child in the background. Lawrence tells Sarah to just get through the funeral, and hangs up.

Although Little Bee is alone again, the world's transition from gray to gold as the sun rises suggests that Little Bee is again feeling hopeful about her potential future, now that she is free from the detention center. This sense of hope notably sits alongside her constant contemplation of suicide, which suggests that Little Bee's traumatic memories and fear can exist alongside hope and happiness, rather than one emotion overruling the other. Though she is hopeful, she still understands that horror may return at any moment.



Little Bee's surprise at many of the modern amenities and the sheer size of everything emphasizes the difference between the world she had to leave behind and the one she's been thrust into. The overwhelming sense of it all suggests that cultural shock for refugees can be severe and overwhelming, depicting yet another challenge that refugees may face in their journey to adjust to a foreign country and culture. This also suggests that they may feel separate or excluded from the people they see, since everything is unfamiliar.



Once again, the suburbs are used to epitomize modern life and daily banal concerns in the developed world. Sarah's exclamation to the radio suggests that everything which once seemed meaningful now appears unimportant in light of her husband's death. This suggests that the gravity of losing a loved offers Sarah a new perspective on life, allowing her to see which things truly matter and which do not. Sarah's instinct to emotionally run from her pain parallels Little Bee's physical flight from danger and her traumatic past.



Lawrence's interaction with Sarah immediately establishes him as a fundamentally selfish person. Rather than listen to Sarah's grief and confusion, Lawrence brushes it aside and encourages her to bury it, suggesting that he cares more for his own convenience than Sarah's emotional health.



Sarah stares at her face in the bathroom mirror, disappointed to see no marks of grief in it. She wonders if she lost something “so fundamental” that day in Nigeria that any additional loss—a **finger**, a husband—seems inconsequential. Sarah rubs her eyes hard so that at least they’ll be reddened at the funeral and it will look as if she’s been crying. Going back to the living room, Sarah finds Little Bee still sitting on the couch. Little Bee tells her she had no other place to go, no one else she knew in the country. The undertaker arrives and prepares to take the coffin, so Sarah sits with Charlie in the garden. Charlie asks if Little Bee is a “goody” but Sarah does not answer.

Sarah privately frets about superficial details: whether her clothes are appropriately dark for a funeral, whether 10 pounds is a suitable donation for the collection plate at church. Andrew always had a “strong opinion about life in a civilized country,” and Sarah realizes that such ordinary decisions will be difficult without him. As she looks at Charlie in the garden in his **Batman costume** and Little Bee in the living room, she realizes “life had broken through.” Her curated identity, her “careful set of defenses against nature” have failed her and allowed reality to come and sit in her living room.

Standing outside next to the hearse and the limo, Sarah thinks about how slowly Andrew’s death happened, stretched over the two years since Nigeria. With the “full clarity of horror,” Sarah recalls that Andrew used to be a “passionate, loving, brilliant man.” They’d met just after Andrew was fired from a newspaper job over his unmoving principles, and the instant attraction between them felt like a lightning strike. That attraction began to fade when Charlie was born, and that day in Nigeria only quickened its collapse. Sarah cannot cry for Andrew because his fading happened so slowly. And she cannot cry for herself because she deserves no sympathy.

After the funeral, someone drives Sarah, Little Bee, and Charlie home. Sarah and Charlie talk about ordinary things, and there seems to be something horrible for both of them in the ordinariness of it all. After lunch, Little Bee plays with Charlie in the garden, helping him hunt bad guys. They form a quick and easy bond. Sarah sits in the kitchen while her mother and sister putter around the house, trying to help. Sarah realizes that she can run and hide from a memory, perhaps, but not a person. She will need to face Little Bee and face what happened in Nigeria. Sarah stares at her **stump of a finger**, her eyes wet with tears.

Sarah’s missing finger represents her loss of innocence, the moment when she was forced to recognize that the world is a horrific place, even if she manages to shut such horrors out of her upper-class suburban lifestyle. Her desire for her eyes to look red, as if she’s been crying, suggests that Sarah cares more about appearing the right way to the people around her than actually grieving her husband’s loss or coming to terms with what happened in Nigeria.



Again, Sarah’s focus on superficial details suggests that she is very careful to appear right and fit into her identity as a sophisticated career woman, which she admits is a defense against the outside world. Little Bee’s entrance into Sarah’s life thus represents the failure of Sarah’s constructed identity to keep the real world at bay. Little Bee’s presence forces Sarah to confront the existence of horror around the world.



Andrew’s slow descent into numbness and depression suggests that his experience in Nigeria left him with his own form of trauma, though it seems to manifest in different ways than Little Bee’s. Although Sarah does not suffer the same depression that Andrew did, her inability to feel anything for his pain or tragic death or even for her own bereavement suggests that she feels a similar numbness in her own way, as her own form of trauma.



Again, Little Bee’s entrance into Sarah’s life symbolizes the real world, with all its horrors, cutting through Sarah’s constructed identity that once protected her. Sarah’s tears as she looks at her missing finger and realizes that she cannot run from what she saw in Nigeria any longer suggests that her own numbness is beginning to crack, presumably as her protective identity fails to insulate her from the outside world’s problems any longer.



Two years before, Sarah and Andrew took a holiday in Nigeria, though they shouldn't have. They didn't know that an oil war was in progress there, and they didn't realize that the Foreign Office's advisory against traveling to Nigeria was serious. When a tourist company sent Sarah a free trip to Nigeria, her independent streak jumped at the chance to be unusual. Not far from the beach where Sarah and Andrew were staying and "being unconventional," Little Bee was fleeing her burning village. Sarah's **missing finger** itches as she thinks about it.

After Little Bee and Batman come in and clean up—Sarah gives Little Bee new clothes—Sarah makes drinks for herself and Little Bee. They sit together in the living room. Sarah asks Little Bee to tell her everything about her escape. Little Bee begins her story: after **the men** burn her village, she runs through the jungle for six days. Nkiruka is able to follow her trail and catch up with her, though that means anyone else will be able to as well. Nkiruka decides they should change their names to hide their ethnicity. She names herself Kindness. A bee lands on a flower between them, which Little Bee had not noticed before. She names herself Little Bee.

Since **the men** are hunting them, the sisters hide in the jungle until sunset. The oil companies do not want any survivors left alive to testify to all the killings, so mercenaries hunt all the women and children who fled. During the night, Little Bee and Kindness sneak down to the shore to wash their bleeding feet. In the morning the sisters hear Sarah and Andrew on the beach. Andrew seems nervous about being away from the hotel compound. Little Bee and Kindness are amused by the two white people, until they hear dogs barking behind them in the jungle.

A Nigerian hotel guard armed with a rifle jogs up to Sarah and Andrew and asks them to return to the hotel; it's not safe on the beach. Sarah and Andrew are both irritated by him and resistant. The dogs' barking grows nearer. Little Bee and Kindness are terrified. The hotel guard points his rifle toward the jungle. Andrew thinks the guard is putting on a show, looking for a bribe, so he starts arguing with Sarah about how much to bribe the man. The guard pays them no heed, staring at the tree tops, and demands that they return to the hotel. He fires three shots into the air, giving the dogs and whoever is with them brief pause.

The contrast between Sarah and Andrew's flippant desire to be "unconventional" and Little Bee's flight for her life suggests that Sarah and Andrew's lives at this point are marked by frivolity, privilege, and ignorance, which is a sharp contrast to the life-and-death struggles that many people like Little Bee endure. Sarah's itching missing finger suggests that this realization marks her loss of innocence.



Little Bee's unwillingness to go by her real name, even now, two years after escaping the killing in Nigeria, shows how she clings to her constructed identity. Little Bee no longer needs this identity to hide from physical danger, but it perhaps protects her from grappling with the trauma she's experienced in the past.



The oil companies' involvement in the slaughter of innocent people suggests that globalization has come with grim consequences, enabling wealth in some parts of the world and horrific violence in others. Although the novel does not heavily explore this idea, it makes several nods to it throughout, suggesting that the developed world exploits the developing world for profit.



In the midst of real danger, Sarah and Andrew misunderstand the situation and bicker about bribes. This suggests that in their modern, upper-class lives, they are so far removed from the horrors present in other parts of the world that they can hardly conceive of any real danger; it is far easier for them to believe that a Nigerian man is trying to shake them down than that he is warning them of a real threat.



Little Bee and Kindness can hear the mercenaries' machetes cutting through the brush close by, so they break their cover and run out to the beach to meet Andrew and Sarah. Little Bee ignores the guard and Andrew, looking straight at Sarah, and begs her to take them to the hotel compound. The hunters will kill them otherwise. Sarah cannot fathom why someone would kill a little girl. Andrew exclaims that the situation is a "classic Nigeria scam" and starts to pull Sarah back in the direction of the hotel. Little Bee and Kindness follow after. When the hotel guard threatens them with his rifle, the sisters exclaim that a bullet is better death than the "oil company's men" would give them. The guard shakes with fear.

