

Orphan Train



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF CHRISTINA BAKER KLINE

Christina Baker Kline was born in England, and is of Irish descent. She moved around while growing up, living in England, Maine, and Tennessee. She studied English at Yale and has a Master of Arts in Literature from Cambridge University and a Master of Fine Arts from the University of Virginia. Kline was also a Henry Hoyns Fellow at the University of Virginia and received the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation Fellowship. From 2007 to 2011, she taught creative writing at Fordham University. She has written six novels: *Sweet Water* (1993), *Desire Lines* (1999), *The Way Life Should Be* (2007), *Bird in Hand* (2009), *Orphan Train* (2013) and *A Piece of the World* (2017). She co-wrote a book called *The Conversation Begins* with her mother, Christina L. Baker. The book features interviews with noteworthy modern feminists and their mothers. Kline is married and currently lives outside of New York City.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In *Orphan Train*, the central featured historical event is the orphan train movement, which involved relocating orphans from crowded East Coast cities to live with families in the Midwest. The orphan train movement began in the early 1900s and continued through the late 1920s. Kline also portrays the period of immigration from European countries into Ellis Island during the early twentieth century. She features early twentieth-century Ireland, depicting Ireland's continuous battle for independence from England and periods of extreme poverty. As she tells Vivian's life story, she moves through the twentieth century, including the Great Depression and World War II. Through the story of Molly Ayer, Kline briefly discusses the history of the Penobscot Indian Nation in Maine, from its pre-colonial history to when it first came under attack from British colonists in the 1600s.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Orphan Train has most frequently been compared to [All the Light We Cannot See](#) (2014) by Anthony Doerr, a novel that explores the pasts of a German orphan and a blind French girl in German-occupied France. Like *Orphan Train*, Doerr's novel is a work of historical fiction, portrays the experiences of orphans, has a two-plot structure, and retraces the lives of modern-day characters by telling their stories from the beginning. *Orphan Train* is also similar to Kline's other works, *A Piece of the World* (2017) and *The Way Life Should Be* (2007). Like *Orphan Train*, both of these novels examine the lives and troubles of modern-

day women in Maine by exploring their family's histories. Kline's portrayal of Midwestern orphans at the beginning of the twentieth century has also been compared to Willa Cather's [Pioneers!](#) (1905) and *Mail-Order Kid* (2010) by Marilyn June Coffey. In terms of the subject matter of *Orphan Train*, it has been likened to *The Little Immigrants* (2000) by Kenneth Bagnell, a work of historical fiction that portrays the history of British orphans who were sent to work in Canada in the 1800s. Other feminist historical novels that, like *Orphan Train*, focus on the themes of memory, secrets, and overcoming the past, are Jody Picoult's *The Storyteller* (2013) and Sue Monk Kidd's [The Secret Life of Bees](#) (2001). Kline's portrayal of a young woman aging out of the modern foster care system has also been compared to Vanessa Diffenbaugh's *The Language of Flowers* (2011).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Orphan Train
- **When Written:** 2013
- **Where Written:** New York; Minnesota; Ireland
- **When Published:** 2013
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary Fiction
- **Genre:** Feminist Historical Fiction; "two-plot" novel
- **Setting:** Present-day Maine; 1920s Kinvara, County Galway, Ireland; 1920s New York City; 1930s-1940s Hemford Country, Minnesota
- **Climax:** When Vivian reveals that she gave her baby daughter up for adoption after the death of her first husband, Dutchy.
- **Point of View:** Molly's story is told in a third-person-limited perspective; Vivian's story is told in the first person.

EXTRA CREDIT

Biographical sources. *Orphan Train* was inspired by the lives of two of Kline's grandparents, who were also orphans, along with her husband's grandfather, an orphan train rider.

Continued relevance. The orphan train movement is largely believed to have been the precursor to the modern foster care system.



PLOT SUMMARY

Molly Ayer is a seventeen-year-old girl who lives with her foster parents, Ralph and Dina Thibodeaus, in the town of Spruce Harbor, Maine. Even though Dina constantly criticizes

Molly for her liberal opinions and “goth” self-presentation, Molly knows that Ralph and Dina give her a better, safer home than many of her previous foster families. As the novel progresses, it is revealed that Molly grew up on Indian Island, a Penobscot reservation. Molly’s father died in a car accident when she was eight years old, and her mother, Donna Ayer, was soon jailed for charges related to drug abuse. Molly’s only link to her parents is the **charm necklace** her father gave her for her eighth birthday.

After stealing a library copy of *Jane Eyre*, Molly is sentenced to fifty community service hours. Her boyfriend, Jack, arranges for her to fulfill her hours by helping Vivian Daly, the elderly, lonely woman his mother Terry housekeeps for, to clean out her cluttered **attic**. Despite her anxiety around letting Jack help her, Molly agrees because she is afraid of being sent to juvenile detention or being kicked out by Ralph and Dina. The only catch is that Terry and Jack have lied to Vivian, telling her that Molly’s community service hours are for a school project.

The novel’s parallel storyline begins in 1929 and features Vivian’s life story as Niamh Power, a nine-year-old girl who lives in New York with her father, Patrick, her mother, Mary, her younger twin brothers, James and Dominick, and her baby sister, Maisie. Two years before, Niamh and her family emigrated from Kinvara in County Galway, Ireland. In New York, Niamh’s depressed mother and alcoholic father struggle to provide for their children. One night, there is a house fire that kills Niamh’s father and brothers. After the incident her mother is committed to a mental hospital. Niamh’s neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. Schatzman, tell her that her sister Maisie died in the hospital. They take Niamh to the Children’s Aid Society, and the agency sends Niamh out to the Midwest on an “orphan train.” On the train, Niamh befriends Dutchy, a twelve-year-old boy, and takes care of Carmine, a toddler. Just before Dutchy goes home with a farmer in Minneapolis, Minnesota, he and Niamh promise to find each other again someday.

In Albans, Minnesota, Niamh is taken home by Lois and Raymond Byrne. Mr. and Mrs. Byrne change her name to “Dorothy.” The Byrnes neglect and deprive Niamh, all the while exploiting her for free labor in their ladies’ garment business. After the stock market plummets, the Byrnes request to have “Dorothy” relocated. Mr. Sorenson, a Children’s Aid worker, takes Niamh to the home of the Grotes, a poor rural family with four children. Niamh hates the squalor and neglect at Wilma and Gerald Grote’s household. One night, Mr. Grote sexually abuses Niamh. After Mrs. Grote finds them, she and Mr. Grote kick Niamh out into the cold winter night. Niamh walks to the local schoolhouse and sleeps on the porch. The next day, her beloved teacher, Miss Larsen, agrees to take care of Niamh for a while.

In between segments of Niamh’s story, the novel returns to the present day. When Molly first begins helping Vivian, she is annoyed by the stories Vivian tells about each item in her attic.

She assumes that Vivian is a wealthy old lady who has had few problems. When Molly’s history teacher assigns her a project that requires her to interview an older person about their life’s “**portages**,” or journeys, Molly asks Vivian, who agrees.

As Vivian delves deeper into her life story, Molly realizes the parallels between Vivian’s life and her own. She also begins to see the attic project in a new light. Despite Jack and Terry’s concerns that Molly isn’t making any progress, Molly realizes the goal of cleaning out the attic is to give Vivian the opportunity to review her past, rather than to actually get rid of things. Molly grows fond of Vivian and becomes defensive of their friendship. The situation at Molly’s foster home continues to get worse, as her arguments with Dina escalate. One day, Molly decides to do some research about Vivian’s family history. As she looks through newspaper and record archives, Molly discovers that Vivian’s sister Maisie didn’t actually die in the fire. Rather, she was adopted by Vivian’s neighbors, the Schatzmans, grew old, and died just the year before. Molly grapples with the question of whether or not to reveal her discovery to Vivian.

The novel returns to the story of Niamh’s life. After a while, Miss Larsen’s kind landlady, Mrs. Murphy, arranges for Niamh to be adopted by Mr. Nielsen and Mrs. Nielsen, an affluent local couple whose daughter died a few years before. There Niamh finally has a safe, comfortable home. She agrees to take on the name of the Niensens’ late daughter, Vivian, even though she finds it impossible to view the Niensens as her parents. Over time, she tries to assimilate to the Niensens’ way of life. Vivian’s only link to her past is the **claddagh cross** her Gram gave her before sending her family off to America. As a teenager, Vivian is well behaved, hardworking, and reluctant to get close to others.

In the present day, Molly finishes her community service hours. Dina and Molly get into a serious argument one evening, when Dina finds a copy of *Anne of Green Gables* – a gift from Vivian – in Molly’s room. Assuming it was stolen, Dina kicks Molly out. Molly escapes to Vivian’s house. That night, she tells Vivian the full story of her life. She tells Vivian the truth about her community service sentence and her discovery about Maisie. Vivian is startled by the news about Maisie, but she isn’t angry about Molly’s lie.

As the night goes on, Vivian tells Molly the rest of her life story. At eighteen, she went with some friends on a trip to Minneapolis. There, in the lobby of a hotel, she ran into a handsome man who turned out to be Dutchy. The two reconnected, fell in love, and soon got married. With Dutchy, Vivian again felt a sense of belonging and self-acceptance. After a couple of happy years together, they were torn apart when Dutchy was drafted during World War II. Dutchy died in battle, leaving Vivian alone and pregnant. Grief-stricken, Vivian gave away her baby daughter, determined never again to love someone so deeply that losing them would destroy her. She

remarried a few years later to Jim Daly, Dutchy's former shipmate. She and Jim had a harmonious but dispassionate marriage. Vivian kept her baby a secret, and had no more children.

In the present day, Vivian invites Molly to live with her. As her relationship with Vivian grows, Molly also deepens her relationship with Jack. At school, Molly is nominated for an award for her portaging project. With Molly's support, Vivian decides to get a computer and reconnect with people from her past, particularly from the orphan train. After some time, Vivian asks Molly to help her find her daughter, and Molly helps Vivian sign up with an adoption registry. They find her daughter, Sarah Dunnell, who immediately arranges a visit to meet Vivian. As Molly helps Vivian prepare for Sarah's visit, she is filled with a sense of peace and resolution. The novel ends just after Vivian and Sarah make eye contact outside of Vivian's house.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Molly Ayer – Molly is one of the novel's two protagonists. She is an intelligent, opinionated, and reflective seventeen-year-old girl who lives with her foster parents, Ralph and Dina Thibodeaus, at their home in Spruce Harbor, Maine. Molly's father was a Penobscot Indian and her mother, Donna Ayer, is white. As a child, Molly lived with her parents in a trailer on the Penobscot Indian Island Reservation in Maine. When Molly was eight years old, her father died in a car accident. When her mother landed in jail a few months later, Molly was placed into the foster care system. She has lived in several foster care homes and struggles to develop trusting relationships with others. She has a boyfriend, Jack, and she is a vegetarian. Throughout the novel, her friendship with 91-year-old Vivian Daly transforms her ability to connect with others and accept herself.

Vivian Daly / Niamh Power / "Dorothy" – Vivian/Niamh is the novel's second protagonist. Christened as "Niamh Power", she was born in Kinvara, County Galway in Ireland in 1920. As a young child, she immigrated to New York with her parents and siblings. Her father and brothers died in a house fire in 1929, while her mother was placed in a mental hospital. Niamh was then sent off to the Midwest on the orphan train. In Minnesota, she moved between two abusive adoptive families (who renamed her "Dorothy") before finding her way to the Niensens, the affluent couple who renamed her "Vivian" and raised her. Vivian was married twice, first to Luke Maynard ("Dutchy") and then to Jim Daly. She is the biological mother of Sarah Darnell, who she gave up for adoption. As a 91-year-old widow living a lonely life, Vivian finds peace by recounting the story of her life to Molly Ayer and cleaning out **her attic** together. Vivian/Niamh has red curly hair and freckles.

Ralph Thibodeaus – Ralph is Molly's current foster father. He works as a plumber in Spruce Harbor. Inspired by his own experience as a troubled teen, he convinced his wife, Dina, to become foster parents. Ralph is even-tempered and often tries to play the role of mediator during Molly and Dina's frequent fights. Though he is generally kind to Molly, he fails to protect her from Dina's fits of anger.

Donna Ayer / Molly's Mother – Donna is Molly's birth mother. She is white and comes from a low-income background. During Molly's childhood, she worked at a mini-mart. She gave Molly presents and arranged fun activities, but her struggle with depression sometimes led to her neglecting Molly. After the death of Molly's father, Donna developed a problem with drugs and ended up in jail. Molly soon lost contact with her.

Mr. Ayer / Molly's Father – Mr. Ayer is Molly's father. He was a Penobscot Indian who was proud of his cultural heritage and made an effort to share it with Molly. He had a problem with alcohol abuse, however, and died in a car accident when Molly was eight years old. The **charm necklace** Molly wears was a birthday gift from her father.

Jack – Jack is Molly's boyfriend. His mother, Terry Gallant, is white and his father is Dominican. His parents weren't married and his father left his mother to return to the Dominican Republic. Jack is intelligent, athletic, and optimistic. He feels responsible for Molly and tries to help her manage her life and stay out of trouble.

Patrick Power/ "Da" – Patrick Power ("Da") is Vivian/Niamh's biological father. Born in Ireland at the turn of the twentieth century, he immigrates to New York with his wife Mary and his three children, Niamh, Dominick, and James. In New York, he works at an Irish pub. His daughter Maisie is born in New York. Patrick has a problem with alcoholism, and he loves to sing. He dies in a house fire in 1929, along with his two sons.

Mary Power/ "Mam" – Mary Power ("Mam") is Vivian/Niamh's biological mother. Born in Ireland at the turn of the twentieth century, she immigrates to New York with her husband Patrick and her three children, Niamh, Dominick, and James. She becomes pregnant with her daughter Maisie during the voyage to America. Mary is frequently depressed, which can make her neglectful of her children. Still, she values education and teaches Niamh to read. In Ireland, Mary's fights with Niamh's Gram are part of the series of events that lead to their family's departure from Ireland. After Mary's husband and sons die in a house fire, Mary is institutionalized in a mental hospital.

Gram – Gram is Vivian/Niamh's biological grandmother. She is the mother of Patrick Power. She is born in Ireland in the late 1800s and remains there even after her son emigrates. Gram is a good cook and treats Niamh kindly. She gives Niamh the **claddagh cross** that Niamh will wear throughout her life. Tired of supporting her son Patrick's family and fighting with her daughter-in-law Mary, Gram plays a key role in sending Niamh

and her family away to New York.

Grandad – Grandad is Vivian/Niamh’s grandfather, the husband of “Gram” and the father of Patrick Power. He is born in Ireland in the late 1800s and remains there even after his son emigrates. He is kind to Niamh, but plays a key role in sending Niamh and her family away to New York.

Margaret (“Maisie”) – Maisie is Vivian/Niamh’s biological little sister. She is conceived during the voyage to America and born in New York in 1927. As a child, Niamh is responsible for taking care of her little sister and forms a strong bond with her. In 1929, a house fire kills her father and brothers. The family’s neighbors, the Schatzmans, lie to Niamh and tell her that the fire killed Maisie, too—but they actually adopt her and raise her as their daughter. Maisie moves to upstate New York, marries and has children and grandchildren. She dies just months before Vivian discovers that she survived the fire. Unlike Vivian/Niamh, Maisie has blonde hair.

Mr. and Mrs. Schatzman – Mr. and Mrs. Schatzman are Niamh’s neighbors on Elizabeth Street in New York in the 1920s. They are a middle-aged couple who emigrated from Germany. They care for Niamh in the days after the house fire that kills her father and brothers, and take her to the Children’s Aid Society. They tell her that her sister, Maisie, died in the fire, but years later, Vivian/Niamh discovers that they adopted Maisie.

Dutchy / Hans / Luke Maynard – Dutchy is Vivian/Niamh’s true love. He is born in New York in the late 1910s to German parents. After escaping his abusive father to live on the streets as a shoe-shiner, Dutchy is taken in by the Children’s Aid Society. They send him out on the orphan train, where he befriends Niamh. He grows up in Minnesota, moving between adoptive families. He and Vivian/Niamh fall in love and marry after reuniting as adults. As an adult, he works as a musician and music teacher. He dies during battle in World War II. Dutchy is smart, impulsive, creative, and passionate.

Raymond Byrne – Mr. Byrne is Vivian/Niamh’s first adoptive father. Born in Minnesota, Mr. Byrne’s family comes from Ireland. He is cheerful and talkative. He and his wife Lois own a ladies’ garment business run out of his home in Albans, Minnesota. Mr. Byrne is friendly with Vivian/Niamh, who he and his wife call “Dorothy.” But he does nothing to challenge his wife’s stern rules and poor treatment of her. At his wife’s request, the couple kicks “Dorothy” out after several months.

Lois Byrne – Lois Byrne is Vivian/Niamh’s first adoptive mother. She is stern, cold, and controlling. She and her husband, Mr. Byrne, own a ladies’ garment business run out of their home in Albans, Minnesota. Mrs. Byrne dislikes Vivian/Niamh, who she renames “Dorothy,” and makes it clear from the beginning that she doesn’t want to play the role of her mother. After several months, Mrs. Byrne kicks Vivian/Niamh out. Mrs. Byrne has a mental breakdown after the Depression forces her

and her husband’s business to go bankrupt. She dies after walking into a snowstorm not long after.

Mr. Sorenson – Mr. Sorenson is the local social worker for the Children’s Aid Society in the Albans-Hemingford region of Minnesota in the late 1920s. After the Byrnes kick Vivian/Niamh (called “Dorothy” at the time) out of their home, Mr. Sorenson relocates her to the home of the Grotes. He is kind and sympathetic to “Dorothy” at first, but when the Grotes mistreat her and throw her back out onto the streets, Mr. Sorenson begins blaming her for her situation.

Wilma Grote – Wilma Grote is Vivian/Niamh’s second adoptive mother. She lives with her husband Gerald in a shack in the woods outside of Hemingford, Minnesota in the late 1920s. They have four children, and Mrs. Grote becomes pregnant again during “Dorothy’s” time living with them. Mrs. Grote is depressed and irritable, and sleeps all day. She doesn’t seem to like her children. She takes little interest in “Dorothy,” who she expects to take over the work of caring for her home and children. She kicks “Dorothy” out after she discovers her husband trying to rape her.

Gerald Grote – Gerald Grote is Vivian/Niamh’s second adoptive father. He lives with his wife Wilma in a shack in the woods outside of Hemingford, Minnesota in the late 1920s. They have four children. Like his wife, Gerald doesn’t want his children and frequently neglects them. He enjoys hunting, fishing, and farming, and tries to live a self-sustaining life so that he doesn’t have to have a job. He takes an inappropriate interest in Vivian/Niamh (called “Dorothy” at the time), and ultimately tries to rape her.

Miss Larsen – Miss Larsen is the teacher at the rural schoolhouse Vivian/Niamh attends in Hemingford County, Minnesota. Miss Larsen’s parents have both passed away, and she lives with other unmarried women in a ladies’ boardinghouse in Hemingford, run by Mrs. Murphy. Miss Larsen is gentle, cheerful and intelligent. She is especially kind to Vivian/Niamh (called “Dorothy” at the time). After the Grotes kick “Dorothy” out, Miss Larsen takes care of her and arranges for her to stay with her at the home of Mrs. Murphy.

Mrs. Murphy/“Miss Larsen’s Landlady” – Mrs. Murphy is the matron of the ladies’ boardinghouse where Miss Larsen lives in the town of Hemingford, Minnesota. Originally from Ireland, Mrs. Murphy is a widow. She takes in Vivian/Niamh and, with the help of Miss Larsen, helps her to find a safe permanent home. Mrs. Murphy is opinionated, authoritative, and warm. She is a good cook and runs an efficient house. She is especially gentle and generous with Vivian/Niamh, who she calls “Niamh.”

Viola Nielsen – Viola Nielson is Vivian/Niamh’s third and only legal adoptive mother. She is descended from Swedish Romani who migrated to the United States. She and her husband, Mr. Nielsen, run a successful general store in the town of Hemingford, Minnesota. They had a biological daughter, Vivian

Nielsen, who died as a child from diphtheria. Mr. and Mrs. Nielsen ultimately ask “Dorothy” to take on the name of their late daughter, Vivian. Mrs. Nielsen is kind and provides well for Vivian/Niamh’s needs, but she and Vivian/Niamh never become deeply emotionally connected.

Mr. Nielsen – Mr. Nielsen is Vivian/Niamh’s third and only legal adoptive father. He and his wife, Mrs. Nielsen, run a successful general store in the town of Hemingford, Minnesota. They had a biological daughter, Vivian Nielsen, who died as a child from diphtheria. Mr. and Mrs. Nielsen ultimately ask “Dorothy” to take on the name of their late daughter, the first Vivian Nielsen. Mr. Nielsen is generous and provides well for Vivian/Niamh’s needs. But just as with his wife, he and Vivian/Niamh never become deeply emotionally connected.

Sarah Dunnell/ “May” – Sarah is the biological child Vivian/Niamh has with her first husband, Dutchy. At birth, Vivian/Niamh names her daughter “May” after her sister, Maisie, who shares Sarah’s blonde hair. Sarah’s biological father, Dutchy, dies in battle while Vivian/Niamh is pregnant with Sarah. Overwhelmed by grief, Vivian/Niamh gives her daughter up for adoption. Sarah then grows up wondering about her birth mother’s identity and story. She becomes a successful musician and music teacher, has children and grandchildren, and lives in North Dakota. At the age of sixty-eight, she meets her birth mother for the first time. She is the grandmother of Becca.

Molly Molasses – Molly Molasses (or Molly Pelagie) was a famous Penobscot elder who lived from 1775-1867. She was known for her powers as a medicine woman as well as her courage and strength. Among her people, she was believed to have *m’téoulin*, a magical force that gives one the power to help the sick and needy and to defend against one’s enemies. Molly was married to John Neptune, a “second chief” to the Penobscot nation. Molly Ayer is named after her.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Dina Thibodeaus – Dina is Molly’s current foster mother. She works as a police dispatcher. She is politically conservative and frequently expresses her judgment of others for their social status, race, and appearance. She is suspicious of Molly and disapproves of her vegetarianism. Dina and Molly frequently fight.

Terry Gallant – Terry is Jack’s mother. She is white. She was a popular cheerleader in high school, and she wasn’t married to Jack’s father. She works as a housekeeper for Vivian. She is loyal to Vivian, protective of Jack and initially suspicious of Molly.

Lori – Lori is Molly’s social worker. She is energetic and direct. She encourages Molly to stay on track and treats Molly like she is smart and capable.

Mr. Reed – Mr. Reed is Molly’s American History teacher. He teaches a section on Native American history in which the local

Penobscot tribe is featured. He nominates Molly for a history prize for a school project she creates featuring Vivian’s life story.

Tyler Baldwin – Tyler is a student in Molly’s American History class.

Megan McDonald – Megan is a student in Molly’s American History class.

Dominick and James Power – Dominick and James are Vivian/Niamh’s twin brothers. They are born in Ireland around 1923, and immigrate with their parents and sister to New York. They die in a house fire in 1929.

Jim Daly – Jim is Vivian/Niamh’s second husband and the former shipmate to her first husband, Dutchy. Vivian/Niamh gets along well with Jim, who is even-tempered and practical, but they are never in love. They have no children together, and are married for several decades.

Carmine – Carmine is the 18-month-old baby Vivian/Niamh takes care of and becomes attached to on the orphan train. He is adopted by a young couple in Minneapolis. As an elderly woman, Vivian/Niamh discovers that Carmine grew up to be a salesman, married, and had many children and grandchildren.

Mrs. Scatcherd – Mrs. Scatcherd is the matron of the orphan train during Vivian/Niamh, Dutchy and Carmine’s ride. She is smart, strict, and authoritative, but wishes the children well and does her best to take care of their needs on the train. She works alongside Mr. Curran.

Mr. Curran – Mr. Curran is the second adult supervisor of the orphan train during Vivian/Niamh, Dutchy, and Carmine’s ride. He is well intended but is noticeably less able to manage the children than his colleague, Mrs. Scatcherd.

Fanny – Fanny is the kind elderly woman who works as a seamstress for the Byrnes’ garment business in Albans, Minnesota. She is their most trusted employee. She immediately welcomes Vivian/Niamh (renamed “Dorothy” at the time) and does her best to look after her.

Mary – Mary is the Byrnes’ youngest seamstress at the Byrnes’ garment business in Albans, Minnesota. She is cold and mean to Vivian/Niamh (renamed “Dorothy” at the time) because she is afraid that the Byrnes’ will replace her job with “Dorothy’s” unpaid labor.

Bernice, Joan, and Sally – Bernice, Joan, and Sally are three of the seamstresses who work for the Byrnes’ garment business in Albans, Minnesota. Vivian/Niamh (renamed “Dorothy” at the time) takes comfort in the company of the seamstresses, with the exception of Mary.

Mabel – Mabel is the three-year-old daughter of the Grotes, the poor rural family who adopt Vivian/Niamh (called “Dorothy” at the time) after the Byrnes. Like her siblings, Mabel is severely neglected and doesn’t seem to be developing normally.

Gerald Jr. – Gerald Jr. is the two-year-old son of the Grotes, the poor rural family who adopt Vivian/Niamh (called “Dorothy” at the time) after the Byrnes. Like his siblings, Gerald Jr. is severely neglected and doesn’t seem to be developing normally. He clings to “Dorothy” more than most of his siblings.

Nettie – Nettie is the baby daughter of the Grotes, the poor rural family who adopt Vivian/Niamh (called “Dorothy” at the time) after the Byrnes. Like her siblings, Nettie is severely neglected and doesn’t seem to be developing normally.

Harold – Harold is the six-year-old son of the Grotes, the poor rural family who adopt Vivian/Niamh (called “Dorothy” at the time) after the Byrnes. Like his siblings, Harold is severely neglected and doesn’t seem to be developing normally. He clings to “Dorothy” more than most of his siblings.

Mr. Post – Mr. Post is the man who helps Miss Larsen to operate the rural schoolhouse Vivian/Niamh attends in Hemingford County, Minnesota. Mr. Post is kind and discrete.

Lucy – Lucy is Niamh’s classmate at the rural schoolhouse she attends in Hemingford County, Minnesota.

The first Vivian Nielsen – Years before adopting Vivian/Niamh, Mr. Nielsen and his wife Viola have a biological daughter they name Vivian. She dies as a child of diphtheria. Niamh is then legally renamed as “Vivian” in memory of the Nielsen’s biological daughter.

Judy – Judy is Vivian/Niamh’s close friend during high school in Hemingford, Minnesota.

Lillian – Lillian is Vivian/Niamh’s close friend during college in Hemingford, Minnesota. Like their shared friend Emily, she is more worldly and outgoing than Vivian/Niamh. She is engaged to Richard.

Richard – Richard is the fiancée of Lillian, Vivian/Niamh’s close friend from college. He has a grandiose demeanor that is off-putting to Vivian/Niamh.

Emily – Emily is Vivian/Niamh’s close friend during college in Hemingford, Minnesota. Like their shared friend Lillian, she is more worldly and outgoing than Vivian/Niamh.

Becca – Becca is the granddaughter of Sarah Dunnell and the biological great-granddaughter of Vivian/Niamh. She “likes adventure” and has red hair and freckles just like Vivian/Niamh. She comes along with her grandmother to meet Vivian/Niamh for the first time.

Francis Fahy – Francis Fahy was an Irish poet, nationalist, and ballad composer from the 1880s to the 1930s. He was born and died in Kinvara in County Galway, Ireland, but launched his literary career in England.

coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



BELONGING AND CONNECTION

Molly Ayer and Vivian Daly, two women born in different places and eras and who were orphaned as young children, both struggle to find a sense of home and belonging. Because of the loss and betrayal they have suffered, they each find it difficult to open their hearts to new people. Ultimately, however, the two women form a friendship through storytelling and mutual acts of care and acceptance. Even though they both lack a conventional family, they find a sense of belonging and connection in their friendship with each other.

As orphaned children, Molly and Vivian (born “Niamh Power” and then renamed “Dorothy”) both suffer from loneliness and detachment resulting from having no family or community where they belong. Even when their physical needs are met, they seldom feel truly wanted by others. For example, as a child living in temporary adoptive homes, Vivian lives in constant fear of being thrown out. And even though she eventually finds a stable home, she continues to live in fear that she isn’t wanted.

Even when Vivian and Molly do feel wanted, they have trouble identifying with the emotions of others. For both women, this results in an overall feeling of disconnection. After multiple dangerous and uncaring foster families, Vivian is eventually placed with the Niensens, a loving, safe family who come to see her as their daughter. But even though she is safe and cared for, Vivian doesn’t identify with the Niensens or feel a sense of belonging with them. Vivian is from Ireland, and her adoptive parents express little interest in her culture and her family background. Instead, they expect her to assimilate seamlessly to their way of life, religion, and culture. They care for her, but they don’t fully see who she is. She respects and appreciates them, but she struggles to return their love.

Similarly, Molly has trouble forming friendships with her peers. Moving around frequently has made her feel like a perpetual outsider wherever she goes. Unlike Vivian, Molly hasn’t found a stable adoptive family: she continues to bounce between foster families throughout her childhood. With her foster parents Dina and Ralph, as with many foster parents before them, Molly feels that her place in their home is precarious and conditional. When Dina ultimately kicks Molly out, Molly is unsurprised. With the exception of her biological parents, most of the adults in Molly’s life haven’t made her feel loved or understood. It’s only when Molly moves in with Vivian that she finally feels a sense of unconditional love and acceptance.

Within the novel, being unconditionally loved and accepted is a prerequisite for feeling a sense of belonging. This is the kind of



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-

love that is generally provided by biological family members. Even though Vivian's Mam was often neglectful and her Da was an alcoholic, she at least felt a sense of belonging with her family. Likewise, Molly felt a sense of unconditional love and belonging with her biological parents, even though her parents weren't always able to provide materially or offer emotional support. For both girls, their families have an even deeper sense of belonging because of their shared cultural identity (Vivian's family is Irish and Molly's father is Penobscot Indian). When they were orphaned, both girls struggled to find a new sense of belonging and connection in their adoptive and foster care homes.

Over the course of the novel, both women come to realize that shared experiences can also help to build a sense of common identity. Even though Molly and Vivian have different backgrounds and a wide age difference, they share the common experience of having been orphaned as children. Their shared experience gives them insight into each other's experiences, and this in turn gives them a sense of belonging and connection with each other. They become like family to one another: they are able to provide each other with deeper support than the foster/adoptive families and friends they've had throughout their lives. Through the emotional progress they spur in each other, both women are able to open their hearts to new and healthier relationships with others. Molly takes steps to improve her relationships with her boyfriend, Jack, by becoming more honest with him, and after decades Vivian finally reopens her heart to love and family by making contact with the daughter she gave up for adoption. As they move forward in their other relationships, their friendship continues to provide them each with a central source of love and support.



SELF AND IDENTITY

Both Vivian and Molly struggle to maintain and define their identities in the face of changing, unreliable, and even hostile environments. Both

protagonists come into foster or adoptive care at a young age—before their identities and personalities have been fully formed—and both struggle to develop and define their identities in situations in which they do not feel the love and acceptance that would allow them to express themselves in authentic ways. Compounding this, both women have cultural identities that differ from the adults who take care of them, and, because of this, have difficulty determining whether and how they should assimilate to their new environments. The two main characters ultimately accept their unique identities and incorporate their various experiences into their senses of self.

As the novel reveals, cultural background is strongly linked to a sense of self. As Irish immigrants to the United States, Vivian's family has a sense of belonging with each other and a sense of alienation from the culture of their new country. Similarly,

Molly has a shared cultural identity with her father, Mr. Ayer, who is a Penobscot Indian, and this connection made her feel that she belonged with him. After the death of their parents, both Molly and Vivian are placed in foster care and adoptive homes where their cultural backgrounds are criticized and marginalized. As a consequence, they are both forced to try to assimilate to their new environments, which creates a sense in both girls that they are becoming estranged from their identities and pasts.

As a consequence of their changing environments, the main characters are forced to become several different "selves." As a child born in rural Ireland, Vivian is christened as "Niamh." When she comes to New York with her family, she must confront a new culture. After she is orphaned and taken in by the Byrnes, Niamh is renamed "Dorothy" because the Byrnes believe that "she should have an American name." She remains Dorothy until she is adopted by the Niensens, who ask her take on the name of their deceased daughter, Vivian. Each new name represents a change in Vivian's identity and a new incarnation of her self that reflects her environment.

In Molly's case, it's her presentation of herself, rather than her name, that changes with each new home and environment. In order to cope with the changing expectations of each new foster family, Molly becomes an expert in molding and adapting herself to fit her environment. Eventually, she turns her skill at adaptation into an opportunity to reinvent herself. In each new foster home, Molly changes her style of dress, hair, and makeup to create a new "persona." While living with Ralph and Dina, Molly darkens her hair and wears heavy makeup and jewelry to present herself as "goth." Instead of considering herself helpless in the face of changing expectations, she chooses to turn reinvention into a way of claiming her own identity.

Although adaptation is a helpful tool for survival, the main characters feel safe and connected to others only when their full selves and identities are seen and embraced. It's only when young Vivian reunites with Dutchy, the boy she met as a child on the orphan train, that she feels free to fully express herself without fear of judgment. As an orphan himself, Dutchy shares a common experience with her. Because she is able to talk about and express her true self without any need for adaptation, she feels safe with him. For the first time in years, she is able to let go of pretense and open her heart, which enables her to fall in love with him.

Similarly, after years of trying to negotiate the demands and expectations of foster families, Molly describes a feeling of "freedom" when she moves in with Vivian. Unlike her foster families and others in her life, Vivian understands and empathizes with Molly's past and the effects her past has had on her. As a consequence, Vivian is able to fully accept and embrace Molly without misunderstanding or judgment. With Vivian, Molly feels free to reconnect with herself and her emotions.



SAFETY AND SURVIVAL

As children, Molly and Vivian both become responsible for their own survival, and they struggle to find a place in which they feel safe physically and emotionally. Their safety is often threatened, making them vulnerable to exploitation and abuse—and even when their safety isn't immediately threatened, their status as orphaned children makes them vulnerable to the whims of strangers, which prevents them from ever feeling truly safe. Their struggle makes them strong and resourceful, but it also forces them to repress their emotions in order to concentrate on survival. Nevertheless, they both ultimately find a place in the world where they feel safe.

Without consistent guardians, both Vivian and Molly are vulnerable to exploitation, abuse, and neglect. In response to abusive and exploitative caregivers, both girls become skeptical and distrusting of others. For example, at the Byrnes', Vivian is underfed, exploited for free labor, and abandoned to care for herself. At the home of the Grotes, she is also underfed, left to sleep in the cold, and sexually abused by Mr. Grote. After these experiences, she becomes distrustful of the intentions of others. She moves forward in life assuming that most people are selfish and potentially dangerous. Similarly, Molly's experiences of neglect, physical abuse, and sexual exploitation while in foster care have led her to believe that most adults are selfish, deceitful, and unreliable. She sees herself as being the only person responsible for her survival, and she struggles to trust the intentions and reliability of others.

As the novel illustrates, a sense of safety also requires having a stable, secure home and family. Conversely, a feeling of being unsafe results from living in an unstable or temporary home, or living with the constant risk of rejection. After losing their parents, both Molly and Vivian are left to move between temporary families. The temporary nature of foster care (and in Vivian's case, adoptive care in the 1920s) keeps them from developing a secure sense of home and belonging. In each new home, they run the risk of being ejected if their presence becomes unwanted. This creates a constant fear of rejection. Even when the girls' physical safety isn't endangered, they have no guarantee of how long they will be welcomed and cared for in each home.

With no consistent guardians to keep them safe, Vivian and Molly must both be vigilant about their own survival—and their struggle to survive requires them to repress their emotions in order to continue moving forward. Because they are in "survival mode," their energy and effort is entirely dedicated to self-protection. This produces a drain on their emotional energy, which then disrupts their ability to feel and express normal emotions and to invest in building human connections with others. For example, as a child temporarily living with the Grote family, Vivian feels no love or connection to the other Grote children. She knows that they need love, but she only has

enough energy to perform her household chores, feed the children, and take herself to school—she doesn't have the strength or resources to provide the love that the other children should be getting from their parents. When Vivian finds a stable home with the Niensens, however, she again begins to feel capable of empathy, as evidenced by her interest in the hungry homeless children who visit her adoptive parents' general store.

For both women, a lifetime of focusing primarily on physical and emotional survival often means moving forward without fully managing the trauma of the past. Moving forward involves going through the motions of building a new life without acknowledging one's underlying emotional needs and experiences. After so many experiences of abuse, neglect, hunger and deprivation, Vivian simply craves a comfortable, safe home above all else. But while she craves love and a sense of belonging, she also desperately fears the risks associated with these pursuits. When her fear of loss materializes in the death of her husband, Dutchy, she retreats yet again into focusing on her survival, repressing her lifetime of grief and eliminating any possibility of risk by marrying someone she doesn't love deeply. Similarly, Molly tries not to think about how she misses her parents or to consider her sense of loneliness and fear. Instead, she is always focused on holding herself together and finding a safe next place to live. One of the many reasons she resists forming attachment is that it is easier to let go, bounce back, and move forward after loss when she isn't attached to people and places. For both women, their friendship ultimately gives them a sense of physical and emotional safety and security that then frees them to address their emotional needs for meaning and connection.



TRAUMA AND LOSS

The novel is riddled with traumatic events and losses that are beyond Molly and Vivian's control.

These events shape their outlook and their sense of the world, and impair their ability to feel safe and connected to others. Yet, as both Molly and Vivian learn, it is necessary to recover from and process trauma in order to fully reconcile with oneself, move forward in life, and develop new attachments and connections.

Both Molly and Vivian's lives are characterized not by one single defining trauma but rather by the accumulation of different traumas over time. Since they don't have the social support needed to recover from traumatic events as they happen, they both get in the habit of repressing their emotions in order to move forward. They become intent only on preventing future traumatic events, rather than on grappling with what has happened in the past. These losses mark turning points in their development that continue to haunt them throughout their lives. Because they are each forced to focus on the present and on finding a safe place to live, they are

unable to properly process and recover from past losses. As a consequence, they carry their trauma with them into the future.

The primary trauma for both Molly and Vivian is the loss of their parents at an early age. When they experience additional traumatic events, such as neglect and sexual exploitation, they are forced to repress their emotions. After being sexually abused, Vivian is focused entirely on preventing the Children's Aid Society from sending her back to the home where she was molested. When the Niensens adopt her, they fail to express interest in her past experiences, instead expecting her to move forward as part of their family, essentially pretending that she had no past before them. As a result, she keeps her abuse a secret for many years.

As Molly and Vivian's experiences demonstrate, unprocessed and unresolved past traumas create difficulties in the present. In particular, past traumatic events can make it difficult to move forward in new relationships and to form new connections. After the death of Vivian's first husband, Dutchy, she chooses to give her baby May up for adoption. Years later as an elderly woman, while telling Molly the story of how she gave up her baby, Vivian explains that she couldn't bear to let herself love again. After losing her biological parents, her siblings, and then Dutchy, Vivian doesn't want to let herself risk the pain of potentially losing her child. In effect, Vivian deals with traumatic losses by closing her heart to future connections.

In a similar way, after several dangerous and unstable experiences with foster care families, Molly struggles to trust the adults in her life. When she first meets Vivian, she is initially resentful and distrustful of Vivian's character. Molly approaches her peers with a sense of wariness, and she therefore has difficulty forming friendships. Similarly, despite her boyfriend Jack's constant expressions of commitment and displays of love, she maintains a sense of paranoia that he'll change his mind and leave her. Like Vivian, Molly copes with her past traumatic losses by becoming secretive, distrusting, and closed off.

But, as both women discover, supportive relationships—in particular, relationships in which a person can talk about one's past—provide a therapeutic space for traumatic events to be processed and for their effects to be resolved. Vivian and Molly's supportive, nonjudgmental friendship gives them both the space to discuss the difficult parts of their pasts with one another. Together, they acknowledge and process their respective traumas and unresolved struggles. Through their mutual support, they are able to finally overcome the lingering impact of past traumas and are emotionally freed to move forward with their lives and relationships.



SECRETS, REALITY, AND ILLUSIONS

Within the novel, appearances are often deceiving. Over time, this creates illusions about reality that can have detrimental consequences for the vulnerable protagonists. At the same time, secrets and pretenses may also help to aid vulnerable people in their survival. Ultimately, Vivian and Molly discover that liberation from secrets and illusions is part of the process of reconciling with past mistakes and trauma in order to move forward.

As Vivian and Molly discover, misleading appearances can be dangerous, especially during moments of extreme vulnerability. For example, Mr. Sorenson, the social worker with the Children's Aid Society in Minnesota, believes that something is wrong with Niamh because she has been ejected from two foster families in a row, and both times by the woman of the house. Mr. Sorenson quickly assumes that his perception of reality is accurate, and that this pattern is the consequence of Niamh's character deficiencies. In reality, however, she has had the bad luck of being placed into two abusive foster homes where the foster mother didn't really want her there in the first place. Acting on his misguided interpretation of events, Mr. Sorenson tries to send Niamh back to the home where she was molested, which would have again threatened her safety. Luckily for Niamh, Mrs. Murphy, the innkeeper, arranges an alternate home for Niamh, which saves her from the consequences of the misunderstanding.

As Niamh's other experiences show, intentional lies may also be harmful, particularly for vulnerable individuals. Niamh's first foster family, the Byrnes, pretend to be adopting a child when, in reality, they are using adoption in order to get free labor for their clothing business. And after Mr. Grote molests Niamh, he and his wife throw her out into the cold with the intention of lying to social workers about it later (even if she should die).

At the same time, however, intentional deceit can also help vulnerable individuals in their survival. As a child, Niamh hides or minimizes her Irish Catholic background in order to better assimilate into the Protestant Midwestern households in which she is placed. In her first foster home, she also lies to Mrs. Byrne when she is blamed for "stealing food": her family isn't feeding her enough, so she is forced to steal food and lie about it in order to survive. In Molly's case, she believes that she must lie to Vivian about the purpose of her "community service" help so that Vivian will agree to participate. She tells Vivian she is doing a community service project for school, but in reality, she is on probation for stealing a book from the library, and she must complete a community service project or else face time in juvenile detention. If Molly goes to "juvie," she will lose her foster care placement and face a criminal record. Molly knows that if she tells Vivian the truth, she may refuse to sponsor Molly's project. Facing the risk of juvenile detention, Molly sees lying to Vivian as her only opportunity to get out of a bad situation.

Sometimes secrets and omissions of information allow the characters to create false illusions that serve their purposes. For example, Vivian never tells her second husband, Jim Daly, the full truth about her childhood as an orphan. She also keeps it a secret that she had a baby who she gave up for adoption. She keeps these secrets because she doesn't want to think about the hard parts of her past. By keeping them a secret from her husband, she is able to pretend they never happened. This gives her a sense of a clean slate, although in reality she remains deeply affected by her experiences.

The novel presents the idea that everyone, at one time or another, relies on illusions to get through life. As Vivian tells Molly when she learns about Molly's lie, "We all come under false pretenses." In Vivian's view and in the view of the novel, the tendency toward "pretense" is a common part of human behavior. This removes some of the stigma and judgment from falseness, as it is a common and often necessary human flaw.

While illusions and pretense may be useful, the novel conveys the idea that, in order to know and understand another person fully, one must know the truth about that person's history. While secrets can sometimes be helpful for survival and coping in the moment, telling the truth can lead the characters to longer-term peace, reconciliation, and hope. As they clean out **Vivian's attic** and review the relics of her past together, Molly and Vivian provide each other with the opportunity to tell their full stories and reveal their full identities. Each of them has managed to get through life by hiding behind illusions and adaptations of the self. However, through storytelling, mutual acceptance, and love, they are both able to find their way back to their true selves.



HOPE AND SKEPTICISM

In the aftermath of traumatic events and devastating losses, Molly and Vivian struggle to hold onto a sense of hope. In its place, they often

feel disillusionment and skepticism, particularly towards other people and human relationships in general. Ultimately, however, they discover that hope is a prerequisite to feeling connected to others—and connection, they learn, is what gives life meaning.

As Molly and Vivian demonstrate, skepticism makes risky emotional situations more palatable. Rather than expecting for things to turn out well, they learn that having "no expectations" makes it easier to cope when life doesn't go as expected or when people let them down. For example, Molly becomes progressively more disillusioned by each negative experience with foster care families. By the time Molly meets Vivian, she has chosen to stop nurturing a sense of hope and instead to expect the worst from people. Her cultivated sense of skepticism is evident from Molly's lack of surprise when Dina and Ralph kick her out after an argument. Throughout her story, Molly actively tries to defeat hope in order to prevent

disappointment.

In some cases, Molly and Vivian sabotage their own relationships because they are afraid of risking loss by giving in to hope. By interrupting and damaging their own relationships, they exercise control over loss rather than allowing themselves to be at the mercy of loss. After losing her parents, siblings, and then finally her one true love, Vivian determines that "loss is inevitable." She knows it will happen; life has taught her that it is beyond her control. She then decides that the only way to prevent loss is to keep from loving someone so much that losing the person would destroy her. So, she gives her baby up for adoption because she doesn't want to risk losing another person she loves. But despite this, she already loves her baby, and her attempt to avoid hope only forces her to compound her suffering with yet another loss, this time at her own hands.