Five dogs emerge from the jungle, followed by six men, and sprint across the beach. When the guard shoots the closest dog in the head, the other dogs turn and immediately start devouring its corpse. The hunters approach. Most of them have machetes. One draws a bow. The leader has a large, festering wound in his neck. When the leader sees Kindness, he grins, points at her, and fingers his nipples in sexual gesture. The hotel guard threatens to shoot them, but the leader tells him he cannot kill all of them quickly enough. Little Bee and Kindness move behind Andrew and Sarah.

The hunters are passing around what looks like a bottle of wine. One of them has a full erection. Sarah tells Andrew to give the hunters whatever they want. The leader steps up to Sarah and pulls off her beach wrap, exposing her small green bikini underneath. In the retelling, Sarah says that she cannot believe that she wore such a thing into the middle of an oil war. The leader steps close to Sarah and runs his finger across her bare shoulder. As one hunter passes the bottle that looked like wine, Sarah sees an eyeball floating in the red liquid. Andrew offers the man money, and the leader takes it without looking at it and passes it to the men behind him. The leader says that he wants the girls.

Sarah tells the leader he can't have Little Bee and Nkiruka; if he tries to take the girls, the hotel guard will shoot him. The leader looks genuinely surprised at the refusal. He asks Sarah where she is from, and when she tells him they are from Kingston he remarks that he knows the place; he "studied mechanical engineering there." The leader stabs his machete through the hotel guard's throat and lets his body drop to the sand. Kindness mutters a prayer behind Sarah. The leader points at Kindness and announces that she will die next. Sarah pleads for the leader to leave the girls alone, but Andrew tries to dissuade her, saying that "this is not our affair."

Again, Sarah's disbelief that anyone would kill a girl like Little Bee suggests that her life is so far removed from any actual horror or danger that she hardly believes it exists. By contrast, the Nigerian guard's apparent fear suggests that he understands the potential horror of the world and their immediate situation all too well. The contrast between Sarah and the guard's reaction to Little Bee suggests such an insular mindset that does not believe in danger is a privilege of living in a wealthy developed nation.



The dog's ferocity and the leader's threat of sexual violence immediately establish that Sarah and Andrew were wrong—the threat that Little Bee claimed is very real. Andrew and Sarah's comfortable, privileged life, insulated from violence and horror, leads to a delusional view of the world where violence and barbarism do not actually exist, and certainly cannot them.



Sarah's remorse at wearing a revealing bikini into the midst of a genocidal oil war suggests she recognizes her own extreme naiveté, which is the product of a privileged life insulated from any actual violence or horror. The hunter's erection and their collective drinking of what is clearly blood not only indicates that they are rapists and cannibals, but increases the sadism and horror of the entire scene.



Although Andrew at one point criticizes Sarah for doing unimportant work at the magazine, she is obviously much braver and more assertive than he is, even though he is the one who writes moralistic newspaper columns. The contrast between Andrew and Sarah's conduct under pressure suggests that speaking about virtue and self-sacrifice is far easier than acting out those ideals. Andrew's claim that "this is not our affair" demonstrates that despite his virtuosity, he is unable to overcome his own self-interest and self-preservation instincts.



The killer laughs at a white man claiming that something is not his business, since white people have always wanted his money, his oil, his land. He stares at Andrew and asks if Andrew wants to save the girls. Mentally, Sarah recalls that the last column Andrew wrote before they left for their trip mourned the fact that “we are a self-interested society.” Andrew is silent, but Sarah tells the leader they will give him anything he wants. The leader points to the hole in his neck and says he’ll die within two days. The only thing he wants is for Andrew to cut off his middle finger with the leader’s machete, since white men “been giving me this finger all my life.” If Andrew does that, he’ll let the girls live.

Andrew curls his hands into fists while the killer takes his machete by the blade and holds the handle toward Andrew. He states that if Andrew refuses, he will have to listen to the sisters die. Sarah tells Andrew he must do it, but Andrew can’t summon the courage, offering several weak excuses. The killer shrugs and turns away, stating that Andrew made his choice. However, Sarah kneels, takes the machete, and chops off her own **finger** instead. Sarah thinks they will all die anyway, and the act is easier than she would’ve expected. Andrew is horrified and tries to hug Sarah, but she shoves him away and clutches the bleeding stump. The leader nods, takes Sarah’s finger from the sand, and announces that Little Bee will live, but Kindness will die because of Andrew’s failure.

At some point in Sarah’s retelling of this incident, Little Bee fell asleep, but Sarah picked up the narration in her own memory. She calls Lawrence again and asks him to come over, but he tells her that he’s stuck home with his kids. When Sarah tells Lawrence about Little Bee, he becomes angry. Lawrence insists that Little Bee must be some kind of criminal and that Sarah should call the police to take her away. Sarah resists, however. She doesn’t think Little Bee is dangerous in any way, and she wants to help her this time.

Instead, Sarah hangs up on Lawrence and wanders up to Charlie’s room. While she watches him sleep, she reflects on her happy childhood and healthy family. None of them had extramarital affairs; it just wasn’t done. At least that was the image. Sarah knew Andrew was a mistake within the first month of their marriage. They married quickly, to spite her mother, and were both so stubborn they wore each other down.

Andrew’s virtuous writing calling for self-sacrifice contradicts his actual conduct, again suggesting that espousing self-sacrifice is far easier than actually practicing it. The leader’s request for Andrew to cut off his middle finger suggests that he wants Andrew to admit that white people in the developed world have been actively exploiting countries like Nigeria for decades, and Andrew, by living in the developed world, benefits from that. The leader simply wants Andrew to take some responsibility for other people’s pain.



Again, Andrew’s failure depicts him as a hypocrite, unable to live up to the righteous opinions he writes as a columnist. He embodies the self-interest that his writing criticizes. The ease with which Sarah cuts off her own finger suggests—as she will later state—that one finger in exchange for a human life is not even that great a sacrifice. Also, her rejection of Andrew’s attempt to hold her not only reflects that she is angry at him, but signifies a new sense of separation between them, even though they’d been trying to restore their marriage by going on this vacation.



Sarah asks Lawrence to come over immediately after revisiting her most painful memory, which suggests she uses her affair with Lawrence to hide from her own pain. This is ironic since, contrasting with Sarah’s self-sacrifice, Lawrence embodies societal cynicism by believing that refugees are naturally dangerous criminals, rather than seeing them as human beings.



Sarah’s reflection on her own family suggests that marital faithfulness is part of their familial image, the identity they’ve formed as a family, even if it’s not true. This again suggests that even positive traits such as marital faithfulness can become part of a constructed identity to hide behind.



Sarah thinks back to the aftermath of her vacation with Andrew: she doesn't sleep for a week after returning from Nigeria. On the plane home, she thinks how odd it is that the world simply continues without her. She feels like her childhood has ended. Holding her hand aloft to ease the throbbing pain where her **finger** should be, Sarah decides that she will never let Andrew touch the wound for the rest of her life. When they get home, she resumes her work at the magazine, resumes her affair with Lawrence, and focuses on keeping her life moving along. But back in the present, staring into the mirror and seeing dark bags beneath her eyes, Sarah feels as if her "mask is finally cracking."

Sarah marking the flight home as the end of her childhood confirms her missing finger as a symbol of her lost innocence. Although this loss of innocence is an integral part of her personal development, her decision to never let Andrew touch the wound suggests that she is barricading him out of this part of her life. Sarah's belief that her mask is cracking suggests that Little Bee's presence and confronting her own painful memories is threatening her constructed sense of identity.



CHAPTER FIVE

Little Bee wakes on Sarah's sofa, though it takes her a moment to remember where she is. As she looks around the lavish house, she thinks it would be impossible to describe to "the girls back home." Little Bee decides that this story is not for such girls, but for "sophisticated people." Sarah offers her some tea. The flavor reminds Little Bee of the cargo ship she stowed away on. When she revealed herself to the captain, he locked her away from the crew and gave her the book [Great Expectations](#) to read for the three-week voyage. When she arrived in the detention center an officer gave her a cup of tea as well, but the taste only made her want to get back in the ship and sail home.

Little Bee's thought for "the girls back home" again emphasizes the cultural contrast between Little Bee and Sarah. From the outset, Little Bee and Sarah's relationship is hindered by the entirely different worlds that they've grown up in, since their beliefs, assumptions, and experiences are radically different.