In a similar way, Molly often tries to push away her boyfriend, Jack, despite his efforts to trust her and deepen their relationship. The more love and acceptance Jack shows, the more Molly tries to show him the darker parts of herself in order to "test" his love. She doesn't want to let herself believe that Jack is sincere and that they have a possibility of a successful relationship, since doing so would mean risking disappointment if things don't work out. Because human relationships always run the risk of loss, Molly, like Vivian, believes that forming deep human connection isn't worth the risk.

Despite their fears that they are "broken," Molly and Vivian's ability to regrow and renew their sense of faith in others shows both their resilience and the resilience of the human ability to hope. Both Vivian and Molly try to hold onto hope throughout their journeys as orphans. Despite the immense loss of her family, Vivian nurtures the hope that someone will pick her and take her in. Even after she is exploited, neglected, and rejected by the Byrnes, she indulges in imagining a beautiful, cheerful home at her next family, the Grotes. Only after her devastating experience of neglect and sexual abuse with the Grotes does she give up on hoping for a traditional home and family. But then again, after she is shown kindness by her teacher, Miss Larsen, and the landlady, Mrs. Murphy, she begins to regain some sense of hope. And years later, after decades of loneliness and disconnection, Vivian allows her sense of hope to be restored by Molly's friendship. Her experiences suggest that hope can never be permanently destroyed. Rather, it grows and fades depending on an individual's experiences.

As Molly and Vivian both learn, deep human connection is essential for life to be meaningful. For both women, cultivating a reliable and loving friendship opens the door to regaining a sense of hope. Because the source of their hopelessness is their distrust in the love or consistency of others, their ability to find love and consistency in their friendship serves to revive their respective senses of hope. As their friendship progresses, they each make progress in deepening their other human

relationships. Vivian finally chooses to find and reach out to her long-lost daughter, and Molly deepens her relationship with her boyfriend and his mother. Through the understanding and trust they build with each other, they are able to regain a sense of faith in people in general.



SYMBOLS

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



THE CLADDAGH CROSS / VIVIAN'S NECKLACE

Like Molly Ayer, Vivian/Niamh has a necklace from her birth family that holds deep sentimental value. As a young girl, Niamh Power's Gram gave her a claddagh cross necklace. The pewter necklace has two hands holding a heart in the center. The claddagh cross is a Celtic symbol that Vivian/Niamh considers to represent love, friendship, loyalty, and the journey that leads from home and back. Vivian/Niamh wears the necklace throughout her childhood and most of her adulthood. It represents her cultural identity and history, as well as her emotional connection to her homeland and her birth family. In Vivian/Niamh's life, she ultimately finds her way back to her family and her origins by coming to terms with her past and by reuniting with the daughter she gave up for adoption, Sarah Dunnell.



THE THREE PEWTER CHARMS / MOLLY'S CHARM NECKLACE

Like Vivian/Niamh, Molly Ayer also has a necklace from her birth family that holds deep sentimental value. Molly's charm necklace was a birthday gift from her father (Mr. Ayer) for her eighth birthday, given to her just a couple weeks before his death. The necklace is made of three inexpensive pewter charms. As explained by Molly's father, each charm is an important animal with symbolic power in Penobscot culture. The teddy bear represents the Maine black bear and imparts courage. The bird represents the raven, which has the power to protect from "bad spells." The fish imparts the power to resist bad influences and forces. The necklace is precious to Molly, and as a child growing up in the foster care system, she puts she necklace on every time she has to move to a new home. For Molly, the necklace represents the strength and comfort she finds in the memory of her family. It also represents her connection to her past and her cultural identity as a Penobscot Indian.



THE ATTIC / BOXES IN THE ATTIC

Vivian's attic represents the unresolved matter of her past. Throughout Vivian/Niamh's long life, she has loved and lost many important people. She has experienced many traumatic and difficult events that she has never processed emotionally and has kept secret to herself for many years. Because she hasn't processed and reconciled her feelings about the people and events in her life, she has carried her past with her into the present. As she has moved through life, she has likewise accumulated countless boxes full of objects that tell the story of her life. As Vivian/Niamh cleans out her attic with the help of Molly Ayer, the two women discuss the symbolic importance and the story of each item. The process of cleaning out the attic represents Vivian/Niamh's process of acknowledging and making peace with her past.



PORTAGING

As part of her American history class, Molly Ayer learns about the Wabanaki Indian custom of "portaging." "Portaging" literally refers to carrying a canoe or boat and all its contents from one body of water to another, and in the book, this usually means carrying everything one owns to get to a new home. Like Molly and Vivian/Niamh, the people of the Wabanaki Confederation (of which the Penobscot Nation was part) had to "carry their homes on their backs" whenever they had to migrate. As Mr. Reed, Molly's history teacher explains, "portaging" then partly refers to the process of choosing what to take and what to leave behind as one makes the journey forward in life. Within the context of the novel, "portaging" symbolizes the life journeys of Molly and Vivian and the balance they must both toggle between letting go of the past and holding onto important memories and connections.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the William Morrow edition of *Orphan Train* published in 2013.

Chapter 1 Quotes

☝ The charms are all she has left of what used to be her life.

Related Characters: Mr. Ayer / Molly's Father, Molly Ayer

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

On the night of this passage, Molly's foster parents, Ralph and Dina, are arguing in the other room about whether or not to let Molly stay with them. Molly has recently been arrested, and she feels certain that Dina will persuade Ralph to kick her out. Whenever she fears being displaced, she puts on the charm necklace her father gave her for her eighth birthday.

The necklace has three animal charms, each representing a symbolic animal in Penobscot culture (at least as her father described them). The charms represent Molly's connection to her Penobscot origins, as well as her connection to her parents. After her father's death and her mother's imprisonment, Molly's life changed completely. The loss of her parents meant the loss of her family, her home, and her connection to her cultural origins. Molly keeps the necklace as a link to her past and a reminder of the parents who loved her. By putting on the necklace when she fears being displaced, Molly comforts herself with the memory of love, belonging, and a sense of identity.

Even after getting into trouble like this and probably getting sent away, she knows she'd never have asked Jack to buy the book. If there is one thing she hates most about being in the foster care system, it's this dependence on people you barely know, your vulnerability to their whims. She has learned not to expect anything from anybody.

Related Characters: Molly Ayer, Jack

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

Molly has just admitted to her boyfriend, Jack, that she *was* guilty of the stealing the book she was arrested for. Jack is disappointed by the news, and tells Molly she should just have asked him to buy the book for her. As Molly's thoughts illustrate, she would rather face serious consequences than ask for Jack's financial help.

As a child growing up in the foster care system, Molly has been forced to rely on strangers to provide for all of her needs. Her use of the word "whims" implies that the unpredictability of her adult caregivers has taught her not to have high expectations of others. Being vulnerable to other people is emotionally dangerous because it can lead to rejection and disappointment. To preserve her emotional health, Molly has learned to become as independent from

others as possible. Even though Jack wants to help Molly, she isn't ready for the kind of vulnerability and emotional entanglement that he expects.

Chapter 4 Quotes

But Mr. Schatzman frowns and shakes his head, and it's then that I realize just how alone I am. There is no adult on this side of the Atlantic who has reason to take any interest in me, no one to guide me onto a boat or pay for my passage. I am a burden to society, and nobody's responsibility.

Related Characters: Vivian Daly / Niamh Power / "Dorothy" (speaker), Mr. and Mrs. Schatzman

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

A few days after the house fire that killed her father and led to her mother's commitment to a mental hospital, Niamh asks Mr. Schatzman if he thinks there is any chance he could help her find relatives in Ireland. Mr. Schatzman "shakes his head," implying that he either has no way of finding them, or no interest in making the effort.

Mr. Schatzman's response shows his lack of personal investment in resolving Niamh's situation. This, coupled with the realization that she has no way of contacting her family in Ireland, makes Niamh realize "how alone" she has become. As an orphan, she has not only lost the people close to her, but been left without anyone who is "responsible" for her. Her reflections illustrate the novel's interest in the psychological reality of orphaned children. As a child, Niamh depends on the consistent care of adult guardians to provide for and protect her. More than an adult experiencing loss, a child experiencing loss is left with an uncertain and vulnerable future.

No one feels sorry for me because I've lost my family. Each of us has a sad tale; we wouldn't be here otherwise. The general feeling is that it's best not to talk about the past, that the quickest relief will come in forgetting.

Related Characters: Vivian Daly / Niamh Power / "Dorothy" (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis

At this moment, nine-year-old Niamh is with a large group of other orphaned children under the care of the Children's Aid Society. They are all awaiting the arrival of the orphan train, which will carry them to towns throughout the Midwest where they will be given up for adoption to new families.

Rather than feeling a sense of comfort among other orphans, the desperate situation of the other children only normalizes and minimizes Niamh's pain. The focus of the Children's Aid Society and the adults helping to operate the orphan train is to find new homes for the children and to provide for their basic needs until they are adopted out. With the energy and resources of the staff focused only on ensuring the children's physical survival, there is no opportunity for Niamh, or any individual child, to have their emotional needs met. Further, each child is focused on his or her own pain and survival, leaving them no space to feel sorry for or comfort one another. This passage emphasizes the difference between physical and emotional needs. It further shows how one's own pain can make it difficult to feel empathy. Finally, it underscores the theme in Vivian's (Niamh's) life of pretending to "forget" the past as a coping mechanism.

☝ Our sponsors have told us little; we know only that we are going to a land where apples grow in abundance on low-hanging branches and cows and pigs and sheep roam freely in the fresh country air. A land where good people – families – are eager to take us in [...] But I am skeptical. I know all too well how it is when the beautiful visions you've been fed don't match up with reality.

Related Characters: Vivian Daly / Niamh Power / "Dorothy" (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

At this point, nine-year-old Niamh is boarding the orphan train, along with a large group of children under the care of the Children's Aid Society. The orphan train will carry them to towns throughout the Midwest where they will be given up for adoption to new families. The "sponsors" – the staff at the Children's Aid Society – have told the children that they

will have better, happier lives in the country. As Niamh's thoughts illustrate, the Children's Aid workers have given the children a romanticized image of Midwestern life and of the families who will adopt them.

Niamh's skepticism points to how her earlier life experiences have taught her not to believe all of the promises she is told. As a child leaving Ireland for America, she was promised that her new life would be better and more prosperous. Yet in New York, she encountered poverty and the loss of her family. Despite her young age, Niamh is already learning to temper her hopes in order to prevent disappointment. Throughout her life, her tendency toward skepticism will be one of many coping mechanisms she uses to manage her losses. Like Molly, she has learned to have low expectations of her future and of other people.

Chapter 7 Quotes

☝☝ Dina purses her lips and cocks her head, clearly trying to gauge whether Molly's praise is sincere. Well, Dina, Molly thinks, it is and it isn't. Thank you for taking me in and feeding me. But if you think you can squash my ideals, force me to eat meat when I told you I don't, expect me to care about your aching back when you don't seem the slightest bit interested in my life, you can forget it. I'll play your fucking game. But I don't have to play by your rules.

Related Characters: Dina Thibodeaus, Molly Ayer

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

At dinner one night, Molly's foster mother, Dina, cooks hamburger helper – even though she knows Molly is a vegetarian. Despite her displeasure that Dina continues to serve her meat, Molly thanks Dina and compliments the food. Dina responds to Molly's compliment with uncertainty. Earlier in the evening, Dina talked about her day at work and complained about her back hurting. However, she didn't ask Molly about school or about her day.

Because Dina knows that Molly is a vegetarian, her choice to continue serving her meat takes on symbolic importance. To Molly, it represents Dina's refusal to acknowledge Molly's autonomy, identity, and right to control elements of her own life and body. This, coupled with Dina's general disinterest in Molly's life, makes Molly feel unvalued and unseen by Dina. Molly's thoughts at this moment illustrate

that, despite her appreciation for having her basic needs met, she refuses to give Dina the constant compliance and gratitude Dina expects. Molly's thoughts reflect her refusal to allow Dina to make her feel indebted or to force her to compromise essential parts of herself.

Chapter 10 Quotes

☝☝ How strange, I think – that I am in a place my parents have never been and will never see. How strange that I am here and they are gone. I touch the claddagh cross around my neck.

Related Characters: Vivian Daly / Niamh Power / “Dorothy” (speaker), Patrick Power/ “Da”, Mary Power/ “Mam”

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

The orphan train has pulled into the Minneapolis station, where the first group of children will be selected and adopted by local families. As Niamh exits the train and enters the station, she considers what it means to come to a place where her parents have never been. Her parents were with her in Ireland and with her in New York, but now, for the first time, she is experiencing a new part of the world completely without them.

Niamh's realization at this moment reveals her growing awareness of herself as a separate entity from her parents. Until now, her sense of self has been largely intertwined with her family. The very idea that she could experience a place they have never been and will never see is confounding; it means that even after their death, she as an individual continues to live and exist. This speaks to a key element of Niamh's journey through life as she struggles to cope with loss and maintain a sense of purpose in life. By touching her claddagh cross, a gift from her Gram in Ireland, she comforts herself by holding onto the one thing she has left that connects her to her family. Even though they are gone, the necklace symbolizes her enduring connection as she keeps her memories of them with her.

Chapter 11 Quotes

☝☝ “For goodness’ sake, Raymond, it doesn’t matter what she thinks,” Mrs. Byrne snaps as she opens her car door. “Dorothy is our choice, and Dorothy she will be.”

Related Characters: Vivian Daly / Niamh Power / “Dorothy” (speaker), Raymond Byrne, Lois Byrne

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 72

Explanation and Analysis

At the train station in Albans, Minnesota, Mr. and Mrs. Byrne agree to take Niamh home with them. Before signing the papers required by the Children's Aid Society, Mrs. Byrne tells Niamh that she is looking for someone to help with their sewing business and that she has no intention of being a mother to Niamh. Upon arriving home that afternoon, Mr. and Mrs. Byrne tell Niamh they've agreed to change her name to Dorothy because it is a more “American” name. Mr. Byrne asks Niamh if she likes the name, and Mrs. Byrne here dismisses his concern.

Mrs. Byrne's attitude that it “doesn't matter” what Niamh wants illustrates her view that Niamh has no agency over her new life, and highlights Mrs. Byrne's exploitative sense of ownership over Niamh. Mrs. Byrne's view of Niamh as her property is further shown by the very choice to change Niamh's name, even though Mrs. Byrne has no desire to be Niamh's mother. The Byrnes' choice to give Niamh a more “American” name represents their view that she must assimilate in America and leave behind her Irish roots. And though he doesn't initiate this poor treatment of Niamh, Mr. Byrne is complicit by doing nothing to defend her.

Chapter 13 Quotes

☝☝ To her surprise, Molly feels a lump in her throat. She swallows, pushing it down. How ridiculous – an old lady gives her a moldy book she has no use for, and she chokes up. She must be getting her period.

Related Characters: Vivian Daly / Niamh Power / “Dorothy”, Molly Ayer

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 85

Explanation and Analysis

Shortly after beginning the project of cleaning out Vivian's attic, Molly and Vivian find a copy of *Anne of Green Gables*. The book, Vivian explains, was a gift from her favorite teacher, Miss Larsen. Molly is surprised to find herself

feeling moved by the gesture of Vivian's gift. At this point, Molly doesn't yet know the story of Vivian's life as an orphan, nor does she understand the important role that Miss Larsen played in Vivian's life.

As someone who deeply loves books and has trouble connecting with other humans, Molly finds a sense of companionship with the characters in books. Molly's entire community service project is the consequence of her arrest for stealing a library copy of *Jane Eyre* – just because she wanted to “have” it for her very own. The gift of a book – especially one with sentimental value – speaks to something that already matters deeply to Molly. Further, by giving Molly a beloved book, Vivian shows that she cares about Molly's hobbies and that she wants to connect with her over shared interests. To Molly, who feels uncared for by her foster parents, this genuine effort to make a connection is compelling. Yet at the same time, Molly clearly tries to push her emotions aside, and for now maintains her façade of cynicism.

Chapter 15 Quotes

☝☝ I keep forgetting to answer to Dorothy. But in a way I am glad to have a new identity. It makes it easier to let go of so much else. I'm not the same Niamh who left her Gram and aunties and uncles in Kinvara and came across the ocean on the *Agnes Pauline*, who lived with her family on Elizabeth Street. No, I am Dorothy now.

Related Characters: Vivian Daly / Niamh Power / “Dorothy” (speaker), Gram, Raymond Byrne, Lois Byrne

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 98

Explanation and Analysis

When the Byrnes took Niamh home, they changed her name to the more American sounding “Dorothy.” Even though they didn't ask for her consent before giving her a new name, Niamh is now “glad” that the new name gives her a new identity. Having a new name allows her to more easily compartmentalize her past and present experiences. When she says this “makes it easier to let go,” she implies that having a new identity makes it easier to repress the grief, anger, and loneliness triggered by her immense losses. This allows her to create distance between her past and present selves, which enables her to repress her sense of attachment and longing for the family she lost.

Chapter 16 Quotes

☝☝ I feel myself retreating to someplace deep inside. It is a pitiful kind of childhood, to know that no one loves you or is taking care of you, to always be on the outside looking in. I feel a decade older than my years. I know too much; I have seen people at their worst, at their most desperate and selfish, and this knowledge makes me wary. So I am learning to pretend, to smile and nod, to display empathy I do not feel. I am learning to pass, to look like everyone else, even though I feel broken inside.

Related Characters: Vivian Daly / Niamh Power / “Dorothy” (speaker), Raymond Byrne, Lois Byrne, Mr. Sorenson

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 112

Explanation and Analysis

At this moment, Mr. Sorenson, a social worker with the Children's Aid Society, has come to take Niamh from the Byrnes and place her with a new family. Mr. Sorenson's visit came as a surprise to Niamh, who didn't know that the Byrnes didn't want to keep her any longer. Even though Mr. Sorenson explained the Byrnes' rationale in terms of their economic situation, Niamh nevertheless felt an immense sense of rejection.

The experience of being displaced without any warning reminds Niamh that she isn't secure anywhere, and that she can be thrown out whenever she becomes an inconvenience. Her experience with the Byrnes, who neglected and exploited her, shows her the human capacity for selfishness and cruelty, and when they throw her out, she is overwhelmed by the feeling that she doesn't have any control over her surroundings. Her unmet need for love and care leaves her with a sense of detachment from others, which makes it difficult for her to feel empathy. Like Molly, she learns to create the illusion of normalcy to mask her inner feelings of hurt and disillusionment.

Chapter 19 Quotes

☝☝ He's always making excuses – “She didn't mean nothing by it,” “She's yanking your chain” – when Dina does things like intone “the Tribe has spoken” when Molly expresses an opinion. “You need to stop taking yourself so seriously, little girl,” Dina said when Molly asked her to knock it off. “If you can't laugh at yourself, you're going to have a very hard life.”

Related Characters: Ralph Thibodeaus, Dina Thibodeaus, Molly Ayer

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 130

Explanation and Analysis

At dinner one night, Ralph and Molly discuss Molly's community service project with Vivian. During the conversation, Dina realizes that she went to high school with Terry, who is Jack's mother and Vivian's housekeeper. Dina shamelessly expresses her feeling of superiority over Terry for her social status and because Terry had a baby with a Mexican man. When Molly corrects Dina by saying that Jack's father was Dominican, Dina becomes defensive and the two women begin arguing. Ralph tries to end the fight. To herself, Molly thinks about Ralph's habit of mediating fights by downplaying Dina's comments.

This passage demonstrates how Dina trivializes Molly's opinions and identity, and how Ralph fails Molly by ignoring and downplaying the severity of Dina's words. By saying things like "the Tribe has spoken," Dina makes a mockery of Molly's Penobscot ethnicity. This highlights Dina's lack of cultural sensitivity and her failure to acknowledge the value of Molly's identity. Her comment that Molly shouldn't take herself "so seriously" when Molly becomes offended also shows Dina's refusal to acknowledge the validity of Molly's feelings, and her defense that she's trying to spare Molly a "very hard life" is almost laughably tone-deaf, considering how hard Molly's life already is.

Chapter 20 Quotes

☝☝ Maybe it'll be a stretch to find drama in Vivian's portage – a happy, stable life does not an interesting story make, right? But even the rich have their problems, or so Molly's heard. It will be her task to extract them.

Related Characters: Vivian Daly / Niamh Power / "Dorothy", Molly Ayer

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 132

Explanation and Analysis

Molly's history teacher, Mr. Reed, has given the class the assignment of interviewing an older person in their lives. As

part of a lesson on Wabanaki culture and the practice of "portaging," Molly must ask her subject to describe the journeys they have taken in their life. Because Molly doesn't have any other older relatives or neighbors, she has decided to interview Vivian.

As her thoughts reveal, Molly has a false perception of Vivian's story because she doesn't yet know about Vivian's past. Based on her superficial perception of Vivian, Molly thinks that Vivian has led a stable, easy, and affluent life. This highlights the novel's thematic emphasis on the power of illusions to alter perception. In this case, Vivian's seemingly normal, untroubled life creates an illusion about her experiences and her personality. Only through their later experience of mutual storytelling do the two women discover the truth about how much they share in common.

Chapter 21 Quotes

☝☝ "Well," Molly says, "I think the boat represents what you take with you – the essential things – from place to place. And the water – well, I think it's the place you're always trying to get to."

Related Characters: Molly Ayer (speaker), Vivian Daly / Niamh Power / "Dorothy"

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 137

Explanation and Analysis

Molly is beginning her interview with Vivian for her portaging project. The Wabanaki people, Molly explains, carried everything they needed with them each time they moved from one body of water to another in search of a new home. Molly asks Vivian to describe what she has chosen to keep with her and what to leave behind as she has moved forward in her own life journey. Molly's "portaging" project gives her the opportunity to learn about Vivian's journeys, as well as the chance to discover more about the meaning of her own.

As Molly's explanation implies, a person's "boat" (that which is being carried in the portage) represents the things one carries through life, and the "water" (where the boat will be set down again) represents the ultimate goal toward which one is always striving. This passage highlights the importance the novel places on carrying important memories and connections into the future, even after loss

and change. It also highlights the importance of moving forward, and suggests that connections to the past are essential for building a meaningful future.

Chapter 24 Quotes

☝☝ “I will help you find a home,” she says gently. “A place that is safe and clean, where you’ll be treated like a ten-year-old-girl. I promise you that.”

Related Characters: Miss Larsen (speaker), Vivian Daly / Niamh Power / “Dorothy”

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 156

Explanation and Analysis

This is the morning that Mr. Post and Miss Larsen help Niamh (called “Dorothy” at the time) after discovering her sleeping on the schoolhouse porch. The night before, Mr. Grote sexually abused Niamh. When his wife found him, she and her husband kicked Niamh out into the cold winter night, and Niamh walked four miles in the snow to get to the schoolhouse. Upon hearing the details of Niamh’s story, Miss Larsen promises to help Niamh find a safe new home.