Sarah asks Little Bee to tell her what happened after the hunters took them away. Little Bee's eyes wander around the kitchen and settle on the icemaker. Its ability to turn liquids into solids entrances Little Bee. She thinks that if this is possible, then perhaps the things in her life that are always flowing away might become solid as well. Sarah asks Little Bee again and insists that she must know what happened.

The icemaker symbolizes the stability of the developed world, its potential to provide Little Bee with the safety and security she has lacked for years. Although the developed world made Sarah and Andrew's lives so insular, Little Bee's hope suggests that such stability is not inherently bad, since it can provide refuge.



Little Bee is inwardly angry, since she does not want to relive the experience, but she decides that if Sarah is going to press, she "would not spare her." She picks up her story: the hunters march her and Kindness down the beach until they reach an overturned boat in the sand. The men shove Little Bee under the boat and tell her to listen; she can leave once they're finished. Little Bee listens as the hunters rape Nkiruka for hours. Through a crack in the boat's hull, Little Bee can see the killer standing by the waterline, far from his men and the assault, gazing out over the ocean "as if he was carrying a weight." In the kitchen, both Little Bee and Sarah shake so hard the table rattles.

Again, the author provides a disturbing level of detail so that even readers in the developed world, far removed from violence, will grapple with the horror in the world that many refugees flee. The killer's refusal to participate seems to suggest that, facing the end of his life, he takes no pleasure in what he has done or what his hunters do. Although not explicitly stated, this moment implies that, like Andrew, the leader feels remorse for the man he has become.



Little Bee does not want to hurt Sarah, but now that she's started the story, she must finish it. She continues: Nkiruka begs the hunters to kill her. The hunters laugh and Little Bee hears them break Nkiruka's bones "one by one." The hunters and their dogs eat whatever they can of Nkiruka's body and throw the rest into the sea. In the afternoon the sun grows hot, so the hunters go to the shade of the jungle to sleep. The killer, however, marches straight into the sea and swims until his head sinks beneath the surface.

Now that she is alone, Little Bee runs back down the beach, toward the place where she met Andrew and Sarah. She finds the guard's body and Andrew's wallet lying in the sand. Little Bee takes his business card and driver's license from it, then hides herself in the jungle. In the evening, a truck full of soldiers come to retrieve the guard's body, but Little Bee is too afraid to reveal herself. She waits until they leave and the sun goes down, then travels up the beach for two days until she reaches a port. Little Bee sees a ship with a British flag on it, so she climbs onto it and hides herself in the cargo hold.

Back in the present, Sarah rises from her side of the table and hugs Little Bee for a long time while they sit and cry together. Charlie wanders into the kitchen, still wearing his **Batman costume** though missing the mask and tool belt. He asks Sarah why she is crying. Sarah takes him onto her lap and says that she doesn't feel emotions very often anymore; sometimes they take her by surprise. Little Bee senses that she should let Sarah and Charlie have this moment alone, so she steps out to the garden.

Little Bee sits in the garden until Sarah comes out to meet her, after dropping Charlie off at nursery. Now that Little Bee has told her story, neither of them know what to do. Little Bee frets about being an illegal immigrant and knows **the men** could take her at any moment, but Sarah doesn't believe this. She thinks she could leverage her power as an important magazine editor to come to Little Bee's defense; she doesn't think that immigration will simply take Little Bee and send her away as if they're in "Nazi Germany." Little Bee looks around the garden for a way to kill herself, just in case.

This passage illustrates a disturbing level of sadism—such graphic detail is arguably necessary to communicate the full extent of the horror that many refugees flee and that the developed world pointedly ignores. Easing the descriptions or lightening the tone would be a disservice to those who have suffered such horrors.



Little Bee's fear of the soldiers suggests that she does not even trust government actors, which seems to be the right instinct in her case. However, this highlights yet another privilege of the developed world—people like Andrew and Sarah trust their government to protect their rights and dignity because they believe their government will be held accountable. For refugees like Little Bee, trust in the government seems a luxury, rather than a guarantee.



Although Charlie still wears his costume and thus holds onto his identity, the temporary lack of his mask and tool belt suggests that he is letting his guard relax for the moment and allowing himself to be less Batman and more Charlie, perhaps because his Batman identity failed him at the funeral.



Little Bee's fear that the men will take her, even in the safety of Sarah's garden, suggests that the horrific events she's seen and her resultant trauma have left her constantly on edge and fearful. By contrast, Sarah's belief that immigration won't simply arrest Little Bee as if they were "Nazi Germany" again suggests that she still believes in the fairness of her government and its immigration system, which is a luxury that Little Bee can't afford.



Charlie's nursery calls Sarah and asks her to come get him—he is acting unusually aggressive towards the other kids. Sarah hangs up and dial another number, and a cell phone rings inside the house. Sarah realizes what she's done and starts to shudder; she called Andrew. In tears, Sarah asks Little Bee to delete his contact information from her phone, since Sarah cannot bear to do it herself. Little Bee imagines that it is a difficult thing to remove someone from a phone, but when she takes Sarah's phone she realizes it only takes pressing two buttons. Just like everything in the modern world, it is easy to “delete” a person. Sarah tells Little Bee that without Andrew's sensibility, she is frightened. She does not know how she will go on.

Sarah gives Little Bee a pink summer dress to wear—the nicest thing she's ever worn—and Little Bee feels “like the Queen of England.” They go to the nursery together to take Charlie home. The shape and smell of the nursery reminds Little Bee of the therapy room in the detention center, where a therapist was disturbed by Little Bee's trauma and told her to “move on,” as if such a thing were possible. Earlier, the nursery leader took Charlie's **Batman costume** after he urinated in it, and now he bites and kicks and screams whenever anyone comes close to him. He screams that he wants Andrew back. When Sarah tries to approach him, Charlie hides his face in a corner of the room.

Realizing that Sarah is overwhelmed, Little Bee walks to the corner and stands next to Charlie, staring at the wall just like he does. While she waits silently for him, Little Bee imagines how she would kill herself in the nursery, though it's a difficult task since there are no sharp objects, just safety scissors. Charlie asks what she is thinking about, and she tells him she is planning her escape from the nursery. Little Bee explains that she spent two years in a place like this, so she understands why Charlie is upset without his **Batman costume**.

When Charlie mentions his father, Little Bee reminds Charlie that Andrew is “dead,” just like all of her family is dead. Charlie asks if she is sad, but Little Bee kneels down and tickles him until he giggles and says that he does not need to be sad when he has a good mother. Little Bee gives Charlie a gentle push toward Sarah and Charlie runs to hug her. While Sarah holds Charlie and they cry together, she silently thanks Little Bee. As the three of them walk home together, Little Bee thinks that the world is bright and beautiful and feels “full of hope.”

Little Bee's reflection that it is so easy to “delete” carries multiple meanings. On the surface, Little Bee refers to how easily she can remove Andrew's information, though she also refers to how quickly Sarah replaced Andrew with Lawrence. Deeper still, Little Bee's reflection that people are easily erased from the developed world refers to herself and other refugees, whom the government finds and plucks away, seemingly without considering the impact it will have on the refugee as a human being.



Little Bee's therapist's advice to simply “move on” suggests that the therapist, and much of society, does not understand the depth of the trauma that many refugees experience. Telling Little Bee to just move on suggests that the horrors she's seen were only uncomfortable circumstances, rather than life-altering, emotionally scarring events. Charlie's sudden aggression without his Batman costume suggests that the identity it affords him allows him to feel safe.



Charlie being forced to operate without his Batman costume, his protective identity, leaves him feeling vulnerable and endangered. In this scene, Charlie models the same outward fear Little Bee would likely have felt in the detention center without her own constructed identity to give her a sense of safety. Little Bee's consideration of suicide even in a nursery again suggests that her trauma follows even into safe spaces.



Where Sarah was reticent to tell Charlie his dad is dead, Little Bee's heightened awareness of death and pain makes her far more blunt in explaining Andrew's death to him. However, Little Bee's forthrightness seems to help Charlie appreciate his mother, who is still alive, which suggests that it is perhaps better to be honest with children about the hard realities of life, within reason.



Little Bee and Sarah chat about Little Bee's home village, and Sarah begins spontaneously crying once again. Sarah tries to apologize, but Little Bee assures her that it took a full year after Nkiruka died before she could even think clearly. The detention center didn't help. Little Bee tells Sarah she will help her cope with her pain, but Sarah thinks this is too great a burden to lay on a 16-year-old girl; it should be Sarah helping Little Bee. Little Bee reminds her that Sarah already cut off her **finger** and saved Little Bee's life, though Sarah feels like she should have done more.

Little Bee places her hand underneath Sarah's and stretches them both out, aligned together so that the Little Bee's finger fills the space where Sarah's **middle finger** is missing. She tells Sarah that if she wants her to stay, Little Bee will love her as if she were Sarah's daughter and Charlie's sister. She will help Sarah survive. Sarah is overwhelmed, so Little Bee backtracks and says she will just leave instead. When they are back at Sarah's house drinking tea, Sarah tells Little Bee that she thinks they should help each other and Little Bee should stay. Sarah thinks it is time to take life seriously.

CHAPTER SIX

Sarah thinks back to the beginning of "serious times," when Charlie is not quite two years old and she finally fits back into her pre-pregnancy skirts. Sarah decides to do some actual reporting herself, in part to inspire her magazine staff, but mostly to spite Andrew and write something uplifting, since his column is always so pessimistic. They've been fighting recently; Andrew had sharply implied that her work at the fashion magazine was meaningless. Sarah goes to the Home Office to interview department heads, hoping to come out with an optimistic piece on the government. She does not feel like a journalist anymore, however, and the men she sees while she waits in the lobby look "limp and hypoxic—half-garroted by their ties."

Lawrence Osborn, from the press office, meets Sarah in the lobby. Sarah finds Lawrence's easy self-deprecation and distaste for not only his job, but the entire system, instantly arresting. She quickly realizes that the "payback" she will inflict on Andrew is "not necessarily going to be an editorial one." Lawrence announces that he's arranged several interviews with department heads for Sarah, but Sarah states that she enjoys talking to him. As Lawrence leads Sarah through a crowd of Home Office workers gathered around a TV screen, he places his hand on the small of her back. She finds herself leaning into the pressure. The TV reports that the home secretary just resigned in a scandal, and Lawrence cynically notes that all anyone cares about is whether the vacancy will mean a promotion for themselves.

Sarah's constant bursting into tears and Little Bee's recognition that it took a full year for her to even function regularly suggests that trauma inflicted by loss or horrific experience can have significant effects on a person for years to come. Sarah's wish that she had done more to save Little Bee suggests that she regards her missing finger as an insignificant sacrifice, even if it was greater than what Andrew could make.



The image of Little Bee's hand filling in the gap for Sarah's missing finger symbolizes the way Little Bee can help Sarah feel whole, offering her both perspective and purpose. Although Sarah's missing finger represents her loss of innocence, her relationship with Little Bee can fill that space and make that loss worthwhile.



Although hurtful, Andrew's accusation foreshadows Sarah's eventual realization that in light of events going on in the world, the fashion magazine truly doesn't matter. Sarah's hope that she will find an uplifting story in the work of the Home Office immediately contrasts with the weak, lifeless men she sees running the place. This description of the people running the government suggests that Sarah—and perhaps the author himself—is generally cynical about the government's operation.



The image of government workers crowding around a TV screen, hoping a colleague's fall will grant them a promotion, cynically suggests that the people who operate government institutions are less concerned with the public good and more interested in advancing their own careers. Although Lawrence obviously has low self-esteem, his character embodies this cynicism, representing blatant self-interest at the expense of other people throughout the story for the sake of minimizing his own suffering.



Lawrence leads Sarah to his office so he can check his emails. He tells her that with the home secretary's resignation, the Home Office is in chaos. He'll need to reschedule Sarah's interviews. Lawrence's superiors assigned him the task of writing the goodbye letter to the home secretary, but Lawrence feels like the task is too difficult even though it's only a few sentences. Sarah stays in Lawrence's office and they talk vaguely about the letter. Both can feel the sexual tension rising between them. Sarah states she'll write her article about Lawrence instead, and they begin to flirt more openly. They both admit they're unhappy.

Sarah stands behind Lawrence at his desk to see the single sentence he's typed for his letter. They suddenly start to kiss and have sex in Lawrence's office. As Sarah is getting dressed, Andrew calls her and excitedly tells her that he's just been assigned to research the home secretary's scandal. The project will take weeks of work and lots of nights at the office, but it will pay well. Sarah hangs up and tells Lawrence she'd like to see him again, knowing that her marriage is now "mortally wounded."

While Andrew throws himself into his new assignment, Sarah and Lawrence carry on their affair during lunch hours, afternoon getaways, occasionally in the evenings. For both of them, the affair provides an escape from their respectively "tragedies." Sarah feels alive when she's with Lawrence, though she never completely trusts him. Even so, for six months Sarah is able to feel "less serious." Sarah successfully keeps their affair separate from her real life until she attends a media party with Lawrence, which Andrew also happens to attend. Lawrence, unaware of who Andrew is, introduces Sarah to Andrew with his hand suggestively holding the small of her back.

That night in their garden, Sarah and Andrew fight about the affair. When Sarah throws a flower pot at Andrew, he gets in his car and disappears for six days to get "properly drunk with his brother." During that week, late at night, Sarah bakes a cake for Charlie to celebrate his first day at nursery. While she carefully decorates it, she thinks about how much she loves being a mother. Lawrence calls her and asks if he can come over for the night. Sarah refuses him; she wants to keep the affair separate from her real life. When she hangs up the phone, however, her "body aches" for Lawrence so much that she smashes her phone into the cake over and over again. She takes a deep breath, turns the oven on, and bakes another.

Sarah and Lawrence's admitted unhappiness suggests that their affair is aimed more at mitigating their own personal pain than forming any positive bond. Sarah uses Lawrence to hide from unhappiness, which suggests that her affair with Lawrence contributes to her sense of numbness, even before she cuts her finger off in Nigeria.



Andrew's excitement about the home secretary's demise is just as cynical as the other workers in the home office, since he celebrates his personal benefit while downplaying the ruin of a human being. Andrew and Sarah's behavior parallels each other. Andrew prioritizes money over their marriage in the same way that Sarah prioritizes her new affair and desire to run from unhappiness.



Again, Sarah and Lawrence's affair is depicted primarily as an escape, a way for both of them to feel less unhappy and less burdened by the world's horrors. This depiction of their affair is significant, since in later chapters, when Sarah continues to hold onto the affair, it will suggest that although Sarah is learning to face many of the issues in her life, she is also still compromising and using Lawrence to hide from unhappiness.



Just as Sarah runs from her unhappiness by having an affair with Lawrence, Andrew runs from his failing marriage and wife's infidelity by leaving and getting drunk for a week. Andrew and Sarah's methods take different forms, but parallel each other, suggesting that as a couple, they are ill-equipped to directly confront and handle any of their marital problems.



The next day, Sarah shows Charlie the cake. When she asks him to make a wish, his bright face darkens and he says he wants his father back. After Charlie is asleep, Sarah calls Andrew and tells him what Charlie said. When Andrew asks if Sarah wants him back, she can only say she wants what's best for Charlie. Andrew calls her a "slut"; Sarah argues it was "just sex." They argue until Sarah asks if they can take a holiday together and try to reset their marriage. The next day she calls him from work and suggests they go to Nigeria. After they return from Africa, Andrew goes through "shock, then recrimination, and then two awful years of Andrew's deepening depression." Sarah continues her affair with Lawrence.

Back in the present, drinking tea in the kitchen, Sarah tells Little Bee it's time they help each other "move on" from their pain. Sarah lists steps she can take to help Little Bee fight for legal citizenship, though she's distracted by Charlie making a mess while he eats. While Charlie hugs her leg, crying, Sarah apologizes to Little Bee for being "a mess at the moment," but Little Bee comforts her.

In the evening, Lawrence arrives at Sarah's door. He told his wife he's on a three-day trip in Birmingham and plans to stay over, but Sarah does not want him to be there. Lawrence frets about Little Bee, since he could lose his job at the Home Office for not reporting an illegal immigrant. Sarah tells him to leave, but once Lawrence starts demeaning himself, she pities him and invites him in.

Charlie eyes Lawrence skeptically and asks if he's a "goody" or a "baddy." Lawrence says that he's neither, only an "innocent bystander." Sarah puts Charlie to bed and starts making dinner for Lawrence—thinking of Andrew while she does—while Lawrence and Little Bee sit awkwardly at the table. After dinner, Little Bee goes to bed. Sarah is pointedly irritated at Andrew for not even trying to be polite to Little Bee. Lawrence thinks Little Bee's presence is unhealthy for Sarah, a drain on her energy and a reminder of a traumatic time.

Andrew and Sarah's conversation on the phone again suggests that they are highly dysfunctional as a couple and unable to solve any issues between them. Andrew immediately insults Sarah and Sarah tries to minimize her betrayal, though neither of them address any underlying issues or admit their own culpability. Although Sarah claims she wants what is best for Charlie, her continued affair with Lawrence while Charlie's father sinks into depression suggests that Sarah is mainly self-interested.



Although Sarah means well, her initial approach to helping Little Bee is to take action and try to fix the situation. The fact that she is immediately overwhelmed suggests that trying to fix everything at once for someone else is not the best approach.