As Miss Larsen’s words express, one of the central problems with Niamh’s temporary placements is that she has not been given the care, love, and protection that children need. Instead, she has been exploited for her labor (both physical and emotional), left to care for herself, and been the victim of adult sexual advances. In these ways, she has been treated like an adult rather than like a child. As this passage suggests, one of Niamh’s central struggles is finding a home where she is cared for and loved, and simply allowed to have a childhood.

Chapter 26 Quotes

☝☝ Why shouldn’t Vivian’s attic be filled with things that are meaningful to her? The stark truth is that she will die sooner than later [...] So yes – Molly has begun to view her work at Vivian’s in a different light. Maybe it doesn’t matter how much gets done. Maybe the value is in the process – in touching each item, in naming and identifying, in acknowledging the significance of a cardigan, a pair of children’s boots.

Related Characters: Jack, Vivian Daly / Niamh Power / “Dorothy”

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 173

Explanation and Analysis

Molly is having an argument with Jack. After noticing that Molly hasn’t been successful in convincing Vivian to get rid of things in her attic, Jack tells Molly he is worried that it will appear to Terry, who is his mother and Vivian’s housekeeper, like Molly isn’t doing her job. Molly reacts defensively. In her view, the progress she and Vivian have made is emotional rather than physical. At this point, Molly has learned many of the details of Vivian’s past.

In Molly’s view, the true purpose of the attic project isn’t to clean out the attic, but to allow Vivian the opportunity to sort through her past, acknowledging and making peace with her memories. The attic represents all of the unprocessed and unfinished business of Vivian’s life. Molly’s role is to hear Vivian’s story and to help her process and come to terms with the material of her life. Molly knows that the objects in the attic serve as props that give Vivian the framework for talking about her past.

Chapter 27 Quotes

☝☝ But over and over, Molly begins to understand as she listens to the tapes, Vivian has come back to the idea that the people who matter in our lives stay with us, haunting our most ordinary moments. They are with us in the grocery store as we turn a corner, chat with a friend. They rise up through the pavement; we absorb them through our soles.

Related Characters: Vivian Daly / Niamh Power / “Dorothy”, Molly Ayer

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 177

Explanation and Analysis

Molly is on the bus, listening to the tapes of her interviews with Vivian for her “portaging” project. As she listens, she begins to discover certain themes in Vivian’s storytelling.

As Vivian’s expressions suggest, she considers her lost loved ones to be like “ghosts” who continue to “haunt” her everyday life. This suggests that rather than providing

peaceful memories, Vivian's connection to her past is riddled with unresolved and unfinished business. Like ghosts, the people from Vivian's past have something left to tell her. This is because Vivian hasn't come to terms with or processed the pain, loss, and regret she feels in relation to her past. Until she can make peace with the past and at least try to reunite with her remaining family members, Vivian will continue to feel "haunted."

Chapter 29 Quotes

☝ They don't seem eager to learn about me, but then again, few people are. I get the sense that my abandonment, and the circumstances that brought me to them, matter little to them, compared to the need I might fill in their lives.

Related Characters: Vivian Daly / Niamh Power / "Dorothy" (speaker), Mr. Nielsen, Viola Nielsen

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 189

Explanation and Analysis

At this point, Niamh has just been introduced to Mr. and Mrs. Nielsen, who are asking her questions in order to determine if she will be a good fit for their household. As her thoughts suggest, the Niensens have expressed very little interest in Niamh's past or her family of origin. Niamh interprets this as evidence that they are more concerned with how and whether she will fulfill a "need" they have in their own lives.

Though they have only just met, this first interaction lays the groundwork for the future of the Niensens' relationship with Niamh. As the novel later shows, Niamh never comes to see them as her true parents. In part, the Niensens fail to connect with Niamh on a deep emotional level because they never make the effort to understand her past or her feelings about that past, and how this has shaped her sense of identity.

Chapter 30 Quotes

☝ And though I rarely take the claddagh off, as I get older I can't escape the realization that the only remaining piece of my blood family comes from a woman who pushed her only son and his family out to sea in a boat, knowing full well she'd probably never see them again.

Related Characters: Vivian Daly / Niamh Power /

"Dorothy" (speaker), Gram

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 199

Explanation and Analysis

As Vivian grows up in the Niensens' home, her memories of her biological family begin to fade. She keeps her Gram's claddagh necklace, however, which has held so much meaning to her throughout her life in the United States, and especially since she lost her family and became orphaned. The necklace continues to represent Vivian's connection to her origins and her memories of her family.

However, as this passage reveals, Vivian's views of her grandmother have changed over time. As a younger child, she clung to her romanticized memories of her Gram, especially during times of stress. Her Gram represented the most absolute, untainted form of love, and remembering her used to give Vivian a sense of comfort. However, as she matures and learns more about people and herself, she begins to see things in her memories that she didn't see before. Notably, she begins to realize her Gram's role in sending her and her family so far away from Ireland, and thus sees the threads of selfishness and disconnection conveyed by her Gram's actions. Her revised view of her Gram represents her growing awareness of the limitations and defects in every human and in every human relationship. She also realizes that her sense of abandonment and betrayal runs deeper in her family's past than she had previously thought.

Chapter 33 Quotes

☝ "Ah, well," Vivian says. "I suppose we all come under false pretenses one way or another, don't we?"

Related Characters: Vivian Daly / Niamh Power / "Dorothy" (speaker), Molly Ayer

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 217

Explanation and Analysis

On the first night Molly stays at Vivian's house (after Dina and Ralph have kicked her out), the two women have a long, heartfelt conversation. Molly tells Vivian the full story of her life. She also reveals the secret she had kept from Vivian:

that her community service hours in Vivian's attic were required to fulfill her sentence for stealing the library book, and not for a school project. Molly apologizes to Vivian for lying to her, and specifically for "coming into [Vivian's] house under false pretenses." Vivian's response is shown in this quote.

Instead of expressing a sense of outrage or betrayal, Vivian responds to Molly's confession with forgiveness and empathy. This demonstrates Vivian's nonjudgmental character and her personal understanding of Molly's situation. Her comment also captures one of the central themes of the novel: the idea that everyone, whether intentionally or not, relies on or creates illusions to make it through life. Truthfulness, on the other hand, is rare and requires vulnerability to display in front of another human. As Vivian and Molly's relationships demonstrates, full honesty with another person about one's self requires trust and effort.

Chapter 35 Quotes

☝☝ We both start laughing – at the absurdity of our shared experiences, the relief of recognition. We cling to each other like survivors of a shipwreck, astonished that neither of us drowned.

Related Characters: Vivian Daly / Niamh Power / "Dorothy" (speaker), Dutchy / Hans / Luke Maynard

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 230

Explanation and Analysis

Vivian and Dutchy, now in their early twenties, have just reunited by chance at the Grand Hotel where Dutchy performs in Minneapolis. They are shocked and overjoyed to have found each other after so many years. Vivian describes her and Dutchy's feeling of instant connection in the moments after they discover each other in the hotel lobby.

As Vivian's comments suggest, Dutchy and Vivian have a strong bond forged by their "shared experiences" of riding the orphan train and moving between unstable families in the years afterward. The "shipwreck" in Vivian's analogy encompasses their loss and displacement, and all the associated feelings of isolation, rejection, and insecurity. They both survived a traumatic experience that was witnessed by nobody else they know, so it is as if they are the sole "survivors of a shipwreck." Their ability to see and

identify with each other then comes as a "relief" to the feelings of isolation they normally have with others.

Chapter 36 Quotes

☝☝ Lying in that hospital bed I feel all of it: the terrible weight of sorrow, the crumbling of my dreams. I sob uncontrollably for all that I've lost – the love of my life, my family, a future I'd dared to envision. And in that moment I make a decision. I can't go through this again. I can't give myself to someone so completely only to lose them. I don't want, ever again, to experience the loss of someone I love beyond reason.

Related Characters: Vivian Daly / Niamh Power / "Dorothy" (speaker), Sarah Dunnell/ "May", Dutchy / Hans / Luke Maynard

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 246-247

Explanation and Analysis

While giving birth to her daughter, Vivian finally feels the full impact of her grief over losing Dutchy. Even though it has been months since Dutchy's death, Vivian has spent the time occupying herself with work and social activities, allowing her to repress her sadness. When the emotions and pain of child labor finally force Vivian to face her grief, then, she is unable to tolerate it. She determines that because intense love always brings the risk of painful loss, she can't ever again let herself love someone so much. Knowing she will grow to love her child deeply, she gives her baby away before she can become too attached.

As Vivian's thought processes describe, she has suffered the losses of many people who were precious to her: her family in Ireland, her family in America, and Dutchy. To Vivian, love has become inextricably linked with loss. Loving someone gives that person the power to destroy her, whether by leaving her or through death. Vivian differentiates this kind of powerful love from other attachment by calling it a "love beyond reason." In saying she doesn't want to "give" herself to someone so "completely," she makes it clear that deep love requires her to give away a part of herself. Doing so is emotionally dangerous for Vivian because she has already lost many important people who had a "part" of "herself." By giving her daughter away, she attempts to survive emotionally by preserving what remains of her "self."

Chapter 38 Quotes

☛ She can sleep with the door open, wander around freely, come and go without someone watching her every move. She hadn't realized how much of a toll the years of judgment and criticism, implied and expressed, had taken on her. It's as if she's been walking on a wire, trying to keep her balance, and now, for the first time, she is on solid ground.

Related Characters: Vivian Daly / Niamh Power / "Dorothy", Molly Ayer

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 256

Explanation and Analysis

After Molly's unexpected visit to Vivian's house, Vivian invites Molly to move in with her. In this passage, Molly describes her overall feeling of freedom and security at Vivian's house.

In contrast with her series of foster care homes, Molly isn't afraid that Vivian will react erratically to her choices and mistakes. This is largely because, in contrast with Molly's relationship to her foster parents, Vivian and Molly have a mutual attachment. They both fill an empty place in each other's lives, and they provide each other with practical support as well. Unlike Molly's foster parents, Vivian isn't suspicious of Molly and doesn't feel entitled to control her. Because she can relate to Molly's experiences as an orphan living in strangers' homes, Vivian creates the kind of secure, low-pressure environment she herself would have wanted as a child. This gives Molly a sense of stability that then allows her to relax in her new home.

Chapter 40 Quotes

☛ Sitting in the rocker in the kitchen, looking out at the water, Molly feels oddly at peace. For the first time since she can remember, her life is beginning to make sense. What up until this moment has felt like a random, disconnected series of unhappy events she now views as necessary steps in a journey toward... *enlightenment* is perhaps too strong a word, but there are others, less lofty, like *self-acceptance* and *perspective*.

Related Characters: Vivian Daly / Niamh Power / "Dorothy", Molly Ayer

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 272

Explanation and Analysis

At this point, Molly has lived with Vivian for several weeks. During this time, Molly has helped Vivian to reconnect with the daughter she gave up for adoption, Sarah. While awaiting Sarah's arrival on the day of her first visit, Molly reflects on how she has benefited and grown from her friendship with Vivian.

The excitement and immense meaningfulness of Sarah's visit give Molly the inspiration to reflect deeply on her life and her relationship with Vivian. In contrast with her many years in foster care, Molly is no longer in survival mode. Not only has Vivian given Molly a safe, secure place to live, but she has also given her a sense of companionship and belonging. From that place of belonging, Molly is able to come to terms with her own past and accept herself. Vivian's parallel story gives Molly insight into her own life, offering Molly a new perspective.

☛ Molly touches Vivian's shoulder, frail and bony under her thin silk cardigan. She half turns, half smiles, her eyes brimming with tears. Her hand flutters to her clavicle, to the silver chain around her neck, the claddagh charm – those tiny hands clasping a crowned heart: love, loyalty, friendship – a never-ending path that leads away from home and circles back.

Related Characters: Sarah Dunnell/ "May", Vivian Daly / Niamh Power / "Dorothy", Molly Ayer

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 273

Explanation and Analysis

Vivian and Molly go onto Vivian's porch to meet Sarah, Vivian's daughter. As they watch Sarah and her family get out of Jack's car, Molly reaches for Vivian's shoulder, and Vivian holds onto her claddagh cross. The close third-person narrator, with insight only into Molly's thoughts, reveals Molly's understanding of Vivian's claddagh cross necklace.

Vivian's cross symbolizes many of the important elements that define this moment in her life: love, loyalty, friendship, and home. Molly's presence represents the elements of loyalty and friendship, while both Molly and Sarah's presences represent the element of love. Finally, in Vivian's case, home is not a physical place, but a sense of family and belonging. Vivian has found her way back home by

rebuilding a sense of community, coming to terms with her past and reuniting with her daughter – her only remaining

family.



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.

PROLOGUE

An unnamed ninety-one-year-old narrator opens the book with the line: “I believe in ghosts.” She describes her relationship to loved ones from her past, who are all now dead and who “haunt” her memories. Even when she has been completely alone during her life, their memories have kept her company. She explains that she remembers the “best selves” of her parents, forgetting her father’s alcoholism and her mother’s depression. She describes how she has chosen to survive by holding onto the “ghosts” of her parents, her baby sister, and her true love, who have all “whispered” to her, “telling [her] to go on.”

The book’s opening reveals the narrator’s accumulation of losses over her life, and sets the stage for the importance of holding onto memories as a means of survival. The narrator (later revealed as Vivian) allows “ghosts” to replace living people in order to feel a sense of belonging even when alone. The metaphor of “haunting” suggests that her past returns to distract her in the present. Her memories let her alter reality, remembering the “best selves” of her loved ones.



CHAPTER 1: SPRUCE HARBOR, MAINE, 2011

A seventeen-year-old girl, Molly Ayer, is in her bedroom, listening to her foster parents argue through the walls. Her foster mother, Dina, is telling her foster father, Ralph, that she wasn’t prepared to take care of a kid with so “many problems.” Through a close third-person narration, Molly explains that she knows it was Ralph’s idea to become foster parents. Molly believes he was inspired by his own experience as a “troubled teen” who benefited from the guidance of a mentor. Molly considers Dina, who works as a police dispatcher, as “high strung” and easily upset when her expectations aren’t met. Molly describes her own low expectations of others’ character and reliability. Her boyfriend, Jack, at first surprised her by seeing past her “goth persona” (which she created to appear less “vulnerable”) in order to befriend her.

This introduces Molly, the novel’s other protagonist, and immediately there is a parallel between her situation and that of Vivian (the narrator of the prologue), particularly the fact that they are both orphans. Dina’s attitude reveals how precarious Molly’s living situation is – unlike most children in healthy families, there is no room for Molly to have “problems” or make mistakes. Molly is surprised when others are caring or reliable, her skepticism a product of her accumulation of losses and disappointments. Her “goth” style allows her to keep people at a distance, likely to prevent further hurt and disappointment.



Molly describes Jack’s background: His Dominican father abandoned his white mother and returned to his country. His single mother now works as a maid for an elderly woman. Jack is a star soccer player, but what Molly values most is his intelligence – a trait she values in herself, too. She is an avid reader, particularly of books with “angsty protagonists.” She describes how her goth style requires “effort to stay in character”, and decides that in her next home, she will choose a lower maintenance “persona”. She believes that Dina, who happens to dislike Molly’s goth “persona”, will soon force Ralph to kick her out. Molly even starts packing in case she needs to leave. Her duffle bags, a gift from Ralph, came from an outlet and are embroidered with other girls’ names.

Molly’s fondness for literature is a reflection of her academic aptitude as well as her need to relate to others. Unable to trust most other people, she still finds a way to connect to human emotions and experience through fiction. The use of the word “persona” shows how Molly uses style to create new identities. The names on the duffel bags and Dina’s attitude toward Molly’s “persona” show how Molly’s selfhood is often unseen or rejected by foster families. But by frequently altering her “persona,” Molly reclaims a sense of agency over her identity.



Jack calls. Molly nonchalantly tells him that when Dina found out Molly was arrested for stealing a library copy of *Jane Eyre*, she was furious. Jack believes Molly was falsely accused, and he is surprised when she reveals that she did it. She explains to the reader that she just wanted to “have it in her possession.” Molly puts on a **charm necklace** with a fish, a bear and a raven – a gift from Molly’s father for her eighth birthday, just before he died in a car accident. A year later, her mother was in prison. She puts on the necklace whenever she fears being displaced again. Molly believes Jack will soon give up on her. He tells her he would have bought the book for her, but Molly avoids depending on others because it leads to disappointment. Jack, however, remains optimistic. He tells her that the elderly woman his mother works for needs help cleaning out her **attic**, and that Molly could volunteer to fulfill the community service requirement of her probation. He tells her he has already arranged an interview with Mrs. Daly.

Dina angrily calls for Molly to come out of her room, so she and Jack hang up. In the living room, Molly tells Ralph and Dina she has found a way to fulfill her community service hours, but that she is prepared if they want to kick her out anyway. Ralph says he doesn’t want her to leave, but Dina says, “we need to talk about it.” Molly can tell they have been fighting about her. She tells them “it’s okay if it doesn’t work out.” With “bravado borrowed from Jack,” Molly feels calm, aware that she “can survive just about anything.” She feels that most of the things other people fear—loss, loneliness and rejection—have already happened to her, and she’s survived them all.

CHAPTER 2: SPRUCE HARBOR MAINE, 2011

Jack drives Molly to meet Vivian Daly. Molly is surprised to see that Vivian lives in a well-tended mansion overlooking the ocean. Jack tells Molly that Vivian is very serious, and instructs her just to “nod and smile”. Molly is wearing a pink blouse borrowed from Dina, and has toned down her makeup and removed her piercings. When Dina saw Molly before leaving the house, she told her she “looked more like a normal person.” Dina is skeptical that Molly will “last” at Vivian’s, and so is Molly, who anticipates the project of working with a rich elderly woman in her **attic** to be incredibly dull. Molly wonders whether juvenile detention would have been better. Jack tells her to take the project more seriously because her “ass is on the line”. He informs her that Vivian has no idea of Molly’s probation and thinks the project is just for school.

Molly perceives Jack’s disbelief as a sign of disappointment—and, likely based on her past experiences, she believes his disappointment means he will leave her. Unlike youth with healthy family relationships, Molly feels that there is no room for her to make mistakes. But contrary to her expectations, Jack is only upset because he wishes she had asked him for help. This shows his desire to deepen their relationship. Molly’s desire to have the book “in her possession” suggests that few things in life have been “hers” to keep. The necklace is symbolic of her resilient connection to her family, the past, and her true identity. By putting on the necklace when her situation becomes unstable, she comforts herself with a sense of belonging.



Ralph and Dina’s opposing reactions support Molly’s suspicions that Ralph wants her there and Dina doesn’t. By choosing to stay calm and “borrowing” Jack’s confidence about her situation, Molly finds ways to feel and appear invulnerable. This allows her to prevent further hurt and improve her chances of surviving emotionally. She finds a way to feel strong and fearless by considering how the fears that preoccupy most people have already come true for her.



Dina’s choice of words when she tells Molly she looks “more like a normal person” illustrate her judgmental, superficial way of assessing other people. Dina’s skepticism supports Molly’s perception that Dina doesn’t believe in or want her. In contrast, Jack’s efforts to secure the service project for Molly and his seriousness in preparing her show his faith in Molly. Molly’s casual attitude suggests that she is in denial about the consequences of her actions, perhaps as another defense mechanism, but Jack sees what a critical moment Molly is in, showing that he is more in touch with the reality of her situation.



Jack's mother, Terry, greets Molly. Molly knows that Terry only agreed to arrange the service project for Jack's sake. In the library, Molly meets Vivian, an elegant 91-year-old woman. Vivian asks about the "skunk effect" of Molly's dyed hair. She deduces that Molly borrowed the blouse and says it wasn't necessary. Vivian then asks about Molly's life, and Molly tells Vivian the "abridged" version – that her father was Penobscot Indian, that she lived on a reservation until he died, and that she landed in foster care because her mother "couldn't take care of her". Vivian suggests that Molly's "tribal makeup" is connected to her Penobscot roots, which appeals to Molly. Molly remembers when she first dyed her hair and got her piercings as a way of forcing a harsh foster family to kick her out. Vivian reveals that she, too, was orphaned as a child, but doesn't elaborate. She agrees to Molly's "school project."

Contrary to Molly's expectations, Vivian treats her with a curiosity seemingly devoid of judgment. Her intuition that Molly's outfit was borrowed, along with her curiosity about Molly's background, suggests that she is trying to understand who Molly really is. In contrast with Molly's foster families, Vivian seems open to knowing Molly's actual self. Molly remembers creating her style as a way of escaping an unwanted home, but Vivian's alternative explanation—if a bit naïve—reframes her choice as a means of connecting to her family of origin. Vivian's age coupled with her self-identification as an orphan suggest that she is the unnamed narrator from the prologue.



CHAPTER 3: NEW YORK CITY, 1929

The unnamed narrator from the prologue (later revealed as Vivian) describes a night when she was nine years old. She stayed awake soothing the cries of her 18-month-old sister, Maisie, while her twin 6-year-old brothers, Dominick and James, slept nearby on a pallet. The narrator describes how poverty and her mother's occasional neglect had left them thin and hungry. She also describes their emigration from Kinvara in County Galway, Ireland, two years before. Her family had been poor, and was promised that America was plentiful. Despite the difficult voyage on a ship called the *Agnes Pauline*, the narrator felt hopeful about the change. In New York, however, they moved into a slum on Elizabeth street where the landlord was prejudiced against the Irish. A family friend hired her father to work in his pub. Her Da's drinking and her Mam's "black moods" continued, but still the narrator remained hopeful. She reflects that Maisie's wailing on that fateful night warned of danger that she wishes she hadn't ignored.

The timeframe and continuity from the prologue further suggest that the narrator is Vivian Daly. In view of the prologue, it is clear that somehow the narrator is going to lose her family. This knowledge gives each detail of the narrator's story a precious quality. At the same time, her descriptions of poverty, parental substance abuse, neglect, and prejudice illustrate that her suffering began long before losing her family. Nevertheless, so long as she had her family, she remained hopeful. Her hope also suggests her traits of resilience and optimism. Because of her mother's depression and neglect, Vivian appears to have taken on a motherly role at a young age.



CHAPTER 4: NEW YORK CITY, 1929

The unnamed narrator (Vivian) is with her neighbors, a childless German couple called the Schatzmans, a couple days “after the fire.” Mr. Schatzman wakes her to announce his plans to take her to the Children’s Aid Society. The narrator wants to wait for her Mam, who was taken away screaming, but he explains her mother “isn’t coming back.” Mr. Schatzman also says that the narrator’s sister, Maisie, “didn’t make it.” The girl is grief-stricken. The night before, she was stung to hear Mrs. Schatzman through the walls saying, “I didn’t ask for this.” The narrator then remembers the night of the fire – her Da and brothers’ bodies in the hallway, Maisie and her Mam taken away by medics. She thinks of relatives in Ireland who could take her, but realizes there is no way of getting in contact with them or paying the ship fare. The narrator realizes that she is completely alone – “a burden to society, and nobody’s responsibility.”