Sarah only accepts Lawrence once he demeans himself, which suggests that her attraction to him is mixed with pity. This is perhaps because such a pitiable figure makes her feel slightly better about herself, relieved of guilt over her own moral compromises.



Although Lawrence claims that he's an "innocent bystander," his conduct in the next several chapters places him in the antagonist's role, since he selfishly wants to get rid of Little Bee. Lawrence's claim that he's only an "innocent bystander" suggests that in a self-interested society, no one can truly be innocent. Either one helps those who need it, like Sarah, or submits to their own self-interest and fails to, like Andrew and Lawrence. Lawrence's comment is largely reminiscent of Andrew's earlier claim that Little Bee's safety is not his business.



When Lawrence implies that Sarah must choose between him and Little Bee, Sarah tells him that if she already cut off a **finger** to save Little Bee, she'll certainly cut Lawrence off too. Lawrence rises to leave, gathers his things, and makes it partway down the path the street before Sarah stops him and apologizes. She strokes his face and tells him she doesn't want to lose him. They go back inside and start to have sex on Sarah and Andrew's bed. However, Sarah can't lose herself in the act like she once could. Part of her feels guilty for so quickly having Lawrence in Andrew's place on the bed, another part is distracted by all the steps she needs to take for Little Bee's immigration fight.

Lawrence senses Sarah's disconnectedness and rolls off of her, frustrated. She tells him that he's not losing her, though he may have to share her with Little Bee for a while; Little Bee's situation is so urgent. Lawrence sadly half-jokes about immigrants coming into their country and stealing their women, but Sarah wonders how much of a joke it truly is in his mind. Sarah can tell he is guarding part of himself from her, but she realizes this is the first time she's ever asked Lawrence to do anything complex or difficult. Lawrence tells Sarah that this situation is "hard" for him, whether she realizes it or not.

CHAPTER SEVEN

In the morning, Sarah enters Little Bee's room and asks if she wants to drive to the store with her. While they are driving, Sarah tries to explain about Lawrence staying overnight, but Little Bee says she already understands: Sarah is just making the choices that she thinks will make her happy; there is nothing wrong with that. Sarah is happy that Little Bee understands. Sarah's car is low on fuel so they stop at a gas station. Little Bee privately reflects on how the gas flowing into the vehicle likely came from her country, and the whine it makes passing through the pump sounds like her family's screams.

At Sarah's house, Little Bee thinks that the best thing she can do for Sarah right now is "understand." She decides that "Understanding" could have been a good name for her village because even before the oil war, everyone in her village—everyone in the world, even—understood that they had "nothing." They made peace with it. Nkiruka used to put her face in an old wood frame and the children would pretend she was a TV commentator for the BBC. In Sarah's living room, after Sarah has gone back to bed, Charlie wakes and asks Little Bee if he can watch TV. Little Bee isn't sure, so they turn on the TV without sound and imagine what it might be saying.

Sarah constantly moves back and forth, from moral resolution to compromise. This suggests that even for someone with strong convictions and the desire to help others, indecision and the desire to run from unhappiness can still cause them to compromise those convictions. Rather than Charlie's simple classification of everyone as "goodies" or "baddies," the novel suggests that human beings are far more dynamic and complex.



Although Little Bee is literally in a life-or-death predicament, Lawrence still bemoans and the fact she interrupts his affair with Sarah. This casts Lawrence as a shallow person; he's not evil, but weighed down by his own self-interest and inability to see Little Bee as an equal human being to himself. Lawrence's shallowness thus works as a foil to Sarah and Little Bee's moral development and character growth.



Little Bee offers Sarah an understanding ear without trying to change her mind, which contrasts with Lawrence's attempts to convince Sarah to get rid of Little Bee. Little Bee's reflection that the gas pumping sounds like her family's screams reflects the fact that the developed world's consumer goods often come from developing countries; the developing world's pain provides the developed world with wealth and convenience.



Little Bee's name for her village suggests that an understanding exists between the developing world and the developed world: one has lots of wealth, the other has none. Although Little Bee accepts this and even recalls her childhood happiness in spite of it, such an understanding suggests that humanity accepts gross inequality and moral compromise in self-interested nations.



Lawrence laughs gently from behind Little Bee. He smiles and invites her to come have breakfast with him in the kitchen. They leave Charlie in the living room and drink tea in the kitchen. Lawrence tells Little Bee he believes she should turn herself into the police; it's what's best for Sarah. Little Bee asks if Lawrence will turn her in if she doesn't, and she feels frightened. Lawrence states that he'll die without Sarah because she is the only thing in the world that matters to him, even if that sounds "pathetic." However, Little Bee understands this. Everyone is afraid of death.

Lawrence asks if Little Bee is actually afraid of death or if she only wants a "comfortable life." Little Bee assures him that because of what she's seen, the Nigerian politicians will find a way to kill her no matter what. She suddenly feels "rage" at Lawrence's selfishness. She tells him that if he reports her to the police, she'll make sure that Sarah knows he sold her out. Little Bee will make Sarah hate him. Lawrence believes her, though he is surprised by how cunning she is. Little Bee tells Lawrence that she's been in England for two years now; she is more like him than like her own self.

Lawrence insists that he is "selfish" and a "loser." He thinks Little Bee is nothing like her. However, Little Bee insists that she is selfish too. When Lawrence doesn't believe her, Little Bee is furious, because Lawrence doesn't see her as an actual person who can cunning or selfish "like a white person." She shouts at him but Lawrence laughs at her, so Little Bee states, "I left Sarah's husband hanging in the air." Little Bee realizes she's made a mistake. She loses her anger. Lawrence grabs her by the wrist and demands that she tell him what she did.

Little Bee recounts that when she leaves the detention center, she arrives at Andrew's house in two days. However, she does not know how to approach him, so she hides in the bushes and watches for days. Andrew is always angry, yelling at Sarah and Charlie. When he is alone he yells at himself and cries a lot. Andrew catches a glimpse of Little Bee once and thinks he is hallucinating. On the third day, while Sarah and Charlie are gone, Andrew stands in the garden and shouts for Little Bee to emerge. She does, but he thinks she is a ghost. When she touches his arm he flees into the house and closes himself in his study.

Although Lawrence claims that he wants what's best for Sarah, his own shallowness and attempt to keep her in an unhappy lifestyle clearly suggests he only wants what's best for himself, which seems to put him at odds with Little Bee's character. Also, his claim that he'll die without Sarah suggests that he himself has no real experience with death, unlike Little Bee who has far too much.



Lawrence's doubt that refugees are actually fleeing for their lives embodies native-born citizens' skepticism toward asylum-seekers. Although Lawrence is selfish and shallow, the author uses him as an everyman, an example of a typical citizen of the developed world, reticent to share their wealth, safety, or privilege with others. Little Bee's assurance that she would die in Nigeria suggests that refugees truly are fleeing death.



Even when Lawrence admits that he is selfish and insists that Little Bee is a better person than him, he neglects to see her as an actual human being. Lawrence's inability to see Little Bee as person suggests that even when someone thinks well of refugees, they can still dehumanize them by thinking of them only as refugees and not individual people in their own right.



Andrew's belief that Little Bee is only a ghost dehumanizes her much like Lawrence does, seeing her not as a person but a thing or idea. This ironically parallels Andrew's failure to regard Little Bee as a person on the beach as well—rather than see her as a human being, Andrew decided she was "not our affair." This tragically suggests that even after two years of guilt and self-contempt, Andrew still has not recognized his mistake or overcome his self-interest.



Through the door, Little Bee tells Andrew not to fear her—she’s just a person. She leaves and comes back later to find Andrew standing on a chair in the middle of the room, about to hang himself with a power cord. When Little Bee asks why he is doing this, Andrew replies that he’s seen the person he truly is and he can’t live with it. Little Bee tells Andrew that her sister survived too, but Andrew knows she is lying and kicks the chair out from under him. Little Bee tries to help him, but Andrew won’t let her, and he’s too heavy for her to lift out of the noose. Little Bee realizes she could call the police to help him, but they’d arrest and deport her. While she is deciding whether she should do this, she realizes it’s too late. Andrew is already dead.

Again, even in his guilt, Andrew is dominated by his own self-interest. Rather than do anything to help Little Bee, Andrew decides that he cannot live with who he’s seen himself to be and must die, with no apparent thought for what it will do to Charlie or Sarah.



In the kitchen, Little Bee tells Lawrence that her failure to save Andrew is the reason she wants to stay and help Sarah and Charlie. Lawrence is disturbed and decides he has to report Little Bee to the police, since what she did is a crime. However, Lawrence immediately realizes he can’t do that without ruining his relationship with Sarah and connecting himself to Little Bee, which would also destroy his career at the Home Office and reveal his affair to his wife. He might even go to prison. Little Bee tries to take Lawrence’s hands to make amends, but Lawrence is still furious. However, he realizes they are at an impasse, and they agree to keep each other’s secrets.

Although Little Bee just testified to her own selfishness, it pales in comparison to Lawrence’s. Lawrence’s brief conviction that he must report Little Bee’s crime to the police is instantly overridden by his desire to maintain his affair with Sarah, keep his career, and protect his marriage, which again suggests that Lawrence is not concerned with upholding the law or Sarah’s welfare, but only his own self-interest.



In the living room, Sarah asks Charlie who let him watch TV before breakfast, which is against the rules. Little Bee and Lawrence quickly compose themselves and tell Sarah they’ve just been getting to know each other. Sarah seems pleased with this and states that they’ll all need to learn to get along. While she makes Charlie breakfast, Little Bee looks at the TV in the living room. The news commentator looks like Nkiruka.

Sarah, Lawrence, and Little Bee are now all forced to make their own moral compromises to achieve their own aims, which again suggests that human beings are naturally self-interested.



CHAPTER EIGHT

The morning after Lawrence stays over, Sarah sees Little Bee sadly staring at the TV. Sarah thinks she must be “homesick.” In the late morning she takes the commuter train into London and enters her magazine office for the first time since Andrew’s death. Her employees go silent when they see her enter, but Sarah tells them all to get back to work. Clarissa meets her and they enter Sarah’s office. Clarissa has set up her computer from Sarah’s desk and plugged her phone into Sarah’s charger, but Sarah decides not to press the issue. However, as Clarissa explains to Sarah the stories that they’re running and Sarah listens to the hum of the office, she’s bothered by the feeling that it’s all so “unreal.”

Sarah’s sudden feeling that the work her magazine does is “unreal” and insignificant suggests that her relationship with Little Bee is helping her to recognize the meaninglessness of the life she once led. Compared to Little Bee’s struggle to survive or the many horrors happening around the world, a magazine that runs articles about fashion and orgasms suddenly seems far less important. Sarah’s relationship with a person from a different world offers her vital perspective on her own life.



Sarah tells Clarissa that she wants to run a feature piece on refugees. Clarissa resists—she thinks it’s not relatable—but eventually gives in to Sarah’s request. However, Clarissa tells Sarah that she’s still “bereaved” and not ready to be back at work yet. Sarah accuses her of only wanting her job, but quickly apologizes. She recalls their early, idealistic days when they were trying to lure their readers with sex and then inform them about real-world issues. It all seems long gone now. Clarissa suggests that perhaps Sarah should think about quitting and leaving her position to one of the younger girls. At the least, Clarissa asks Sarah to take one more day to think about the refugee piece—“no one dies when we write about fashion.” Sarah agrees and takes the train home.

Sarah finds Lawrence in her kitchen and tells him she’s thinking about quitting her job. She misses the days when she felt like she could make a difference. Sarah asks Lawrence if he can remember the day he lost that feeling himself, though Lawrence isn’t sure he ever had it. Every time Sarah tries to do something meaningful with the magazine, their circulation drops. Sarah wonders if she should take Andrew’s advice and “get a grown-up’s job.” Every time she sees Little Bee now, Sarah’s life feels “shallow” to her. However, Lawrence thinks she’s being “naïve.”

Lawrence claims Sarah has already done more than enough for the world by cutting off her **finger** to save Little Bee. Sarah replies that it was only one finger out of ten, just ten percent of a sacrifice. She asks if Lawrence still wants her to get rid of Little Bee and he strongly denies this, though he doesn’t think she should quit her job either. Sarah remarks that she misses Andrew and his blunt surety. He could be mean, but he always knew what to do. Lawrence is offended that Sarah mentioned Andrew, but she hugs him and reassures him it doesn’t mean anything. Lawrence tells Sarah that her job is meaningful, but Sarah begins to tear up and mourns how growing up causes one to compromise their morals.

CHAPTER NINE

Little Bee states that her story changes on Lawrence’s third day staying at Sarah’s house. Early in the morning, Sarah comes into Little Bee’s room and says she wants everyone to take a day-trip to London for an “adventure.” Little Bee finds this ironic, since in her country an adventure is pretending that one lives in a regular house with dishwasher and washing machine and appliances.

Like Lawrence, Clarissa represents the ordinary citizen in the developed world, consumed with meaningless pursuits—her concern is not telling stories about real people; she only wants to sell more copies of their magazine and make more money. Sarah’s mournful reflection on how mission-oriented and virtuous they were when they were young suggests that although people often start out feeling like they can make a difference in the world, that passion fades with age and comfort.



Once again, Sarah’s renewed desire live a meaningful life suggests that her relationship with Little Bee offers her new perspective on her own life and helps her to see which parts of it have no value. However, the magazine’s circulation drop whenever she tries to produce meaningful content suggests that society as a whole does not seek a meaningful life, only entertainment.



Lawrence has the exact opposite effect on Sarah that Little Bee does. Where Little Bee’s presence and character encourage Sarah to pursue a meaningful life and help people, Lawrence actively encourages Sarah to leave the world as it is and remain focused on herself and her own contentment. This sets Lawrence in opposition to Little Bee, again establishing him as the narrative’s primary antagonist.



As with the concept of horror, Sarah and Little Bee’s differing view of what constitutes an “adventure” reiterates the cultural contrast between them. For people like Little Bee who are plenty familiar with danger, an adventure simply means peace and stability.



When they are children, Little Bee and Nkiruka have a special place in the jungle where they pretend to live in a modern house with all the appliances. When Little Bee is eight, they play house for the last time, even though they are already too old for the game. They wait for nightfall and then walk the mile from their home to the jungle. Holding hands, they enter, but the jungle is so dark that they soon lose the trail and become completely lost. Although they are not in any real danger, the darkness terrifies Little Bee, so Nkiruka sits and holds her close, rocking her gently until they both fall asleep.

Little Bee wakes before Nkiruka. The jungle is growing brighter so she wanders some distance through the trees, alone. She finds what she later learns to be a jeep, covered in overgrowth and vines. Inside lies a man's skeleton, though the bones are clean and he obviously laid there for years. At her young age, Little Bee imagines that the jeep and the skeleton grew out of the jungle like the trees. She wanders back to Nkiruka, unsure of what she just saw but certain that Nkiruka should not see it.

Back in the present, Sarah, Little Bee, Charlie, and Lawrence all take the train into London. Little Bee has never been on a train before, and Charlie claims that he is the train's driver. Little Bee is again overwhelmed by the amount of people in the city who never speak to each other or touch each other. Sarah and Charlie walk on ahead, while Little Bee and Lawrence follow behind. Lawrence points out certain landmarks, but Little Bee is angry that he acts as if "everything is normal" between them. Lawrence insists that they have no choice—civilization is just a lot of people pretending everything is normal. They walk until they reach the edge of the River Thames.

At the river's edge, Little Bee notices that people walk slower as they watch artists and street performers and riverboats. She sees a little boy and his parents watching one of the performers. The boy's skin is light brown, and Little Bee realizes that his father is black and his mother is white. The boy's skin color seems to Little Bee to be the color of "happiness" and she begins to cry with joy. As she looks at the crowds of people in London, she sees them differently. The crowds are a flurry of people from every place and race. They are no longer a "them" but a "you."

Although Nkiruka is only described in small segments, this scene depicts her as not only Little Bee's sister, but her protective and nurturing companion. Nkiruka's death is thus traumatic in two ways, since not only does Little Bee witness the horrific murder of her sister, she also loses the person who gives her a sense of safety and surety, much like Andrew is for Sarah.



Even if she is too young to understand, Little Bee's childhood exposure to danger and death again reiterates the difference between her and Sarah's culture. Where Sarah's culture tries to hide death—she will not even tell Charlie what it means for his dad to die—death is merely something that Little Bee happens upon in the forest.



The tense compromise and mutual impasse between Little Bee and Lawrence parallels Lawrence's understanding of society, which he suggests is only a series of tense compromises between individuals, nations, and governments, all motivated by self-interest. Lawrence sees his own selfishness and manipulation of other people as a microcosm of the way that society as a whole functions, which seems to let him rationalize his own poor behavior.



For Little Bee, the interracial couple symbolizes cross-cultural relationships and the potential for people to cross ethnic and cultural barriers to love each other. Little Bee's observation that their son's light brown skin is the color of "happiness" suggests that she sees the possibility for cultures to meet and produce peace and life, rather than war and exploitation.



Little Bee realizes that for the first time since she's been in England, she can disappear into the crowds and not look more or less different than any other person. She can end her story story as Little Bee and take a new name, a new life. Little Bee steps into the crowd, feeling and enjoying the power of the city. The world feels colorful and alive. She follows the crowd down the street and onto a bridge. A young man asks her what her name is and Little Bee answers "London Sunshine" and they both laugh together.