At the Children’s Aid Society, an unhappy middle-aged woman grooms and lectures the narrator. She warns her that people will judge her harshly because she is Irish. So that she will be accepted, the matron advises her to keep her red hair pinned back and to behave very well. She also reminds her that some women won’t like having a girl in the house who is “too comely.” She and another matron try to tell her that she can’t bring her **claddagh cross** necklace onto “the train” because the children “aren’t allowed keepsakes.” The narrator tells them it is all she has left of her family, both because it’s true and because she “thinks it will sway them,” which it does.

The narrator is huddled onto a train platform along with dozens of other children. She wears a stiff pinafore that, along with her small suitcase of clothing, was given to her by the Children’s Aid Society. The volunteer who sewed her name onto her clothes scoffed at its foreign lettering. The narrator then reveals her name: Niamh (pronounced “Neev”) Power. The volunteer disdainfully told Niamh that her new family would surely change her name. Niamh explains that nobody “feels sorry” for her, because all the other children around her have also lost their families. The Children’s Aid workers focus on preparing them to begin their new lives, treating them as if they were “born the moment” they were placed in their care. As they board the train, the matron in charge, Mrs. Scatcherd, charges Niamh with taking care of a fourteen-month-old baby, Carmine.

The author’s choice to zoom in on this moment, rather than to feature the fire, illustrates that what matters most from this period is Vivian’s feeling of being alone and defenseless. This is the moment when she realizes how vulnerable she is because she is “nobody’s responsibility.” This scene shows many parallels with Molly’s situation; Mrs. Schatzman’s complaint that she “didn’t ask” to be responsible for the child parallels Dina’s attitude of indignation at Molly’s mistakes. Further, Vivian’s feeling of being unsafe parallels Molly’s feeling that she isn’t secure in her home or relationships.



It becomes clear that young Vivian is going to be put up for adoption and sent on some kind of train. Despite the matron’s unhappy demeanor and the prejudice behind her comments, it appears she is trying to help Vivian improve her chances of finding a home. This moment illustrates how cultural prejudice further isolates Vivian – not only is she severed from her family, but from her surrounding culture as well. The rule against keepsakes illustrates how the children’s origins are erased to become adoptable.



It is now revealed that Vivian was born with a different name: Niamh. The volunteer’s disdain for Niamh’s name further supports the idea that Niamh’s culture won’t be welcomed in her new life. Surrounded by other children in the same predicament and forced to focus on the immediate problem of finding a home, Niamh has no space to process her loss—she must repress her sadness and focus on survival. The attitude of the Children’s Aid Society denies the preexisting identities and experiences of the children, forcing them to repress and hide their origins.



On the train, Mrs. Scatcherd makes a speech. She opens by saying, “They call this an orphan train.” She explains that they are leaving depraved backgrounds for new families and the “nobility of the country.” She warns them to behave well, or else they will be sent back to the city. Niamh is settled with Carmine, who cries from hunger. She feeds him sugar lumps that she pocketed from her meager breakfast, and he falls asleep in her lap. Mr. Curran, the other attendant, provides them each with lunch and blankets. Niamh wants to feel optimistic, but she knows promises don’t always “match with reality.” She longingly remembers her home and family in Kinvara. Caring for Carmine both comforts and pains her, reminding her of Maisie. She thinks of other, larger immigrant families in her New York tenement, and wonders if her parents would have fared better with more social support.

Mrs. Scatcherd’s speech reveals her stereotyped view of the poor and immigrant families of New York, while also giving the novel its title and offering the central motif of the book—the train carrying unwanted children from place to place. Caring for a baby is familiar and soothing to Niamh, and distracts her from her loneliness and fears. Though she wants to feel hopeful, just as she did when her family first immigrated, her disappointments and losses are beginning to teach her not to believe in promises. In this way, her wariness resembles Molly’s. Her thoughts about her parents’ isolation reflect her awareness that humans need each other and of how her isolation puts her at risk.



CHAPTER 5: NEW YORK CENTRAL TRAIN, 1929

Several hours pass in the train. Niamh occupies herself with caring for Carmine and reading from Mrs. Scatcherd’s Bible. Niamh is one of the only children who know how to read. She thinks of how her mother taught her to read when she was little, and made her practice by reading food labels and packaging. She recalls when her mother took out a volume by a Kinvara poet, Francis Fahy. A poem about Fahy’s determination to return to his beloved Kinvara often made Niamh’s Mam cry and express her regret over leaving Ireland.

Until now, the author has primarily portrayed Niamh’s mother as bitter and neglectful. However, she now deepens the mother’s character by showing how she put effort into teaching her daughter to read. Niamh’s memory of reading Fahy’s poetry with her mother shows how literature connected them and how much her mother suffered from isolation and longing in their new country.



Some older boys on the train start making trouble for Mr. Curran, who is easily flustered. One boy frightens the children by shouting that he’d rather go back to shoe shining than end up living in a barn with animals. Mrs. Scatcherd intervenes, announcing that their “Christian duty” is to find good, god-fearing families to reform and raise the children well – though, she admits, this won’t work out for everyone. She sends the biggest troublemaker to sit with Niamh, to Niamh’s dismay. The boy, who is about twelve, looks at Niamh “in a way that makes [her] blush.” He starts playing with Carmine. He tells Niamh that it will be hard for them to find homes because they’re older and she’s redheaded, so it would be better to run away. Even though she knows he’s probably right, she debates with him, arguing the virtues of following along and behaving well.

This passage reveals how Mr. Curran isn’t as formidable an authoritarian as Mrs. Scatcherd, suggesting that despite gender norms for the era, the woman in this situation is the more dominant individual. Mrs. Scatcherd’s words reveal her realism about the children’s predicament. Because of the boy’s skepticism about the orphan train, he would rather go back to the familiar streets of New York and fend for himself. Like Molly, he doesn’t want to put himself in a situation where he is dependent on others. Niamh continues to behave well, perhaps hoping that doing so might help secure her a good home.



CHAPTER 6: UNION STATION, CHICAGO, 1929

Niamh explains how she, Carmine, and the boy – Hans, nicknamed Dutchy – become an “odd little family.” She learns that Dutchy was born to German parents, that his mother died when he was little, and that his physically abusive father forced him to work shining shoes. He eventually stopped coming home, and started living with a group of boys who “tried to look after one another.” The Children’s Aid Society “lured them in” with food and clean beds. He suspects that the charity must be getting paid for the kids. Dutchy tells Niamh that she might help out in someone’s house, but he suspects that he’ll be taken as a farmhand. The train pulls up to a station in Chicago. Mrs. Scatcherd explains that while waiting for their next train, the children must challenge the suspicions of the “good citizens of Chicago” by staying on the platform and behaving like “model citizens.”

On the platform waiting for the next train in Chicago, Niamh sees Dutchy disappear up a stairwell. He beckons for her to join him. In the upstairs terminal, Niamh is mesmerized by the well-dressed people, the beautiful grand architecture, and the lights glittering above. Dutchy puts Carmine on his shoulders and twirls him. For a moment, Niamh feels deeply happy, “like a knife’s edge of joy.” Suddenly, police arrive. They take Carmine, handcuff and beat Dutchy, and hold Niamh down on her knees. Mrs. Scatcherd appears and scolds them, expressing disappointment in Niamh and outrage at Dutchy. Niamh lies and says it was her idea to go upstairs to show the baby the lights, and that she made Dutchy “escort” her. Mrs. Scatcherd is visibly “softened”, but she continues to use a firm, angry voice when she tells the police to release Dutchy and leave his punishment to her.

On the train out of Chicago, Mrs. Scatcherd “half-heartedly” whacks Dutchy’s knuckles. Niamh knows there is little else Mrs. Scatcherd can do to punish Dutchy that his life hasn’t already done. Feigning reluctance, Mrs. Scatcherd allows Dutchy, Niamh, and Carmine to stay together. Before she turns the lights out, Mrs. Scatcherd delivers a speech to the children, explaining that tomorrow they will make their first stop. She encourages them to behave well and stay optimistic even if they aren’t adopted in the first town. The children clamor with doubts and questions. Carefully choosing her words, she explains that some families might be a good fit right away, while the “path” for some children might not be “clear.” She encourages them to have faith that God will “guide” them. Niamh realizes that Mrs. Scatcherd has no knowledge or control over how their future families will treat them.

Despite her initial wariness, Niamh has come to embrace Dutchy as part of her “odd little family.” The use of the word “family” illustrates the children’s desperate need to feel a sense of belonging, however temporary and makeshift it may be. Dutchy’s story indicates that he has long preferred to be on his own instead of at the mercy of adults, who in his experience haven’t been trustworthy. His experiences help to explain his cynicism toward the Children’s Aid Society. Mrs. Scatcherd holds the children responsible for defying the stereotypes of ignorant adults, preparing them for the work they must do in their new lives.



Despite her precarious situation and the responsibility that comes with it, Niamh is still a child with a curious, playful spirit. By escaping to explore the terminal, she and Dutchy seek out a small adventure to alleviate the anxiety and sadness of their circumstances. The “knife’s edge of joy” that Niamh feels illustrates how her joy is both dangerous and painful because it is so fragile and fleeting. Mrs. Scatcherd must maintain an appearance of strictness to preserve her authority, yet she appears moved to imagine the innocence of Dutchy going with Niamh just to keep her safe while Niamh shows the baby something pretty.



The performative quality of Mrs. Scatcherd’s punishment and authority suggests that she may feel more understanding and compassion for the children than she allows herself to show. The fact that Mrs. Scatcherd ultimately allows Dutchy, Niamh and Carmine to stay together indicates that she may be aware of and wish to indulge the relationship that the three children share. Her speech to the children portrays a romantic version of reality—while she tries to be honest with them, she also doesn’t want to admit the harsh truths of their futures. Seeing through Mrs. Scatcherd’s careful words and demeanor, Niamh realizes yet again how helpless she actually is.



CHAPTER 7: SPRUCE HARBOR, MAINE, 2011

Jack picks Molly up from Vivian's house. When he asks her how the interview went, she expresses reservations about whether the **attic** project will ultimately work out. Jack encourages her to remain hopeful and try her best. Molly reflects that she often "counters" Jack's enthusiasm with pessimism and sarcasm. Yet, underneath her performance, she relies on Jack to keep convincing her that she's a good person. Molly jokes about just going to "juvie" instead, but Jack takes her seriously, reminding her that juvie will give her "a record."

At home that night, Dina serves hamburger helper, "refusing to acknowledge" that Molly is vegetarian. Dina is staunchly Republican, which "wouldn't be a problem" if she didn't ridicule Molly for her liberal politics. In Molly's view, Dina associates Molly's every action and mistake with her liberal views. Molly knows Dina and Ralph got together in a "predictable football player-cheerleader story arc," but she suspects that Ralph disagrees with Dina's opinions. Molly knows things could be worse. She recalls previous experiences with strange, neglectful, and physically abusive foster parents. One foster family allowed a close adult friend to give Molly a tattoo, which Molly got in exchange for sex. As she thanks Dina for dinner, Molly knows that her thanks are mostly sincere. Nevertheless, despite her gratitude for food and a safe home, she feels Dina has no right to expect Molly to forego her opinions, values, and identity in order to appease her.

CHAPTER 8: SPRUCE HARBOR, MAINE, 2011

On a "tour" of Vivian's mansion, Terry explains that Vivian and her husband owned a department store in Minnesota. They retired twenty years ago and took a sailing trip, during which they found and bought the mansion on a whim. Vivian's husband died eight years ago, leaving her alone in a house with fourteen bedrooms. Terry leads Molly and Vivian up to the **attic**. Seeing all of her boxes, Vivian jokes that other people probably have children so that "someone will care about the stuff they leave behind." Molly tries to control her expressions of hostility toward Vivian, knowing that Vivian is only helping her. Still, she "nurtures her resentment" toward the injustices life has done her, which she feels are exemplified by her "indentured servitude" to a wealthy white lady. Following the advice of her social worker, Lori, Molly makes a mental list of "positive things about her situation."

Despite Vivian's interest and kindness, Molly remains skeptical. Her reservations and sarcasm appear to be defense mechanisms to help prevent disappointment. This scene shows how much Molly has internalized her past suffering as a reflection of her value and self-worth. It also reveals the extent of her self-awareness; she knows how she depends on Jack to maintain her self-esteem and keep her on track.



Dina's insistence on serving Molly meat, even though she is a vegetarian, represents a denial of Molly's agency and right to define herself and her own values. Molly doesn't mind that Dina has different political views, but rather, she feels oppressed by the silencing nature of Dina's unreasonable expectations. Because of the unstable nature of foster care, Molly knows that she must be careful to please Dina in order to keep her place. Molly's past experiences with foster families show how vulnerable displaced children often are to abuse and exploitation. While Molly feels and expresses gratitude, she knows within herself that she doesn't owe Dina her agency or autonomy.



This section leaves the reader with many unanswered questions – how did Vivian/ Niamh end up owning a department store? Did she end up with a rich family, or marry rich? Why does she have such a large house but no children? These carefully crafted gaps in Vivian/ Niamh's life story drive the plot of the parallel storyline of Niamh's journey on the orphan train. Vivian's large empty house, coupled with her remark about children, suggest that she is yet again just as alone as she was in her childhood. At this point, Molly's attitude and her conception of Vivian draw attention to her ignorance about the true story of Vivian's past.



In the first box, Vivian is moved to find a child's mustard-yellow coat. She tells Molly that she "always hated it." Inside the pocket is a folded piece of paper with the words: "Upright and do right make all right." Vivian explains that she wrote it in elementary school, copying the letters from her favorite teacher, Ms. Larsen. Molly contemplates how old the note is, and remarks that the world has changed since Vivian was a child. Vivian contends that not much has changed for her, explaining that she doesn't even own a computer. Molly argues that Vivian is missing out, and that she is too isolated in her "bubble." She immediately regrets being so blunt, but Vivian smiles and remarks that Molly doesn't have "trouble speaking [her] mind." Molly asks Vivian why she kept the yellow coat that she hated so much, and Vivian replies that she doesn't know.

It becomes clear that in the modern-day plotline, Vivian will be reviewing relics of her past. These then become details of her story that have yet to be fully explained, and therefore foreshadow the future of Niamh's storyline. Just as Vivian was perceptive about Molly's background, Molly is perceptive about Vivian's isolated state – her "bubble." Vivian's approving reaction to Molly's criticism reveals her openness to Molly's opinions. This quality makes Vivian a foil to Dina, who is offended by Molly's self-expressions. Molly's question about the coat reflects the question the novel is asking – why has Vivian held onto these things?



CHAPTER 9: THE MILWAUKEE TRAIN, 1929

It is the middle of the night on the orphan train heading from Chicago to Milwaukee. Niamh has had trouble sleeping, kept awake by Carmine's restless cries and her own anxiety. When she thinks Dutchy is sleeping, she combs out her hair before putting it back into a ponytail. Dutchy then says that her hair is pretty, and she realizes he is awake. She retorts that she thought he didn't like it, and he explains that he only meant she'd "have trouble" because of it. Niamh "wants to push away kindness and his honesty." He proposes they make a promise to find each other later. Niamh argues that their names will be changed and it will be nearly impossible, but she agrees nevertheless. She reminds Dutchy that Mrs. Scatcherd has encouraged them to "let go" of the past. Dutchy tells her there are "some things" he doesn't "want to forget."

Niamh's struggle with Dutchy's "kindness and honesty" suggests that she doesn't want to let herself feel close to Dutchy because she knows their time together is limited. From her experiences, she has already learned that loving others can lead to the pain of loss and separation, so her instinct is to carefully guard her affections to survive. Despite Dutchy's skepticism about the orphan train and the adults in charge of them, his promise to Niamh reveals an underlying sense of hope and optimism. Dutchy still hasn't lost the ability to care for or hold onto others.



As the train pulls into Milwaukee in the morning, Mrs. Scatcherd wakes the children up. She instructs them to change into the clean clothes they each have in their suitcases, to comb their hair, and tuck in their shirts. She reminds them to smile and speak respectfully to the adults they meet. When some of the children begin to joke, Mrs. Scatcherd scolds them, asking whether they'll be so "amused" when nobody picks them because of their insolence. Many of the younger children begin to cry. Mrs. Scatcherd tells them not to get upset. So long as they behave and present themselves well, she says, they each have a good chance. Dutchy whispers to Niamh that she will be okay, but not him. She tells him he has no reason to be so sure about either of them.

The children's jokes likely serve as a way to calm their own anxieties and downplay the gravity of their situation. Mrs. Scatcherd's reassurances and detailed instructions give the children the illusion that they have some agency in a situation that, in reality, is completely out of their control. Dutchy's comments show that he sees through Mrs. Scatcherd's efforts and realizes that his fate is out of his hands. Niamh's response then serves as a reminder that the future has no guarantees, either for better or for worse.



CHAPTER 10: MILWAUKEE ROAD DEPOT, MINNEAPOLIS, 1929

The train pulls into the Minneapolis station. With suitcases in hand, the children exit onto the platform with Mrs. Scatcherd and Mr. Curran. Escorted by a police officer, they walk through the station to a waiting room. They see signs advertising the event, calling for families to come and see the children up for adoption. Niamh considers how “strange” it feels to be in a place her parents “will never see.” Dutchy tells Niamh they are being “auctioned” like pigs. Mrs. Scatcherd asks the children to form a circle. The older boys, so confident and cool before, now appear just as vulnerable and uncertain as the younger children. Mrs. Scatcherd says a prayer for all of the children, asking God to be with them. She tells the children not to worry if they don’t find a home this time, as the train will continue onto other towns. Niamh feels “trembly.”

The children are ushered into a large windowless room and onto a stage. Below them is a crowd of adults. Mr. Curran gets on the stage and announces that the children are free to adopt on a ninety-day trial period. He explains that the families must sign a contract, agreeing to provide for the children’s basic needs and education. Men and women form a line on the stage, looking carefully at the children. Niamh remembers a cattle sale she attended with her Grandad in Kinvara. A poorly dressed countrywoman says she “doesn’t like the look” of Niamh, and Dutchy shocks everyone by defending her. Mrs. Scatcherd forces him to apologize. An attractive, kind-seeming young couple decides to adopt Carmine, who refuses to let go of Niamh. On an impulse, Niamh offers to go with them to help “mend and cook,” but the woman sadly turns her down. Niamh “pushes back tears.”

Most of the children around Niamh are chosen. A gruff-looking farmer and his wife come onto the stage, and the man pokes Dutchy’s muscles and forces Dutchy to let him inspect his mouth. He and his wife decide to take Dutchy, who they agree is in good shape for farm labor, despite his resistant attitude. The wife says: “We break horses. Boys aren’t that different.” Without waiting for Dutchy, they go downstairs to sign the paperwork. Dutchy is devastated that he was right. Niamh tells him to make them send him to school. Just before Dutchy walks down the stairs, she reminds him of his promise to find her someday. The event ends, and the only children left are older boys, “sickly” or “homely” children, and Niamh. Mrs. Scatcherd encourages the children to keep their hopes up that they will find a home with the “good people of Albans, Minnesota.”

The signs advertising the event draw attention to the reality of the children’s situation – there appears to be no system for inspecting or filtering out the parents considering adoption. Mrs. Scatcherd’s prayer suggests her sincere good wishes for the children, while also emphasizing how much their fate remains out of her control. Niamh’s realization that she is in a place her parents “will never see” reminds her of how far from home and alone she is. At the same time, this thought implies that Niamh is beginning to realize that she as a person continues living even after her family’s lives have ended.



Dutchy’s use of the word “auction” in the previous section captures the commercial setup of the arrangement: a crowd of adults look at the children on display, inspecting them and deciding on the spot if they want them or not. This setup no doubt makes the children feel objectified and dehumanized. Dutchy’s loyalty to Niamh is evident when he risks punishment by talking back to one of the patrons. Niamh’s impulsive offer to come with Carmine and her tears show the depth of her attachment to the baby, who along with Dutchy has been her only constant company since losing her family.



The farmer dehumanizes Dutchy by inspecting his muscles and mouth as if he were a farm animal for purchase. This scene validates Dutchy and Niamh’s perception that they are like animals at an auction. Dutchy’s devastation when his fate is sealed reveals that underneath his façade of skepticism, he had been secretly hoping that he was wrong. The dramatic moment when Niamh reminds Dutchy of his promise before he departs appears to be the climax of their time together. By having the characters repeat their promise, the author creates the sense that this promise is important to the plot of the story.



CHAPTER 11: ALBANS, MINNESOTA, 1929

The chapter opens with the train pulling into Albans, Minnesota. In a small hall near the train station, the remaining children line up again. Niamh feels tired and detached. She feels that being sent back to New York to grow up in an orphanage, where “at least [she’ll] know what to expect,” might be better anyway. A well-dressed woman with dark hair and her short, fat husband approach Niamh and introduce themselves as the Byrnes. Niamh’s heart lights up when the man says that his family also came from Ireland decades back. After a moment of private discussion, the couple agrees to take Niamh. The woman explains that they “have no interest in being surrogate parents,” but they are looking for help for their garment business. She assures Niamh that if she “works hard” she will be “treated fairly.” Mrs. Scatcherd warns Niamh to be grateful and behave well, as this may be her only opportunity.

Driving away from the station, the Byrnes talk privately in the front seat of their car. Pulling into their driveway, they tell Niamh that they have agreed to change her name to “Dorothy.” Mr. Byrne asks Niamh if she likes the name, but Mrs. Byrne interrupts, telling her husband “it doesn’t matter what she thinks.” Their home and lawn are modest but and well kept. Mrs. Byrne immediately begins telling Niamh about the chores she will be expected to do, including sweeping the porch. She warns Niamh to listen carefully because she “doesn’t like to repeat [her]self.” Inside the house, Mrs. Byrne opens the door to a room that is “full of people.”

CHAPTER 12: ALBANS, MINNESOTA, 1929

Mrs. Byrne introduces Niamh (as “Dorothy”) to the women in the room, all of whom are sitting and operating sewing machines or sewing by hand. She introduces them by name – Bernice, Joan and Sally, and the youngest, Mary, who seems displeased. An elderly woman, Fanny, is the only one to smile at Niamh. Mrs. Byrne explains that meals are served at specific times, with no snacking allowed, and that “Dorothy” can settle in after supper. Until then, she leaves Niamh to help do Mary’s “scut work.” Niamh begins hand-sewing and collecting pins for Mary, who is annoyed with her presence. When Niamh asks for help finding a bathroom, Fanny walks her to an outhouse and warns Niamh never to use the indoor bathroom. She notices how thin Niamh is and gives her an apple she pocketed from lunch, instructing her to eat it in the privy so nobody will see.