Little Bee looks back towards Lawrence and Sarah and sees them standing together with their arms around each other. Beneath them, Charlie stands looking "very small and sad" and alone. Little Bee's happiness vanishes. She returns to Andrew and Sarah and Charlie. Sarah can see she is bothered, but does not understand why. Charlie pulls on Little Bee's hand so she walks down to the beach with him to play. Little Bee worries Charlie will overheat in his **Batman costume**, but when she asks him to take it off, Charlie whispers that if he removes his costume, his father will die, because Andrew died while Charlie was at nursery without his costume on.

Little Bee explains that it's not Charlie's fault that Andrew died, and suggests that sometimes it's good to take one's costume off. She tells Charlie that she wishes she could take her Little Bee costume off too, so she could just be a "village girl" and use her real name. Charlie wants to know what Little Bee's real name is, but she'll only tell him if he takes off his **Batman costume**. Charlie refuses.

Lawrence comes down to the beach and angrily asks Little Bee to go speak to Sarah. Sarah tells Little Bee that Lawrence is jealous of Andrew. Sarah found Andrew's study full of research notes about the immigration centers and the oil wars in Nigeria. She thinks he was planning to write a book, and Sarah wonders if she should continue the work he started and write the book herself. The idea infuriates Lawrence. Little Bee tells Sarah that she wants to speak her true opinion of Lawrence, but Sarah snaps at her and states she's already made her choice. However, she quickly apologizes and hugs Little Bee.

Sarah asks Little Bee to go play with Charlie and Lawrence because she needs a minute for a phone call. Little Bee and Lawrence stand talking at the railing while Charlie plays below them in the sand. Lawrence still thinks Little Bee should leave. Little Bee thinks Lawrence should return to his own wife and children. Sarah walks down to them and begins to make an announcement until she asks where Charlie is. Neither of them knows, and as they call for Charlie on the bank they cannot find him. Sarah's screaming makes Little Bee think of the jungle and the jeep, and she realizes there is horror in this world as well.

Little Bee's sudden feeling of freedom suggests that in a diverse city, people are much freer to take on new identities and blend into new communities, allowing for a greater degree of personal freedom. In such diversity, people do not easily absorb into opposing monolithic groups, but form one mass of humanity.



Although the crowds and a new identity offer Little Bee freedom, she remains with Sarah for Charlie's sake, which suggests that although taking on a new constructed identity may offer a person freedom, it prevents them from truly loving the people already in their life. Also, Charlie's belief that his dad will die if he is not Batman suggests that although his constructed identity gives him a sense of power, it also burdens him with a far greater responsibility than he can carry as a four-year-old.



Little Bee's admission that she wishes she could use her real name suggests that although her persona as Little Bee protects her, it also denies her the opportunity to simply be herself, without the burden of maintaining her identity or fretting about how others perceive her.



Although Sarah mourns her moral compromise as it relates to helping refugees, she also compromises in her relationship with Lawrence. Lawrence holds Sarah back from her desire to live a meaningful life and she even recognizes she'd be better off without him. Despite this, Sarah clings to Lawrence to avoid being alone, suggesting that one's emotional needs may cause them to compromise their values as much as comfort and lifestyle do.



Although Sarah's horror is arguably of a smaller magnitude, Little Bee's recollection of the jungle in Nigeria suggests that horror in the developed world is the same as horror in the developing world. Although Sarah and Little Bee come from different worlds, the horror of losing a loved one transcends their cultural differences.



CHAPTER TEN

Sarah asks Little Bee to go wait with Charlie and Lawrence while she makes a phone call. She calls her employer and tells him that she's quitting the magazine. He seems unbothered, which surprises Sarah. When Sarah hangs up, she feels light and free. She begins planning how to continue Andrew's research, and realizes that she feels closer to him now than she did for the last two years.

However, Clarissa calls Sarah and argues quitting might be a mistake. By the time Sarah hangs up on her, she doubts herself again. When Sarah goes down to the river and sees Little Bee and Lawrence standing stiffly, hardly talking, she realizes that "this is never going to work" and feels like she should've just stayed in her place as a sensible working mother. She starts to speak to them, then realizes that Charlie is missing.

Sarah runs frantically up and down the beach, asking strangers if they've seen a small boy in a **Batman costume**. When she can't find Charlie on the beach or the landing, she thinks he must be somewhere in the muddy river. Sarah splashes in up to her waist and loses her phone but cannot find him. She thinks about how beautiful her son is and mourns the fact that, since Nigeria, she's kept herself so busy between men and work that she's never truly invested herself into him.

Lawrence gives Little Bee his phone and tells her to call the police; they're good at searching. Little Bee initially looks terrified about calling the police, but a resolute look forms on her face. Lawrence suddenly realizes the implication of what he asked Little Bee to do, but it seems necessary. He runs away to keep searching. Sarah screams Charlie's name. Before long, Lawrence returns with Charlie in tow. He'd only been hiding in a drainage pipe, which he calls his "bat cave." Sarah holds him tight and promises that she'll never be so "silly and selfish" again.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The policemen arrive five minutes later. Little Bee is nervous, because she knows deportation could mean death for her. The policeman who talks to her is neither cruel nor kind, but seems no more than a blank face. Little Bee realizes that he will not understand the gravity of arresting her and deporting her; it will only seem a simple action to him. When the policeman demands Little Bee tell him her name, she tries to run but he immediately catches her by the arm and puts her in the back of the police car. When he asks Little Bee her name again, she just tells him "Little Bee." The policeman arrests her and they drive away.

Sarah's employer's indifference to her quitting suggests that although she derived much of identity from her career, her employer only sees her as cog in the machine. This further suggests that the importance Sarah formerly ascribed to her identity as a career woman was contrived.



Sarah wants to pursue a meaningful life. However, he constant back and forth pull that Sarah feels suggests that society puts great pressure on individuals to conform to certain ideals and maintain the status quo.



Sarah's realization that she's been too busy for Charlie suggests that her carefully constructed identity prevents her from existing simply as Charlie's mother and loving him. Sarah is so concerned with fitting the ideal of the working mother that she forgets to actually be Charlie's mother herself.



Little Bee's decision to call the police even though she will risk being exposed as an illegal immigrant suggests that her love for Charlie outweighs her need to maintain her protective identity. Just as Sarah's identity holds her back from loving Charlie, this further suggests that a person may be required to sacrifice their own self-protective identity in order to selflessly love someone else.



The policeman's blank persona suggests that often, the actors in an unjust immigration system are only regular people who do not understand the full implications of what they are doing. In the policeman's mind, deporting an immigrant is simply protocol, not a decision that could potentially cost a human being their life. While this does not absolve such people of responsibility, it does lead the reader to have a more nuanced understanding of them.



Sarah and Lawrence visit Little Bee in a holding cell that evening. Lawrence tries to convince one of the policeman not to deport her and suggests he will make an appeal through the Home Office. The policeman suggests that Lawrence risks his position in the Home Office even by knowing about Little Bee's immigration status, and Lawrence gives up. Sarah sits in the cell with Little Bee and cries and tells Bee that she'll keep trying to save her. Little Bee suggests to Sarah that she is not worth helping and explains how she did not save Andrew. Although Sarah is surprised, she is not angry. As the guard leads Sarah out of the cell, she remarks that she did not save Andrew either.

At four in the morning, officers retrieve Little Bee from her cell and load her into a van. They put her in a different holding cell, and three days later drive Little Bee to Heathrow Airport and deposit her into a room with 20 other frightened refugees from various countries. The guard watching them is vicious and condescending towards the refugees. Little Bee waits for hours, faint from hunger and thirst. Occasionally one or two people's names are called and they are removed from the room. Little Bee tries to maintain her good humor, but she cries with fear.

Eventually, an officer calls Little Bee's name and marches her, handcuffed, out of the room and straight to a waiting airplane, where she is seated in the back row next to a guard in plainclothes. The man unlocks her handcuffs and apologizes; he doesn't like this process any more than Little Bee does. Little Bee asks him why he doesn't change jobs, but the man believes it's the only job he's qualified for at this point of his life. He thinks Little Bee is probably more employable than he is, and thinks it a shame they're sending her away. The guard also explains that he earns enough, but the private "Dutch firms" that run the detention centers and the deportation process make real money; it doesn't matter to them whether a refugee is detained or deported—"It's the global economy."