In contrast with her feelings when she entered the Minneapolis station, Niamh is no longer anxious or hopeful. Her sense of detachment suggests that, like Molly in her teenaged years, she is tired of putting her hopes and feelings in the hands of other people and risking loss and disappointment. The experience of losing Carmine and Dutchy also had a strong impact on her state of mind, draining her emotional energy and leaving her numb. Mrs. Byrne’s businesslike approach and remarks about being “surrogate parents” imply that she sees Niamh as free labor, as opposed to a child who needs the love and care of parents.



The Byrnes’ lack of interest in talking to Niamh on the way home reinforces Mrs. Byrne’s warning that they have no intention of including Niamh in their family. It is ironic that even though they don’t wish to treat her like a daughter, they still take it upon themselves to change her name. Because they don’t see her as their child, this incongruous action seems to merely symbolize their ownership over her. Mrs. Byrne’s dismissal of Niamh’s feelings on the matter further diminishes Niamh’s agency.



Mrs. Byrne gives Niamh no time to settle in or adjust after her long travels before she makes her start working. This further highlights how little Mrs. Byrne cares about Niamh’s needs and wellbeing. Fanny takes on the role of looking after Niamh, which is especially important given Mrs. Byrne’s disinterest and the indifference and even hostility of the other girls. The rule against snacking illustrates the austerity and strictness of the girls’ work environment, and the rule against using the indoor bathroom serves to dehumanize and distance the seamstresses from the Byrnes.



Back in the sewing room, Mary continues to criticize Niamh's work. Niamh knows her work is nearly perfect because she used to help her mother, who took on sewing jobs to make extra money. Still, Mary makes her repeatedly redo her stitches, until Niamh loses her temper. Mary hisses that Niamh is "nothing" and doesn't "even have a family." Niamh walks out. Fanny follows, reasoning with her to ignore Mary. She quietly asks Niamh whether the Byrnes are paying her, but just then, Mrs. Byrne appears in the stairwell. She asks what the commotion is about. Fanny feigns frustration with the girls, explaining that they are fighting about whether or not the newspaper boy "has a sweetheart." Mrs. Byrne gently scolds Niamh not to get involved in such "nonsense." For the rest of the day, Mary and Niamh don't speak.

After dinner, Mrs. Byrne tells Niamh that there is a pallet for her to roll out every night in the hallway. When Niamh expresses her surprise, Mrs. Byrne laughs at the idea that Niamh thought she'd be sleeping "with [them] on the second floor." She instructs Niamh not to "disturb" her and Mr. Byrne after dinner, and says she is certain they will all have a "positive experience" so long as Niamh doesn't "disappoint them." After Niamh washes the dinner dishes, she sits down and thinks about her situation. Even though the Byrnes "don't want to treat [her] like a child," she supposes she wouldn't want that anyway. She tries to think of the "bright side," just as her Gram taught her: She is lucky to have food, shelter, and work to occupy her mind, and soon she will be in school, which she loves. After she visits the outhouse, she discovers that someone put a padlock on the refrigerator.

CHAPTER 13: SPRUCE HARBOR, MAINE, 2011

After one week, Molly realizes that Vivian isn't throwing out anything in **the attic**. Vivian talks about things and Molly puts them into a new box. When Molly mentions this, Vivian claims the project is just to help Molly. Vivian finds her favorite book, *Anne of Green Gables*, a gift from Miss Larsen. Vivian then asks Molly what she was like growing up. Molly remembers how she stopped talking very much after losing her parents, but she only gives Vivian short responses. Vivian tells Molly she senses that she is a "reader" because she sees that she "feels deeply." She gently gives Molly *Anne of Green Gables* as a gift. Surprising herself, Molly feels overwhelmed with emotion, but she tries to appear "neutral." A while later, Vivian randomly asks about Molly's feelings toward her mother. Molly is getting used to Vivian's questions, though she feels uncomfortable because nobody else has ever taken such an interest.

Fanny's question about whether or not the Byrnes are paying Niamh highlights the extent to which the Byrnes are exploiting Niamh for free labor. It also suggests that Mary may be upset that the Byrnes have hired an unpaid laborer to do the work she is paid for. Mary's cruel words to Niamh about being "nothing" highlight both her own lack of compassion and the commonly held belief that a person's value depends on their family. Fanny's crafty cover shows how well she knows how to lie to avoid her boss's rage – a skill that seems necessary to protect herself and others.



Mrs. Byrne's laughter when she realizes Niamh thought she would be sleeping on the second floor highlights just how unapologetic she is about treating Niamh like a servant. Forcing Niamh to sleep on a pallet when they have a large enough house to put her up elsewhere shows how the Byrnes are intentionally depriving Niamh in order to "keep her in her place." Their rule against "disturbing" them after dinner highlights just how alone and neglected Niamh is in their house. Yet as a coping mechanism, Niamh tries to convince herself that she is okay with this situation. Just like Molly, she has learned to make lists of positive things to guard against suffering.



Vivian's pattern of taking things out and talking about them with Molly suggests that the project is accomplishing something else beside helping Molly fulfill her community service hours: it is also giving Molly the opportunity to unpack her past with someone who can be a witness to her story. Vivian's earlier comment that people have children so that someone will "care about the stuff they leave behind" suggests that elderly people often feel the need for someone to pass their story onto. Vivian's interest in Molly's life is unsettling because Molly isn't used to people trying to get to know her. Vivian's gift is powerful to Molly, whose previous theft from the library suggests that she sees books as precious.



Molly is with Jack in his car. She is sitting on his lap, facing him in the driver's seat while they kiss. Molly complains that Vivian is "all up in [her] business," but Jack encourages Molly to be friendlier with Vivian, reasoning that she is just "lonely." Molly insists that she doesn't care to "entertain" Vivian. Jack pulls Molly's waistband down to reveal a small tattoo of a turtle. He playfully names the turtle Carlos, but Molly explains that he "isn't a Carlos" because he's a symbol in Penobscot mythology. Jack teases that Molly probably just got the turtle on a whim, but Molly insists that the turtle represents "strength and perseverance" because "turtles carry their homes on their backs." Molly remembers her pet turtle, Shelly. She wonders aloud whether Shelly was left to die in her tank. Jack comforts her. With Jack in his car, Molly feels "cocooned."

Jack's interest in Molly's community service shows his determination to seeing her stay out of juvenile detention, which in turn shows his commitment to her wellbeing and their relationship. Perhaps it is this commitment that makes Molly feel emotionally safe – "cocooned" – with Jack. Molly's insistence on explaining her tattoo's meaning reveals how important her culture remains to her identity. The turtle, like Molly, "carries its home on its back." The turtle tattoo shows how Molly makes meaning from her experiences in order to find strength to go on.



CHAPTER 14: SPRUCE HARBOR, MAINE, 2011

On a day off from school, Molly decides to visit Vivian's house early to "knock out" extra community service hours. Vivian knows Molly is coming, but they didn't discuss a time. Nobody answers when Molly rings the doorbell. Molly lets herself in, which startles Terry. Angry, she accuses Molly of breaking in and argues that she can't assume Vivian (who is sleeping) will be available at Molly's whim. Terry criticizes Molly's lack of progress in throwing things out. She explains that Vivian holds onto her stuff as if she were holding onto "her life." Terry instructs Molly to "make" Vivian get rid of things for her own and Terry's sake. Molly feels defensive, but controls herself to prevent trouble. While she waits for Vivian to wake up, Molly starts reading the copy of *Anne of Green Gables* that Vivian gave her. To her surprise, she enjoys it. An hour later, Vivian comes downstairs, happy to see Molly.

Molly's attitude toward her community service is evident in the author's choice of words: Molly arrives early to "knock out" extra hours. This phrase shows Molly's rather self-centered focus in her project. From Molly's perspective, Terry's anger is based in her unreasonable suspicion and distrust. However, from Terry's perspective, Molly's actions seem disrespectful and self-interested. Terry's words about Vivian's attachment to her possessions highlight an important truth: Vivian's attachment to her belongings represents her connection to the past and her collection of unprocessed experiences and memories.



CHAPTER 15: ALBANS, MINNESOTA, 1929

Niamh wakes up early on a Monday morning, and cheerfully takes special care getting dressed for school. At breakfast, she asks Mr. Byrne and Mrs. Byrne how to get to the schoolhouse and what time she is expected. They glance at each other before Mrs. Byrne announces that she "isn't ready." Niamh reminds them of their contract with the Children's Aid. Mrs. Byrne continues to make excuses, eventually implying that Niamh's previous subpar schooling in the "slums" made her unprepared for the local schoolhouse. Because of her indignation and "because she hasn't asked," Niamh tells Mrs. Byrne all about her fourth grade class in New York and how much she loves school. Mrs. Byrne tells Niamh that she "doesn't want to hear another word" because now they "are the ones who decide what's best for [her]." Nobody brings up the "subject of school" again.

The innocent image of Niamh happily getting ready for her first day of school only makes the reality of the Byrnes' intentions all the more insidious and heartbreaking. The phrase "because she hasn't asked" and the timing of Niamh's monologue about her fourth grade class suggests that she is tired of the Byrnes' indifference to her life and her needs as a child. School was the one basic right Niamh thought the Byrnes couldn't take away from her. Their actions imply that they have no intentions of keeping their contract with the Children's Aid, so Niamh is effectively left without any protection of her rights.



As the days pass, Niamh becomes curious about what Mrs. Byrne “does with her time” besides coming in often to manage the seamstresses. Mrs. Byrne continues to scold Niamh frequently. She “has many rules” that Niamh tries to remember, one of which is that the doors of the house are to remain shut. At night in her cold pallet, Niamh feels deeply alone. When they are alone, Mr. Byrne is kind to Niamh and enjoys talking about his family in Ireland. Niamh recalls how her Da talked proudly of Irish history, while history just made her Mam sad. At one point, Mr. Byrne tells her she “could be his daughter” with her name and red hair. Niamh decides she is glad that they call her “Dorothy” because it makes it easier to forget her life as Niamh with her family in Ireland and New York.

The closed doors of the house and Niamh’s cold pallet bed symbolize the isolation and coldness of the atmosphere Mrs. Byrne creates for Niamh. Even though Niamh is with other girls and women all day, she is vulnerable and alone because her emotional (and developmental) need for love and care is going unmet. Mr. Byrne’s interest in Niamh means very little when he does nothing to actually improve Niamh’s daily life. Niamh accepts the name “Dorothy” because it allows her to protect and compartmentalize her true identity, keeping it safe from those around her.



One day, Mrs. Byrne tells “Dorothy” that she’s heard from Mary that she is misbehaving. Niamh contests that it isn’t true. Mrs. Byrne threatens to send her back to the Children’s Aid, which she claims she would have already done if it weren’t for Mr. Byrne. She tells Niamh they only chose her because of Mr. Byrne’s attachment to Ireland. The next day, Mrs. Byrne sends Niamh on an errand in town. She scolds Niamh for asking for directions, insisting she should have memorized it on first drive to their home. Fanny volunteers to go with Niamh, and jokes with her during their walk. After they buy supplies, Fanny gives Niamh a penny for candy. On the way home, Fanny explains that Mary hates Niamh because she fears that Niamh’s free labor will put her out of a job. Niamh now realizes why the Byrnes chose her.

Even when Niamh is trying her best to follow the rules and do well in her work, she can’t seem to appease Mary or Mrs. Byrne. This scene illustrates how futile Niamh’s efforts are because the entire situation is set up to keep her afraid and subjugated. Fanny’s kindness is Niamh’s one saving grace – Fanny, unlike any of the people there, sees and treats Niamh like a child (and like a person with worth). Niamh’s reaction when she realizes that the Byrnes chose her for free labor serves as a reminder that despite her growing skepticism, Niamh is still an innocent and trusting child.



For weeks, Niamh wears only the two dresses she was given by the Children’s Aid society. One day, Mrs. Byrne expresses concern for Niamh’s limited wardrobe. She decides to take her shopping for “sturdy and inexpensive” fabric so she can sew herself some dresses. Afterward, Mrs. Byrne takes Niamh to buy a coat and two sweaters on discount. That night, she notices “Dorothy’s” **claddagh cross** for the first time. She disdainfully asks about it, and Niamh tells the story of how it came from her Gram and symbolizes love and friendship. Mrs. Byrne considers making Niamh remove it, but Mr. Byrne defends Niamh’s right to keep her “trinket from home.” Mrs. Byrne contends that Niamh shouldn’t “tell the world she’s Catholic” and remarks on how “unbecoming in a girl!” her red hair is already. Mr. Byrne later explains that his wife hates Catholics, “even though she married one.”

This scene represents the only instance of near-decency for Mrs. Byrne. She isn’t obligated to secure new clothing for Niamh, but does so just because she notices that Niamh needs it. Nevertheless, her stinginess and indifference to Niamh’s preferences remain, as she chooses the cheapest fabrics and garments she can find. Niamh shows that she still has a little faith in Mrs. Byrne’s humanity when she tells her the story of how she got her necklace and what it means. Perhaps she thinks that doing so will persuade Mrs. Byrne to let her keep it. Mrs. Byrne’s reaction, however, shows her continued disdain and indifference to Niamh’s culture and identity.



CHAPTER 16: ALBANS, MINNESOTA, 1929-1930

One day, Mrs. Byrne comes into the sewing room and announces that the stock market has crashed. She bemoans that she can't be expected to pay her employees if she "can't feed" herself. As the weeks pass, the sewing business declines but the women keep working. Niamh learns that Mr. Byrne had invested heavily in stocks. Despite everyone's anxiety, Niamh likes being with the seamstresses (except for Mary). As more time passes, Niamh is shocked by the harsh winter. Unlike the other ladies, she doesn't have gloves to keep her fingers warm in the drafty sewing room. On Christmas, Mr. and Mrs. Byrne visit family out of town, leaving Niamh behind. Fanny slips Niamh a gift of fingerless gloves, instructing her to tell the Byrnes she "brought it from home." Niamh sees the seamstresses as her family now, likening herself to "an abandoned foal that nestles against cows in the barnyard."

As the weeks pass, Niamh grows very thin from malnourishment. Mrs. Byrne stops bathing and changing her clothes. One by one, she fires each of the seamstresses, leaving only Fanny and Niamh. One day, a fat man named Mr. Sorenson visits from the Children's Aid. He is surprised to learn that the Byrnes never had any "intention" of adopting Niamh. He gently explains to Niamh that the Byrnes' business is suffering and she must be relocated. Despite Mrs. Byrnes' poor treatment, Niamh is stunned that Mrs. Byrne is sending her away. Mrs. Byrne accuses Niamh of eating "too much." Mr. Sorenson explains that a "good country" family with four children, the Grotes, has requested a "mother's helper." Niamh tries to feel hopeful by imagining a pretty farmhouse with a kind family. The Byrnes don't even emerge to say farewell when Niamh leaves. Fanny helps Niamh pack and gives her a long hug goodbye.

On the drive to the Grotes, Niamh "almost feels sorry" for Mr. Sorenson, who seems heavy-hearted. He asks repeatedly if she is "comfortable" and takes it upon himself to educate her about Minnesota after discovering how little she has learned about her new home. Niamh tries to nod and smile, but she can't focus on his words. Instead, she feels herself "retreating to somewhere deep inside." She ponders how terrible it is for a child to feel like "no one loves you and is taking care of you." She reflects that she has lost faith in people, grown suspicious, and become too numb to feel empathy.

Mrs. Byrne's proclamation about paying her employees highlights her lack of empathy. After the crash, the Byrnes' neglectful treatment of Niamh grows even worse. Despite the harsh winter, Fanny senses that they would be displeased that someone gave her gloves. Their choice to leave a child at home alone on Christmas serves as an especially dramatic statement about the extent of their cruelty and disregard. Niamh's metaphor of the abandoned foal is a reminder that despite her hardening experiences, Niamh is still a child who desperately needs love and a sense of belonging. The comparison illustrates how seeking love is a survival instinct for children.



Mrs. Byrne's neglectful hygiene suggests the depths of her depression. Mr. Sorenson's reaction when he hears that the Byrnes had no intention of adopting Niamh reinforces how obviously exploitative their relationship to her was. Niamh's surprise when she hears that Mrs. Byrne is sending her away suggests that even after all of their cruelty and neglect, she had unconsciously grown to depend on the Byrnes as her caregivers. Even though another place could be better, being displaced and sent out alone again reinforces Niamh's feeling of being and unprotected in life. It also reinforces how little control she has over her fate.



Niamh's observations of Mr. Sorenson's feelings show her emotional intelligence, even at a time when she feels apathetic. Niamh's reflections illustrate how trauma, instability, and loss impair the ability to trust in and care about others. As a child, Niamh has the basic needs of love, protection, and consistency – all of which have been lost or denied her. Without these, she isn't able to develop a healthy sense of balance and connection.



CHAPTER 17: HEMINGFORD COUNTY, MINNESOTA, 1930

Mr. Sorenson and Niamh come to a dilapidated “shack” in the woods. A young boy, Harold, and a baby, Nettie, play without shoes in the yard. With evident disapproval, Mr. Sorenson asks for their mother. Harold says she is sleeping and he won’t wake her. Uneasily, Mr. Sorenson takes Niamh into the house, where they find a three-year-old girl, Mabel. Eventually, a grumpy Mrs. Grote emerges. The woman appears exhausted. She explains that her husband just lost his job at the feed store. She ignores Niamh but confirms that she’ll keep her to help with the kids. Mr. Sorenson seems “eager” to leave. He tells Mrs. Grote they must put Niamh in school. Mrs. Grote hesitates, and Niamh hopes she “won’t have to stay.” But then Mr. Grote walks in and quickly agrees to send Niamh to school. He signs the papers, and Niamh watches as Mr. Sorenson drives away.

Niamh’s vision of a farmhouse with a kind family is shattered by the reality of the chaos and poverty at the Grotes’. Mr. Sorenson’s depiction of the Grotes as “good country” people now proves his ignorance (or how he’s trying to romanticize the harsh reality). Even when Niamh tries to trust adults and hope for the best, the reality of her situation is getting progressively worse. Just like Mrs. Byrne, Mrs. Grote appears to be interested in exploiting Niamh only as a source of free labor. Despite Mr. Sorenson’s earlier kindness and his obvious distaste for the situation at the Grotes’, he leaves her there anyway. His “eagerness” to leave suggests his discomfort with placing Niamh there, but he takes no further action to help her.



CHAPTER 18: HEMINGFORD COUNTRY, MINNESOTA, 1930

On her first night, Mr. Grote tells Niamh (still going by “Dorothy”) she can either sleep with the children or on the couch – except that he often sleeps there. Niamh decides to sleep with the children in a room with bare mattresses and old blankets. The house has no running water or electricity. Niamh soon realizes that Wilma Grote barely gets out of bed and that she and Mr. Grote pay little attention to their children’s needs. When the children try to sleep by their mother, she sometimes lets them and sometimes “pushes them away,” causing them to “wail.” Mrs. Grote mostly ignores Niamh; meanwhile, the children begin to warm to her as their caretaker, especially 2-year-old Gerald Jr. Mr. Grote tells Niamh he requested her because his wife “wouldn’t get out of bed and he didn’t know what else to do.” Niamh feels “abandoned” and “dropped into misery.”

Niamh is still a child who needs parental figures to nurture and care for her, yet instead of finding a family to look after her, she has been assigned a family she must take care of. Not only is Niamh still deprived of the love and care she needs, but she is now responsible for providing love and care to younger children. Mrs. Grote’s constant sleep and disinterest in the people around her (including her children) suggest she may have postpartum depression. Niamh is strongly affected by her new surroundings – the atmosphere of neglect, isolation, and dysfunction only add to her “misery.”



Mr. Grote tells Niamh that his goal is to be “self-sufficient” so that he doesn’t have to work again. He fishes and hunts and keeps a goat, some plants, chickens, and a mule on his land. Their car is broken down, but he walks or rides his mule on the rare occasion that he needs to go into “town.” He doesn’t believe in government, but says he will send Niamh to school to avoid problems with the “authorities.”

Despite his neglectful parenting, Mr. Grote invests at least some time and effort into finding ways to feed his family. His identity seems shaped by his sense of “self-sufficiency.” His infrequent contact with the “town” adds to the sense that the Grotes live an isolated, remote existence.



Niamh rises early on her first day of school. With heated water from the outside pump, she washes herself the best she can without a bath. She feels cheerful and plays with the children. On her walk to the school-bus stop, she realizes for the first time how beautiful the forest is. Mr. Post, who helps run the school, collects her and the other country children (of all ages) and drives them to the schoolhouse in his truck. The teacher, Miss Larsen, is pretty and kind. She keeps soap and clean rags in the indoor bathroom for the children who need them. Miss Larsen offers to call Niamh by her real name, but Niamh decides to be called “Dorothy.” She does well on her reading test, and Miss Larsen gives her a copy of *Anne of Green Gables*. At recess, Niamh is thrilled to play with the other children. When Mr. Post drops her off, her “footsteps are slow.”

Not only does Niamh seem to enjoy reading and learning, but in her present situation, school provides a stable, safe place that contrasts with the unsafe, neglected atmosphere at the Grotes'. Miss Larsen's kindness is evident not only in Niamh's description, but in her actions as well, such as keeping supplies the children may not have access to at home. Her offer to call Niamh her birth name also suggests her respect for Niamh's culture and identity. Niamh's joy at playing with the other children points to her relief at finally having a space in which she can act like a normal child.



At first, the food Mr. Grote brings home disgusts Niamh: lots of squirrel meat and some “whiskery” fish, wild turkeys, and deer. But her hunger forces her to overcome her “qualms,” and soon she is cooking squirrel stews. She spends many difficult hours helping Mr. Grote dig up root vegetables from the still-frozen ground, and he teaches her how to plant rice from seeds in the stream. On her birthday, Miss Larsen surprises Niamh with a party and a loaf of Irish currant cake, baked for Niamh by Miss Larsen's landlady. Niamh's happiness brings tears into her eyes as she asks: “For me?” The cake “tastes like Ireland” and reminds her of her Gram's kitchen. That night, Mr. Grote calls birthdays “ridiculous,” saying that he can't remember his own or his children's birthdays, just before helping himself to a piece of the cake Niamh brought home.

This passage shows how Niamh's experiences force her to continually accept and adapt to things she doesn't like in order to survive – such as the food she finds disgusting. Not only does Niamh take care of the children, she must now help with strenuous farm labor. This shows how, just as with the Byrnes, she is expected to fulfill adult-sized responsibilities. By throwing a birthday celebration for Niamh, Miss Larsen shows how she values Niamh as a child and an individual. In contrast, Mr. Grote's comments show how little value he places on celebrating his own life or the lives of his children.



CHAPTER 19: SPRUCE HARBOR, MAINE, 2011

Molly is meeting with Lori, her social worker. Lori is energetic and direct. She reminds Molly that she'll “age out” of the foster care system in nine months. She asks about her future plans, but Molly says she has none. Giving short responses to Lori's questions, Molly says that she almost likes working for the “old lady.” To herself, she thinks about how she's started to enjoy Vivian's stories and company. Lori mentions Molly's good grades and high SAT scores, and asks if she's considered applying for college. Molly says she hasn't. She thinks about how her grades fell in previous foster homes where the parents partied and how much calmer things are with the Thibodeaus (Ralph and Dina). Lori tells Molly that there are scholarships available for foster care youth—or Molly can just apply for a job at the grocery store. “It's up to you,” she says.

The fact that Molly hasn't thought about her future plans illustrates how focused she is on surviving her immediate situation. The instability of her home life distracts her and consumes her focus. Her past troubles in school when she lived with reckless foster parents show how factors beyond Molly's control have influenced her academic performance. Perhaps her poor grades in the past affected her self-confidence, and this contributed to her inability to imagine herself going to college. Lori's words remind Molly that soon her life and her decisions will be in her own hands.



At dinner that night, Ralph and Molly discuss her community service project. He says he's been to Vivian's house before to do plumbing work. As the conversation progresses, Molly reveals that Terry is Jack's mother. Dina then realizes that Jack's mother is the same Terry Gallant she went to high school with. She describes Terry's high school popularity and gleefully remarks on how "sad" it is that she became a housekeeper after "some Mexican scrub knocked her up." Molly clarifies that he was Dominican. Dina responds that, "those illegals are all the same." Molly's contempt is obvious but she restrains herself, while Ralph tries to minimize their disagreement. Molly reflects on how often Dina dismisses her opinions, saying things like "The Tribe has spoken" and saying she "takes [her]self too seriously" when she gets offended. Ralph often assumes the role of mediator, telling Molly that Dina doesn't mean what she says.

Here Dina shows her sense of entitlement to judge others. Her cheerful attitude toward what she sees as Terry's social decline suggests that thinking about the failures of others makes her feel better about herself. This indicates that underneath her judgments, she may have some problems with her own self-esteem. Her comment about "those illegals" and her disinterest in distinguishing between Mexicans and Dominicans also suggests that she holds racist views toward outsiders. Given this pattern, her use of the phrase "The tribe has spoken" to diminish Molly's opinions seems to be an underhanded expression of contempt for Molly's Native American identity.



CHAPTER 20: SPRUCE HARBOR, MAINE, 2011

In Molly's American History class, they are learning about the Wabanaki Indians. The teacher, Mr. Reed, explains that Maine is the only state that requires schools to teach Native American history. The Wabanakis often had to migrate across the water, so they had to carry only what they needed. The class is assigned a project on "**portaging**" for which they need to interview an older relative or neighbor about their "literal and metaphorical" journeys and what they chose to carry and "leave behind." Molly can't think of anyone else, so she plans to ask Vivian. She knows that Vivian was adopted and grew up with wealthy parents in the Midwest, and that she took on the family business. She believes Vivian has had a "happy, stable life" and worries that her story will be boring, but supposes, "even the rich have their problems."

Studying the subject of local Native American history in class has the potential to bring Molly's own cultural history and identity to the forefront. The concept of "portaging," or carrying one's belongings from one place to the next (specifically in a boat or canoe), symbolically describes both Molly and Vivian's experiences as displaced orphans. Molly's perception that Vivian has had a "happy, stable life" reveals how careful Vivian has been not to disclose the details of her childhood. Molly's perception is completely contrary to the reality of Vivian's life.



Molly recalls her own childhood. She remembers having to "forage" for food in the refrigerator, her mother taking her to church on Easter, and planting crocuses outside their trailer. At the Indian Island school, she learned about the history and culture of the Penobscot tribe [a part of the Wabanaki confederacy]. She was named for Molly Molasses, a Penobscot elder attributed with *m'teoulin*, a magic that helped her protect her people. This year in Mr. Reed's class, Molly has discovered that Wabanaki women had more rights than European women, and has learned how quickly the population was reduced by disease. She had always imagined the Wabanakis as "guerilla" fighters, and so she is enraged to learn that they made multiple failed attempts at peaceful reconciliation. In her classroom, she looks at a framed portrait of Molly Molasses, "looking for answers to questions she doesn't know how to ask."

Molly's memories of her childhood reflect both positive and negative experiences, suggesting that she has a realistic view of her past. The story of Molly's name and namesake highlights her ongoing connection to her past and Native culture as part of her identity. Molly's experience of learning the truth about the Wabanakis' history reflects the difference between perception and reality—or at least how certain things are taught or assumed as reality. The questions Molly "doesn't know how to ask" reflect her sense of confusion and indignation at the losses and injustices of her tribe's and her own personal history.



On Molly's eighth birthday, she and her mother celebrated with ice cream sandwiches and a Sara Lee cake from the mini-mart where Molly's mother worked. Her mom called Molly's father repeatedly, angry that he hadn't remembered. After Molly went to bed, her father came home "swaying." He woke her up gently and gave her **three pewter charms**. The bird, he explained, was a raven. The raven would help protect Molly from bad spells she "wasn't even aware of." The cute teddy bear was actually a Maine black bear, he said, because "appearances can be deceiving." The bear would give Molly bravery. The fish, he explained, would help Molly ward off the "bad magic" of people who tried to influence her into wrongdoing. Molly's father promised to buy her a chain for the charms. Two weeks later he died in a car accident, and it was only years later that Molly bought her own chain.

Despite her limited time and money, Molly's mother did what she could to show her care for Molly. The word "swaying" suggests that Molly's father was out drinking. This indicates that like Vivian's father, he had trouble with alcohol abuse. The animal charms shows how Molly's father values his cultural heritage and wants to share it with her. The charms—though they don't seem to be "traditional" at all (a teddy bear, for example)—come to symbolize Molly's cultural identity and her sense of connection and belonging to her family and the past. Unbeknownst to her father, the powers he attributes to each animal represent qualities Molly will need to survive after the loss of her parents.



CHAPTER 21: SPRUCE HARBOR, MAINE, 2011

Late on a beautiful, sunny afternoon, Vivian and Molly sit together in the living room. Molly begins describing her school project. She explains the concept of "**portaging**," saying that it involves choosing what to leave and what to bring as one moves toward "the place you're always trying to get to." Vivian says she has trouble with "metaphors." Molly decides to explain her necklace, which she has always kept, as an example. Molly sees Vivian reach for her **claddagh cross**, and asks her if it has special meaning. Vivian says that it does. Molly tells Vivian about the "metaphorical" magic her **charm necklace** has for her. She then begins her interview by asking Vivian if she "believes in ghosts." Vivian is startled by her question, but confirms that she does. She tells Molly that ghosts are "the ones who have left us behind."

Molly's description of portaging as a journey toward "the place you're always trying to get to" implies that life's journey involves an imagined destination one is always trying to reach. In Molly and Vivian's lives, their journeys have involved the same pursuit of a safe, stable home and a sense of family and belonging – although at this point, Molly still doesn't realize all of the parallels. In this passage, both Vivian and Molly's necklaces are shown as symbols they have chosen to keep that represent their connection to their cultural heritage, families, and memories.



CHAPTER 22: HEMINGFORD COUNTY, MINNESOTA, 1930

Mr. Grote's hunting isn't going well and there is a shortage of food. One day, he tries to figure out the worth of Niamh's **claddagh cross**, but Niamh convinces him that her necklace is made of tin and worth nothing. She remarks that Mr. Grote talks to her "all the time." He tells her how his brother killed his father and how he ran away from home. He tells her that he and Mrs. Grote married after having several children on accident, and that he would rather spend his life hunting than raising children. He says he doesn't love his wife, and that she doesn't talk to him anymore. He says she loves sex but that she disgusts him, and that he wishes he'd found a girl like Niamh who wouldn't have "trapped him." Niamh "knows he shouldn't be talking to [her] like this" because she's "only ten."

Mr. Grote's predatory interest seems to develop (or reveal itself) gradually. At first he tells Niamh about his family, which seems innocent enough. He then begins telling her things that aren't appropriate to tell a child. By the time he tells her about his sex life, he has crossed the line into treating her like an adult woman. Niamh's feelings reflect her instinctive awareness that something is unsafe about the situation. Mr. Grote's attention signals that he is exploiting Niamh's powerlessness as a child under his care. He also seems to have projected his disappointment in his life onto Niamh.



Niamh notices that the children “whimper [...] and cluster together” rather than playing like “normal kids.” Still, she finds herself unable to satisfy their unmet need for love because it “takes all [her energy]” just to get ready and go to school each day. Lying awake one night, Niamh remembers how her Da told her to imagine a happy place to get through a difficult time. She imagines the same place again now: Gram’s kitchen. In her memory, she pictures herself and Gram baking, singing, and sipping tea. But then other memories creep in: She remembers her Mam “expecting her” to cook, clean, and care for her siblings. She remembers one night when her Mam was crying and she went to hug her. Her Mam shook her off and accused her of being insincere. After that, Niamh felt “numb” and stopped “trusting” her. In response, her Mam called her “heartless.”

The Grotes’ children come down with lice. Niamh remembers her Mam’s stories of lice outbreaks at boarding school. Her Mam refused to cut her long, dark hair ever again and was careful to keep her children clean. Reluctantly, Niamh tells Mrs. Grote, who instantly accuses Niamh of bringing the lice. For hours, Niamh boils water and washes the sheets while Mrs. Grote sits and directs her. When Mr. Grote comes home, Niamh hears them argue, with Mrs. Grote yelling phrases like “dirty Irish bog-trotter.” Mr. Grote then comes out and starts helping Niamh. He shaves all the children’s heads, but only “gently” cuts Niamh’s hair short, insisting “it would be a crime” to shave her head. Niamh remembers how she was the only redhead in her family and how her family loved her hair. Mrs. Grote refuses to let anyone check her own head. Niamh spends days cleaning the house, feeling helpless and miserable.

When Niamh returns to school several days later, she hands Miss Larsen a note explaining that she was absent because of the lice. Miss Larsen “doesn’t give away a thing” and compliments “Dorothy” on her “new haircut.” She tells her she reminds her of flappers – “big city girls [who] go dancing and do what they please.” Miss Larsen smiles and tells Niamh, “Maybe that’s what you’ll become.”

The children’s behavior indicates that they aren’t receiving the love, care, and protection they need in order to develop in a healthy way. Niamh is perceptive enough to realize the children’s needs, but she is only a child herself, and has her own trauma and unmet needs to manage. Her remark about school taking “all [her] energy” suggests that she is emotionally shut down because she is in survival mode. The memory of her mother relying on her parallels her current relationship to Mrs. Grote, and the story of her mother’s rejection show that Niamh’s feelings of detachment and distrust in adults began even before she was orphaned.



Despite their troubled relationship, Niamh’s memory of how her Mam kept her children clean suggests that she took better care of her children than Niamh’s current guardians. Mrs. Grote’s assumption that Niamh brought the lice illustrates how her unwillingness to admit fault and her prejudiced beliefs cause her to treat Niamh extremely unfairly. Mr. Grote helps Niamh and doesn’t blame her, but given his predatory attention, it seems that his kindness is motivated by his attraction to Niamh, not feelings of parental care or kindness. Niamh’s memory of her family’s fondness for her hair suggests that her hair partly represents her connection to her country and family. Losing it means losing another link to her past.



Miss Larsen reacts kindly and discreetly to the news about Niamh’s lice, creating a safe environment for her. By addressing Niamh’s hair in a positive way, she gives other students the illusion that Niamh’s haircut was intentional. Her comments about Niamh’s future also suggest her open-mindedness.



CHAPTER 23: HEMINGFORD COUNTY, MINNESOTA, 1930

By fall, Mr. Grote is having better “luck” with hunting and providing meat. Yet he has also become aloof and angry. When Baby Nettie cries, Mr. Grote shakes her until she “whimpers.” Mrs. Grote is also pregnant again, and Niamh hopes that she won’t be responsible for delivering the baby. She remembers her neighbors helping her mother deliver Maisie while she watched the younger children. Soon winter arrives, and when the snow comes, it falls through the cracks and lands on the children. Niamh has trouble getting to school, but the “promise” of a safe warm place and the “distraction” of learning motivate her. Mr. Grote warns her that when the snow worsens, she “might as well forget it.” One day, Miss Larsen expresses concern for Niamh’s missed homework and poor hygiene. Niamh doesn’t want her pity, and tells her “everything is fine.” Miss Larsen instructs her to come to her whenever she needs to talk.

One night, Mr. Grote comes into the children’s bedroom and motions for Niamh to come out. She follows, wrapped in a quilt. In the living room, he asks her to sit with him to keep warm, but she refuses. She senses something strange about him. Then he pulls her down and tells her to stay quiet. He undresses and molests her. He tries to rape her, but just then, Mrs. Grote comes into the living room. She yells, calling her husband an “animal”—but she blames Niamh for the incident, and yells at her to “get out.” Mr. Grote objects, concerned that Niamh won’t survive in the snow. Mrs. Grote implies that if she doesn’t survive, they will claim she ran away. Niamh grabs a few of her things and runs out. She leaves behind her gloves from Fanny, “four children [she] could not help and did not love,” and “any last shred of her childhood.”

Although the Grotes’ access to food has improved, the atmosphere of neglect and violence at their home has only worsened. This suggests that the Grotes’ poor parenting is related to their poverty as well as their emotional instability and dispositions. The harsh winter makes the situation there even more unbearable, as the house is unequipped to keep the snow out. The winter also threatens to keep Niamh from attending school, which is her only escape. Miss Larsen’s concern for Niamh’s wellbeing contrasts with the neglect of the Grotes and the Byrnes. This highlights how school is the only place where Niamh’s physical and emotional needs are met.



The fact that Niamh comes out wrapped in a quilt suggests that she knows immediately that something isn’t right. Mr. Grote’s actions in this passage indicate that his previous inappropriate comments were indeed warning signs of his predatory intentions. By blaming Niamh, Mrs. Grote holds Niamh responsible for something that was completely beyond her control—further contributing to the trauma of this horrifying scene. The Grotes’ choice to send Niamh out into the snow, knowing she may die, serves as the ultimate proof of their contemptible character and disregard for her life and value as a person. The trauma of the experience robs Niamh of any innocence she has left.



CHAPTER 24: HEMINGFORD COUNTY, MINNESOTA, 1930

With her coat and boots, Niamh walks through the snow in the night. Out in the open woods, she feels safer than she did with the Grotes. She decides that she will walk to the school. She tells herself that she is testing her limits, as her Da told her it is important to do once in a while. She wishes she had seen “what was in front of [her]” and been more distrusting, like Dutchy was. Exhausted, she arrives at the schoolhouse after walking four miles over several hours. She enters the back porch, finds a wool blanket, and curls up asleep on the floor.

In a dangerous situation with no clear way forward, Niamh’s resolve to make it through the snow to the schoolhouse shows her determination to survive. She draws strength to keep going from the memory of her Da’s words. This connects to Vivian’s description in the prologue of her “ghosts” as people from her past who urge her to “go on.” She now sees Dutchy’s skepticism as a tool that perhaps could have protected her.



A little while later, Mr. Post wakes Niamh. After his initial surprise, he takes her inside, starts a fire, and gives her new blankets, asking no questions. Miss Larsen then arrives, and startled to see her. After Mr. Post leaves, she tells Niamh to “tell [her] what happened.” Niamh tells her the truth about everything, from the Grotes’ uncared for children to Mr. Grote’s violation. Miss Larsen holds Niamh’s hand the entire time. Afterward, Miss Larsen makes tea and gives Niamh a biscuit. Niamh tells her about Mr. Sorenson and Miss Larsen says she will send Mr. Post to contact him. Niamh timidly asks if she could live with her. Miss Larsen smiles and apologetically explains that she lives in a boarding house, but that she promises to help Niamh find a home where she is “treated like a ten-year-old girl.” The other children soon arrive, and Miss Larsen begins her class.

When Mr. Post returns a while later, Miss Larsen pauses her lesson to speak with him privately. Then they call Niamh outside to the porch. Miss Larsen seems upset. Mr. Post gently explains that Mr. Sorenson isn’t sure of Niamh’s story and will need to hear it directly from her. When Niamh realizes they mean that he doesn’t believe her, she feels “the wildness of revolt” for “the first time in [her] life.” She tells them she “won’t go back there.” Miss Larsen assures her that she won’t let her go back to the Grotes. Mr. Post arranges for Mr. Sorenson to come in person. That afternoon, Niamh’s classmate, Lucy, holds Niamh’s hand but asks her no questions.

When Mr. Sorenson arrives, he meets with Miss Larsen and Niamh on the back porch. After Niamh finishes telling her story, Mr. Sorenson reaches to “pat her knee” but stops himself. He then suggests that her delirium from the cold affected her perception. He claims that young girls are dramatic and that “Dorothy,” influenced by her difficult childhood, likely “[blew] things out of proportion.” He agrees that the Grotes’ home isn’t ideal, but reminds Niamh that “the world is not a perfect place” and that those who “rely on the charity of others” can’t “complain.” He then proposes giving the Grotes another try. Miss Larsen angrily reminds Mr. Sorenson that Niamh was almost raped and that the Grotes threw her into the cold. He backs down, but argues that no other homes are available. Miss Larsen offers to keep Niamh for a few days, while Mr. Sorenson agrees to pursue another arrangement. Niamh is delighted.

In contrast with the cruel treatment by the Grotes, Mr. Post and Miss Larsen’s kindness reaffirms Niamh’s right to a safe, warm place and her basic needs. Miss Larsen listens to and believes Niamh’s experiences, and so for the first time since Niamh was separated from Fanny, her suffering is validated by an adult. By taking care of Niamh’s needs and arranging next steps, Miss Larsen relieves Niamh of the adult burden of strategizing for her own survival. Her promise to find Niamh a place where she is “treated like a ten-year-old girl” shows her understanding that Niamh has been expected to manage adult-sized burdens.



Miss Larsen’s anger and promise not to let Niamh “go back there” show that she has become personally invested in Niamh’s wellbeing. Niamh feels the “wildness of revolt” because she has no energy or patience left to suffer any further injustice. After tolerating the loss of her parents and the cruelty of the Byrnes and the Grotes, she can tolerate no more. Lucy’s quiet gesture, though, reveals the community of caring people Niamh has found at the school.



Mr. Sorenson’s instinct to pat Niamh’s knee suggests that he wishes to comfort her—but his refusal to believe her shows that his sympathy is entirely superficial. His horrifying comments reveal beliefs in misogynistic myths about rape, such as the idea that girls often imagine and embellish events. Further, his remark that those who “rely on the charity of others” shouldn’t “complain” implies an underlying suggestion that poor or orphaned children inherently have fewer rights, and thus less value, than more privileged children. His reminder that the world “isn’t a perfect place” is then tragically redundant, given that his audience is a young girl who already knows that truth all too well.



CHAPTER 25: HEMINGFORD, MINNESOTA, 1930

A man who works for Miss Larsen's landlady drives Niamh and Miss Larsen to the boardinghouse. They drive into Hemingford, which Niamh hasn't seen before. The town – with several shops, parlors and a movie theater – is much bigger than Albans. When they arrive at the boardinghouse, Miss Larsen asks Niamh to wait at the entrance. When she returns, she explains that she had to tell her landlady (Mrs. Murphy) about Niamh's "predicament" to explain why she must stay there. They go into the parlor, where Mrs. Murphy greets Niamh kindly. Mrs. Murphy is from Ireland, and when Niamh speaks, she realizes she's Irish, too. She knows "Dorothy" isn't an Irish name, and she asks her real name. She also notices how Niamh "guards" her **claddagh cross** carefully, remarking: "It's the only thing you've got to remind you of your people, now, isn't it?" Miss Larsen appears pleased that Mrs. Murphy likes Niamh.

Niamh sits with Miss Larsen in her room until supper. She notices that Miss Larsen's small room is "tidy and bright." She sees a framed photograph of a man and woman, and Miss Larsen explains that they are her parents who have passed away, so she is "an orphan too." Niamh explains that she herself "isn't really an orphan" because her mother may be alive. When Miss Larsen inquires, Niamh reveals a secret she hasn't told anyone: that her mother was troubled "even before the fire" and ended up in a mental hospital. Miss Larsen laments that Niamh has suffered a lot for her age. At dinner, Mrs. Murphy introduces Niamh as "Niamh Power" to her boarders. There is an abundant dinner spread, unlike anything Niamh has seen since holidays in Ireland. She notices that Mrs. Murphy is opinionated and bossy with the ladies, but "nothing but kind" to Niamh.

After dinner, Mrs. Murphy shows Niamh to the clean room she has prepared just for her. She gives her clean clothes, towels, and soap. She shows her to the bathroom, with hot running water, and tells her to take a bath for "as long as [she] likes" because "the others can use a different powder room." After she leaves, Niamh looks into the mirror and barely recognizes herself. She feels like she's starting to get a cold. She takes a bath, and feels like she is "floating on a cloud." Back in her room afterward, she locks the door—it is the first time in her life that she has a room to herself. As she gets into the clean, warm bed, she "feels safe" for the first time since she came to Minnesota.

Although Niamh has lived in Hemingford County for several months, she has never actually seen the town of Hemingford before. This draws attention to how isolated her life has been, with the Byrnes in the small town of Albans and again in the woods with the Grotes. The busy streets of Hemingford represent the possibility of a new beginning for Niamh and the end of her isolation. Mrs. Murphy's shared country of origin also gives her insight into Niamh's cultural identity. She is the first Irish person Niamh has known since boarding the orphan train, and therefore has the potential to alleviate the loneliness Niamh feels in a place where nobody else shares (or even accepts) her background.



Miss Larsen's "tidy and bright" room is congruent with Niamh's overall image of Miss Larsen as well managed and cheerful. Miss Larsen provides an example of a healthy adult role model; she isn't cruel and self-involved like Mrs. Byrne or depressed and detached like Niamh's Mam and Mrs. Grote. The revelation that she relates to Niamh as an orphan explains the depth of her vested interest in Niamh. To Niamh, her name represents her truest sense of self. By introducing Niamh with her real name instead of "Dorothy," Mrs. Murphy further makes the boardinghouse a space where Niamh can be herself.



Mrs. Murphy's provisions show her respect and care for Niamh's emotional and physical needs. This is significant because during Niamh's experience with the Grotes and the Byrnes, her emotions were disregarded while her body was either neglected or exploited. By giving Niamh a private tub and her own room, Mrs. Murphy respects Niamh's need for privacy and a sense control after the experiences she has suffered. More than anything, Niamh values feeling safe at this time.