This is the first airplane Little Bee has been on, and the roar of the engines during take-off frightens her. However, once they're in the air she hears a familiar voice and turns to see Charlie and Sarah standing in the aisle. The guard makes room for them, and Sarah holds Little Bee and explains that they just couldn't leave her. The plane lands in Abuja and military police are waiting for Little Bee, but Sarah holds her hand and firmly states that she is a British journalist and will report anything that they do. The police are too afraid to take Little Bee, so they let them leave, though not without sending officers to follow them at a distance. Sarah promises Little Bee she'll never leave her side, and Little Bee will be safe.

Once again, Lawrence folds quickly to pressure once his career is threatened, suggesting that he is more interested in his own well-being than in Little Bee's or even Sarah's, since Little Bee obviously means a great deal to her. Sarah's recognition that she did not do enough to save Andrew suggests that although she did not kill him, she bears her own guilt for watching him sink into depression without trying to help him.



While the policeman that arrested Little Bee was not cruel, the guard standing over the refugees is, suggesting that although not every person involved in the immigration system is mean-spirited or wishes ill upon refugees, some of them don't have the best of intentions, allowing their prejudice to influence their work.



Little Bee's guard on the airplane is kind, again suggesting that not all people working within the immigration are mean-spirited. The guard's admission that he needs the job and statement that private firms profit off of refugees suggests that the for-profit immigration system treats refugees like inventory to be stored or moved, rather than like human beings. When profit is involved, it seems unlikely that the immigration system could ever be just, since someone will always be looking to increase their bottom line.



Sarah's decision to follow Little Bee to Nigeria indicates that she quit her job and left Lawrence behind. This suggests that Sarah realizes she must sacrifice the things that make up her carefully crafted identity in order to selflessly love Little Bee. However, while they are in Nigeria, Sarah leverages her identity as a white journalist to protect Little Bee, which demonstrates that identity can be put to good uses as well, rather than purely self-interested ones.



Little Bee, Sarah, and Charlie stay in a hotel for two weeks. Every day, the military police wait in a car outside. Little Bee marvels at Abuja's skyscrapers and modern buildings; she did not know that a city like this could exist in her own country. Sarah tells Little Bee that she wants to collect stories from other refugees like her. If only one person has a story, they're easy to suppress, but many stories can become a weapon—Sarah can arrange with a lawyer so that if Little Bee ever disappears, the stories will be released to the media.

Little Bee hesitates at first, but agrees to help Sarah gather refugee stories. Sarah bribes the military police each day and they allow Little Bee, Sarah, and Charlie to leave the hotel, so long as they are back by nightfall. Sarah drives around Southeast Nigeria so that Little Bee can meet people and introduce them to Sarah, vouching for her good character so they will share their stories with her. The work goes well. However, one night Little Bee dreams of Nkiruka rising out of the ocean, speaking Little Bee's name and listening for a reply. In the morning, Little Bee tells Sarah that she wants to go back to the beach where Nkiruka died, to say goodbye.

The next morning, Sarah gives the military police an extra-large bribe so that they will allow them to leave for a few days. Sarah, Charlie, and Little Bee drive further south for two days until they reach the coastline, dotted with fishing villages. Little Bee and Sarah stand on the beach and look out over the sea while Charlie in his **Batman costume** plays with Nigerian children in the sand. Sarah asks Little Bee how she would describe this moment to "the girls back home," but Little Bee says she is giving up that life; there is no more of it to return to. Sarah and Charlie are her life now. Little Bee thanks Sarah for saving her life, and they cry together.

In the hot afternoon sun, they sit together and Little Bee drifts off to sleep. She dreams that Sarah and Charlie stay with her and make Nigeria their new home, and that she herself becomes a journalist. However, Sarah shakes Little Bee awake and tells her that she needs to leave. Soldiers with rifles are coming down the beach, obviously searching. The policemen in Abuja must've sold them out. Sarah knows they will be looking for the girl traveling with the white woman, so she tells Little Bee to wander down the beach and disappear amongst the other Nigerian faces. Charlie wants to go with Little Bee, but Sarah explains to him that Little Bee must hide so she can be "happy and safe."

Sarah not only follows Little Bee back to Nigeria but determines how to put her professional skills to good use, which signifies a major change in Sarah's life: at the start of the story, Sarah was preoccupied with maintaining her lifestyle and curated identity as fashion editor and working mother; now, Sarah forgoes the comforts of home to try and help other people.



Little Bee and Sarah's collaboration on gathering refugee stories models the mutual benefit a cross-cultural relationship can provide. As a Nigerian, Little Bee is able to grant Sarah access to people and villages she would otherwise not be able to reach. As a British woman and journalist with important connections, Sarah can distribute these people's stories to the world, raise awareness, and fight for their protection and restoration.



Little Bee's decision to give up her past life suggests that she intends to commit fully to her new life with Sarah and Charlie. While this is seems better than being forever caught between two worlds, Little Bee maintains her name as Little Bee, which hides her past. This suggests that although it may seem a positive step, Little Bee will not have peace until she is able to live by her real name and true identity.



Little Bee's dream is the first time she recounts having a vision for her future, since thus far all of her energy has been dedicated to simply surviving the present. Little Bee's dream of making a home in Nigeria with Charlie and Sarah and becoming a journalist suggests that she is beginning to recover from some of her trauma, which a major character development for someone whose life is defined by trauma and horror.



Little Bee walks a few minutes up the beach and seats herself next to a group of women. From a distance, she sees the soldiers notice Sarah's white skin and approach her. Sarah holds Charlie behind her while the soldier's shout and point rifles at her. Suddenly, Charlie breaks away and starts running toward where Little Bee is hidden. Sarah screams. One of the soldiers aims his rifle and shoots at Charlie, striking the sand behind him. As the soldier takes aim again, Little Bee sprints towards them screaming that she is the person they are hunting. Little Bee runs, waiting for a bullet to strike her. Instead, the soldiers lower their rifles. Little Bee and Charlie meet each other and she scoops him up in her arms.

Little Bee holds Charlie tight while he cries in terror. Sarah screams while one of the soldiers restrains her, though the leader only stands and gazes at Little Bee; Little Bee realizes he is giving her this last moment, "as one human being to another." Little Bee pulls Charlie's mask up so they can smile at each other. She realizes that even if she is not free, Charlie will be, and some part of herself will survive in him. Rather than feel sad, Little Bee feels light and joyful. Charlie sees the other children playing on the beach. He giggles and kicks and struggles to be put down.

Little Bee holds Charlie tight and tells him that he'll overheat in his **Batman costume**; he needs to take it off. Charlie refuses, but Little Bee asks if he remembers their bargain. He pauses, tilts his head to the side, and asks Little Bee what her real name is. She tells him her name is Udo, which means "peace." Charlie doesn't know what "peace" means, so Little Bee describes it as "a time when people can tell each other their real names." Charlie smiles. Over his shoulder, Little Bee sees the soldiers walking slowly towards them.

Charlie gazes at Little Bee and calls her Udo. He decides he will take off his **Batman costume**. As he pulls off the mask, showing his blonde hair, the local children run with excitement to see him, since no white child has ever visited before. Charlie peels off the rest of the costume and slips out of Little Bee's grip. With the local children, he runs laughing down to the surf to play in the water, dressed only in his "skinny white body." Little Bee feels a soldier's hand on her arm, but Charlie and the other children are so "beautiful"—"and that is a word I would not need to explain [...] because now we are all speaking the same language"—that Little Bee cries tears of joy and laughs and laughs.

Little Bee's choice to expose herself as a wanted woman to save Charlie's life mirrors her decision to reveal herself to the police by calling them to help find Charlie. Although Little Bee claims to be selfish like Lawrence, in both instances Little Bee sacrifices her own safety and identity to protect Charlie, which suggests that she is not motivated by self-interest like Lawrence or Andrew, but primarily motivated by her love for Charlie.



Little Bee's realization that Charlie can be free in her place suggests that she is willing to sacrifice her identity as Little Bee, which kept her alive for more than two years, in order to love Charlie and give him the chance to live. Little Bee's sacrifice suggests that although an identity may help a person hide or survive, that self-protective impulse prevents them from selflessly love other people.



Little Bee and Charlie's letting go of their constructed identities parallels each other. Little Bee's description of peace as the opportunity to share real names suggests that although a protective identity may be necessary in certain times, as it was for Little Bee, it is ultimately better to live as one's own self, with the freedom to love selflessly and live honestly.



Although the novel ends without stating Little Bee's fate, her previous statements about the Nigerian government suggests that she will almost certainly be killed for the atrocities she's witnessed. Little Bee's laughter and joy suggests that in her mind, seeing Charlie freed from his dependence on the Batman costume and thus freed from the responsibility he feels to "save" his father from dying is worth being captured by the men. Little Bee's final statement suggests that regardless of how different people are, the beauty and joy of seeing happy, healthy children transcends culture and race and nation, uniting all people together.





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