Niamh soon comes down with pneumonia. For the next week, she is confined to her bed, going in and out of delirium. Mrs. Murphy and Miss Larsen take turns caring for her and feeding her chicken soup. Mrs. Murphy “bustles around” all day, but “drops everything” when Niamh rings the silver bell she has given her. During the moments when Niamh is conscious, she struggles to believe that she is in a safe bed and that people are taking care of her. When Niamh recovers after a week, Mrs. Murphy opens the curtain to show Niamh the snow that has covered the town. Miss Murphy and Miss Larsen help Niamh find clothing from garments other boarders have left behind. Niamh tries not to get used to such “comfort and safety,” and tries not to think about how much harder it will be to return to deprivation after finally feeling safe.

Niamh's pneumonia is the logical consequence of her turbulent experiences – not only did she walk for miles in the snow at night, but the stress and shock of her experiences likely affected her immune system. By giving Niamh a bell and “dropping everything” when she needs something, Mrs. Murphy shows that she isn't begrudging or resentful of Niamh's dependence on her. Niamh's struggle to believe that she is being taken care of shows how she has become used to taking care of herself. Still, Niamh knows the situation is temporary and that there are no guarantees that she will feel this safety again.



CHAPTER 26: SPRUCE HARBOR, MAINE, 2011

One day when Molly arrives, Vivian greets her with unusual energy, announcing that there isn't time for a cup of tea (which disappoints Molly) because she's old and “could drop dead any minute.” As Molly's “**portaging**” project has progressed, Vivian has gone from being timid to forthcoming about her past. Vivian explains that she's never told anyone, not even her husband, so much about the painful experience of being sent off “like garbage” on the orphan train. As they go through more boxes in the **attic**, Molly is beginning to connect stories and objects into a “pattern that was impossible to see when each piece is separate.” She is up to the point in the story where Niamh stays with Miss Larsen. Molly relates to Vivian's distrust in the intentions of others, her “forced” smiles, false “empathy,” and performance of normalcy when she is “broken inside.”

Contrary to Molly's expectations, she now realizes that Vivian has indeed suffered and that they have much in common. Molly's expectation of tea suggests that they've developed a ritual together. This highlights their growing bond, which is further evident in Vivian's increasing openness about her past. The fact that Vivian has kept her stories secret for so long is likely because of the very guardedness and distrust that she and Molly share. Molly's shared experiences and understanding, however, gives her the power to break through Vivian's emotional defenses. This passage reveals that Molly is at the same point in Vivian's story as the reader.



One day in Molly's American History class, a student named Tyler Baldwin comments in response to a film about the Wabanaki people. In his view, the history of humans involves conquer and conquest, and the groups who “lose” should “deal with it.” Molly feels enraged. She raises her hand to speak, which she rarely does. She reveals that she is Indian, and explains that the Indians, like the Irish under British rule, lost without a fair fight. Another student, Megan McDonald, validates Molly by echoing the opinions of her Irish grandfather. Tyler mentions his grandparents' financial losses during the Great Depression and says, “You don't see me asking for handouts.” Then a debate sparks about the politics of modern Native Americans. Megan tells Molly it's “cool” that she's Indian “like Molly Molasses.”

As Molly's history class continues to explore the subject of Native Americans, Molly is faced with the choice of whether or not to reveal her identity and personal heritage. Her comments about the Irish under British rule suggest that her conversations with Vivian, along with her growing anger, have inspired her to reveal her origins in a way that gives her power. Tyler's views treat the experiences of Wabanaki people as politicized and distant (similar to Dina), but to Molly they are very personal and real. Despite Tyler's offensive comments, it's at least comforting that some other white classmates are willing to stand up for Molly and affirm her in a vulnerable moment.



Jack and Molly are eating lunch outside at school. Lately Molly has been spending much more time with Vivian and less time with Jack. She hasn't told Jack about the **portaging** project because she's afraid he'll think she's "asking too much" of Vivian. Over lunch, Jack declares that Molly sees Vivian as a "grandmother figure." Molly objects, claiming that they just have a work relationship. He says it doesn't look like they are making any progress in **the attic**, but Molly insists that they are. She considers it pointless to expect Vivian to get rid of things when "estate sale" people will just take everything after she dies anyway. To Vivian, the importance of their project is in "naming and identifying" each object and its significance in her life. Jack persists, describing how suspicious her lack of progress looks to Terry. Molly snaps, saying it's none of Terry's business. Jack is furious, and walks away.

As Molly has grown closer to Vivian, she has seemingly grown more distant from Jack. This is partly because she has grown protective of her relationship with Vivian and is afraid that Jack won't understand it, but it's also because now that she has Vivian's friendship, Molly is less dependent on Jack to fulfill all of her emotional needs. Jack's evaluation of the situation shows that he sees her growing closeness to Vivian but that he doesn't fully approve, which seems to validate Molly's fears of future abandonment. Molly's reflections on the attic project show that she understands the true meaning it has to Vivian, and that she values Vivian's emotional needs above Jack and Terry's expectations.



CHAPTER 27: SPRUCE HARBOR, MAINE, 2011

A week later, Ralph is cheerfully working on his lawn to celebrate the beginning of spring. Molly tries to eat her cereal beside Dina, but Dina reminds her "no food in the living room." After breakfast, Molly calls Jack. He's still consciously working to "hold a grudge" and he says little before hanging up. Molly takes the bus to the library. On the way, she listens to her recordings of Vivian. At one point, Vivian told her that some periods of life have more meaning than others. She explained that her life since the age of twenty-three has been "flat." Molly considers Vivian's lonely life, with her relatives and husband dead and no children. She thinks about Vivian's view that important people "stay" in one's life, "haunting us" in the present. She feels "Vivian has given [her] community service sentence meaning" and she "wants to give something back."

Molly's attempt to eat beside Dina suggests that she is making a small effort at improving their relationship—but Dina's reaction highlights how she actively keeps Molly at a distance. Vivian's theory that some eras of life have more meaning and that most of her life has been "flat" implies that meaning is created through human relationships, change, and struggle. Vivian's use of the word "haunting" connotes a ghost who has unfinished business, calling back to the prologue and implying that Vivian's present life still contains unfinished business. Molly's desire to "give back" to Vivian shows how their relationship has allowed Molly to open up and start genuinely caring for others.



Molly decides to help Vivian "find peace" by finding answers to the "mysteries" in her story. At the library, she researches the history of Irish immigration. On a library computer, she researches key words from Vivian's story, like "Agnes Pauline" and "Lower east Side Elizabeth St. fire 1929." She finds the *Agnes Pauline* passenger records and the death notices for Vivian's father and brothers - but not her sister. Molly then researches the Schatzmans, and discovers that in 1929 they adopted a daughter, Margaret. Molly realizes the daughter was Maisie. With further research, she discovers that Maisie lived in upstate New York, had several children and grandchildren, and died just the year before. Molly wonders how she will tell Vivian.

Molly's choice to research the "mysteries" in Vivian's past suggests that in Molly's view, Vivian's life story is still unsettled. Molly's view is supported by Vivian's own comments, which implied that her connections to lost loved ones were unresolved. Molly's discovery reveals that during all of these years, Vivian wasn't as alone as she believed. Yet by lying to her, the Schatzmans effectively turned Maisie into a ghost, robbing Vivian of the chance to connect with her only living family member. The fact that Maisie died just the year before, then, makes this discovery all the more tragic.



CHAPTER 28: HEMINGFORD, MINNESOTA, 1930

After her health improves, Niamh begins riding with Miss Larsen to school each morning. Nearly every day, Mrs. Murphy finds some new garment to give Niamh. Her cooking fills Niamh's mind with pleasant memories of her Gram's kitchen. She also begins remembering her Da's drinking and her Mam and Gram's fights, each blaming the other for his alcoholism. She remembers overhearing her grandparents talk about the burden of "feeding that family." On the day her Gram gave her the **Claddagh cross** from her own first communion, she told her it would always lead her back home. A few weeks later, her Mam and Gram got into another fight. Niamh heard yelling, and when she came into her Gram's bedroom, she saw her Gram's prized whalebone brush broken on the floor and a "look of triumph" on her mother's face. Within the month, she and her family were headed to America.

Niamh becomes comfortable at the boardinghouse, now sharing in the chores along with the boarders. In the evenings, she sits with the women and listens to them talk. One day, Mr. Sorenson makes an unexpected visit, to Niamh's dismay. He explains that his search for a placement has been unsuccessful. He adds that her record suggests a problem with insubordination because of "trouble with the women of the house." He suggests sending Niamh back to New York, when Mrs. Murphy politely asks to speak privately with him. When they return, they cheerfully announce that Mrs. Murphy's friends, the Niensens, are in need of help at their general store. Their daughter died a few years before, and they have agreed to meet "Dorothy." Niamh pretends to be "grateful," but she feels angry to be used again for labor, and betrayed that Mrs. Murphy wants to send her away at all.

CHAPTER 29: HEMINGFORD, MINNESOTA, 1930

Mr. Sorenson, Miss Larsen, and Mrs. Murphy are present when the Niensens arrive a few days later. After some polite conversation, Mr. Sorenson prompts "Dorothy" to describe what she will "bring" to them. The truth is she just wants a safe home and her basic needs met; but she responds by listing her skills. The Niensens ask about her work ethic and religion. Mrs. Murphy and Miss Larsen vouch for her character and intelligence. She agrees to attend the Lutheran church with them every Sunday. They promise to pay her for working at their store and to send her to a nearby school. Niamh senses that they are good people, but feels no "connection." She feels that they have no interest in her story, but rather see "the need [she] might fill in their lives." Miss Larsen hugs Niamh goodbye, giving her her personal copy of *Anne of Green Gables* to keep.

Mrs. Murphy's frequent gifts and cooking also allow her to fulfill a grandmotherly role, no doubt further inspiring Niamh's memories of her Gram. Until now, Niamh's memories of her Gram have been comforting and pleasant, reminding her of the feeling of love and safety. Yet, as her darker memories reveal, her Gram likely had a key role in sending them to America. The contradiction between Niamh's romantic vision of her Gram and her Gram's actual role in sending Niamh to America symbolizes the complicated and flawed nature of family relationships (and nostalgic memories). Even the family member who made Niamh feel the most loved sometimes acted in ways that failed her.



Mr. Sorenson effectively blames Niamh for her own abuse when he suggests that she was thrown out because of "insubordination." Despite Niamh's wariness, she has lowered her defenses and allowed herself to feel safe with Mrs. Murphy. Her sense of betrayal signals how shattering it is for her feeling of safety and trust to be removed yet again. Niamh's loss of trust at this moment connects to the trust issues that she describes to Molly years later. Her false expression of gratitude likewise connects to the Molly/Vivian storyline, serving as the origin of her tendency to "fake" expected emotions when her true feelings have no space to be expressed.



*Mr. Sorenson's instructions for Niamh to describe what she will "bring" to the Niensens' home is a question that would better fit a job interview. This highlights the reality that unlike most children, Niamh is held responsible for making adults want her. The questions the Niensens ask then revolve around how well her character and habits will fit into their lifestyle and expectations. This supports Niamh's sense that they aren't interested in her personal story so much as they are in her ability to fit their needs. Niamh's identity – her real name, her religious identity and her past – must all be left behind. Here we also see the emotional value of this copy of *Anne of Green Gables*, which Vivian then passes on to Molly.*



CHAPTER 30: HEMINGFORD, MINNESOTA, 1930-1931

The Niensens' home is large, neat, and well maintained. To Niamh, it seems luxurious. Niamh has her own bedroom and bathroom. Mrs. Nielsen observes Niamh's eating habits and buys things she likes. They attend church every Sunday, and Niamh "find[s] the rituals comforting." She likes how the community's "approval" for the Niensens spreads to her, something she has never experienced before. The Niensens have an orderly daily routine: Mr. Nielsen manages the general store, while Mrs. Nielsen manages the home. At her new school, Niamh works hard to erase her accent and fit in with the other children, who seem healthy and cared for. Every afternoon, she works for a few hours at the store. She pities the hungry children she sometimes sees lingering over the candy, and Mr. Nielsen lets her give them free candy at her "discretion." At dinner, they discuss "the weather, [Niamh's] homework and the store."

As Christmas approaches, Niamh helps to decorate at the store. While she and Mrs. Nielsen prepare the display trees, Mrs. Nielsen tells her about her life. She is Swedish, and her dark eyes and hair are from her "Gypsy" (Romani) roots. She and Mr. Nielsen thought they were infertile until their daughter, Vivian Nielsen, was born – the same year as "Dorothy." Niamh asks about the girl's death, and Mrs. Nielsen tells her the story of how she died of diphtheria. Niamh contemplates Mrs. Nielsen's painful loss and thinks about losing her own family members. She "feels sorry" for the inner "sadness" that she and Mrs. Nielsen both share.

At church on Christmas Eve, the pastor gives a sermon "as elemental as a story in a child's picture book" about "charity and empathy." He lists the situations of several unfortunate local families. He includes the Grotes, described them as a poor family with four children and a baby just born prematurely. Mrs. Nielsen tells Niamh they will prepare a basket for them. Niamh knows Mrs. Nielsen doesn't know her "history with them" and that to her, "they're just another distant calamity." Coming home that night, Niamh observes that their house is "a pleasant place to return to. A home."

Every other week, Niamh joins Mrs. Nielsen in a women's quilting circle. Surrounded by women, Niamh feels "at ease." Mrs. Nielsen begins saving fabric remainders so that Niamh can design and make her own quilt with the help of the circle. One Sunday, while polishing the silver together, Mrs. Nielsen offers to help Niamh polish her **claddagh cross**. Niamh tells her it was from her Gram, but Mrs. Nielsen smiles and asks no questions. Niamh knows that helping her clean the necklace is Mrs. Nielsen's "way of acknowledging that she knows it holds meaning for [Niamh]."

Unlike the Grotes and Niamh's birth family, the Niensens take care of their home and keep a structured life. The care and order of their lives, along with their financial security and generosity, create a safe physical environment, where Niamh no longer has to worry about the risks of cold and hunger. Mrs. Nielsen's attention to Niamh's preferred food and Mr. Nielsen's permission to give candy to poor children also show their care for Niamh, but despite all this they never establish a strong connection with her, and their conversation never broaches topics that would let them get to know Niamh more deeply. Niamh's desire to share with the hungry children shows how when her own needs are being met, she is able to open up and be caring towards others.



Despite Mrs. Nielsen's failure to inquire further about Niamh's past and her losses, she shares a common "sadness" with Niamh that comes from the unexpected loss of important loved ones. Though they don't discuss their shared experience of loss, it provides at least a small connection that allows Niamh to feel some emotion for Mrs. Nielsen. Niamh's ability to "feel sorry" for Mrs. Nielsen (like her concern for the hungry children) shows that her empathy hasn't entirely disappeared.



The pastor's "elemental" sermon reflects the simplicity of the community's approach to right and wrong and parallels the simplicity and uncomplicated goodness of the Niensens' lives. Mrs. Nielsen's ignorance about Niamh's history with the Grotes highlights her lack of curiosity about Niamh's previous adoptive homes and past life in general. This moment also reveals how far away that kind suffering and deprivation is from Niamh's new life.



While individual women in the novel vary greatly in their qualities, circles of women usually symbolize safety and community (for example, the seamstresses at the Byrnes' and the ladies at Mrs. Murphy's.) Mrs. Nielsen's plans for Niamh's quilt and her help cleaning the necklace show that she expresses her care through actions rather than conversation.



One evening, Mr. Nielsen and Mrs. Nielsen tell Niamh that they have come to see her as their daughter, and they hope she is “beginning” to consider them her parents. They ask her to consider taking the name of their daughter, Vivian Nielsen, who they loved dearly. They give her time to decide, and assure her it won’t alter their love either way. Niamh feels “gratitude, respect [and] appreciation” for them, but she doesn’t feel “a child’s love” or the sense that they will ever be “her people.” Further, taking Vivian’s name seems like a heavy “burden.”

The Niensens think that they can love Niamh without knowing her inner self, and by giving her Vivian’s name, they imply that the role of “daughter” is transferrable. Their reluctance to know about Niamh’s past has made it easier for them to give her Vivian’s place in their lives, but Niamh’s sense of her own identity and her lack of emotional connection to the Niensens keeps her from seeing them as her parents.



One day at the store, Niamh hears a familiar voice bartering with Mr. Nielsen. Niamh realizes the man is Mr. Byrne. He appears tired and possibly drunk. When he sees her, he expresses interest in Niamh’s wellbeing. He tells her that after the business busted, Fanny left to live with her daughter. Mrs. Byrne wandered into the snow one day and froze to death miles from their home. Niamh “feels sorry” for Mr. Byrne’s “tattered life” but feels no pity for Mrs. Byrne. She remembers only how she exploited and deprived her. That night Niamh agrees to take Vivian’s name, dawning the beginning of her “new life.” She is “under no illusions” about the life she has “left behind.” A few years later, the Niensens officially adopt her. She never refers to them as Father and Mother, but she trusts them to “take care of [her]” and knows she “belongs to them.”

The appearance of Mr. Byrne serves as a reminder to Niamh of the uncertainty and mistreatment that defined her life after she lost her parents and before she met the Niensens. The memory of that life pushes Niamh to cling more closely to the Niensens. By accepting Vivian’s name, Niamh accepts the parental care and protection they provide her. Her new name also signifies the beginning of a new, better life and the end of all the misery she suffered as “Dorothy,” just as becoming “Dorothy” allowed her to compartmentalize the attachments she and losses she suffered as “Niamh.”



As the years go by, Niamh’s memories of her birth family start to fade. Still, she always wears the **claddagh cross**. When she is older, she realizes her only token of her birth family is from someone “who pushed her only son and his family out to sea on a boat, knowing full well she’d probably never see them again.”

Over time, Niamh makes space for her new life as Vivian by letting go of her earlier memories. The necklace remains her link to the past, however, even as she increasingly realizes and accepts her Gram’s responsibility in launching the events that separated her from her country and family.



CHAPTER 31: HEMINGFORD, MINNESOTA, 1935-1939

One day when Vivian is fifteen, the Niensens find a half-smoked pack of cigarettes in her purse. She can tell as soon as she gets home that Mrs. Nielsen is upset. Vivian explains that she only wanted to “try” them, but as punishment, the Niensens take away her Sunday trips to the movies with her friend Judy for two weeks. After this incident, Vivian is terrified of disappointing them. Unlike her friend Judy, she never sneaks out or lets boys get too close. Vivian holds onto her fear that if she becomes too unruly or burdensome, Mr. Sorenson will come and take her back. At night, she dreams she is on the orphan train or alone on the streets. One day, a man comes into the store talking about the misfortune of a young boy who’d rode in on an orphan train a couple years before. Niamh thinks of Dutchy.

Vivian’s first experience of disappointing the Niensens makes her so anxious that she takes extra care thereafter to behave perfectly. Unlike most teenagers, she feels she can’t afford to rebel because she doesn’t have the confidence and trust in her parents’ love that others have. Even though she wasn’t responsible for the events that led to her abandonment, she was blamed for them nonetheless. Her experiences of rejection and blame made her unable to trust in her caregivers. Although the Niensens have given her no indication of rejection, she is haunted by her past.



When Vivian is sixteen, she takes initiative to help Mr. Nielsen improve and expand his store, taking note of the latest fashions and trends from bigger cities. When she is seventeen, she begins wearing red lipstick. She realizes that makeup gives her the power to change her persona and “determine [her] next incarnation.” She makes her own dress for the senior prom and attends with a boy who she has no serious intentions about. Her English teacher encourages her to apply to college out-of-state, to have a “bigger life,” but Vivian feels the Niensens “depend on her” and her life is “big enough.” After graduation, she co-manages to the store with Mr. Nielsen while taking business classes at night. When her classmates start getting married, Vivian feels no envy for what she considers a “future of washing some man’s clothes.” Mrs. Nielsen tells her she has plenty of “time.”

Vivian’s discovery that changes to her makeup give her the power to alter her “persona” and create her “next incarnation” parallels Molly’s intentional alteration of her appearance to create a new “persona” at each new foster home. Both girls have had no control over how changes in their lives have forced them to alter their identities, so by taking ownership over how they present themselves, they reclaim a sense of agency. Vivian’s reasoning for her choice not to leave for college suggests that she feels indebted to the Niensens. Her remark that her life is “big enough” suggests that she has experienced enough change already.



CHAPTER 32: SPRUCE HARBOR, MAINE

Molly has prepared a vegetarian stir-fry. She’s begun cooking recently as a way of helping Dina make food she can eat, but Dina complains that Molly’s “fancy vegetables” are too expensive. Molly reminds Dina that they are paid to keep her. Enraged, Dina yells that she’s had “enough.” This time, Ralph’s efforts to calm her make no difference. Dina goes into Molly’s bedroom and comes out holding *Anne of Green Gables*. She reads the name “Dorothy Power” inside the cover and accuses Molly of stealing it. Dina yells that she “want[s] her out.” Molly packs her things, ignoring Ralph’s reminder that she should wait for social services. Molly focuses on her anger to keep down the “sorrow” she feels. She looks her biological mother up online, only to find that she is still in jail. Molly then decides to take the bus to Vivian’s, if only to sleep in her garage for the night.

Molly’s vegetarian meals serve as her effort to express her individual needs while also trying to make things work with the Thibodeaus. To Dina, however, any accommodation to meet Molly’s needs is asking too much. Molly’s retort reveals her sense of injustice at being treated like a burden, when she knows they are compensated for taking care of her. Molly’s desire to leave immediately rather than waiting for social services highlights how much pain she feels in response to being rejected yet again. It also shows her need for some control over the situation. Her underlying sorrow points to her loneliness and sense of constant abandonment.



CHAPTER 33: SPRUCE HARBOR, MAINE

Before Molly leaves, Ralph offers her pocket money, a ride, and help with packing. Molly turns him down, resisting the urge to hug him and say thank you. She carries her two duffel bags and laptop onto the local bus, leaving most of her things behind. She gets out at the stop near Vivian’s and lumbers uphill. She thinks of her **portaging** project and imagines herself as a Penobscot Indian journeying with all her possessions. She wears her **charm necklace**, but thinks of how “the things that matter stay with you, seep into your skin.” When she gets to Vivian’s she calls instead of ringing the doorbell. Vivian is startled and worried. Realizing that she’s “freaked” Vivian out, Molly starts to cry. Vivian soothes her and promises to come right down. At her doorstep, seeing Molly with her bags, Vivian says: “come in this minute and tell me what happened.”

Rejecting Ralph’s last-ditch efforts to help her gives Molly a sense of power in a situation that is largely beyond her control, and shows just how feeble Ralph’s “help” really is when he won’t actually stand up to Dina. Just like her Penobscot ancestors, Molly must again choose what to carry and what to leave behind. Her observation that “the things that matter [...] seep into your skin” suggests that some experiences, both good and painful, come along with her “baggage” whether she wants them to or not. She has been focusing on her anger to survive the night, but the thought that even Vivian might reject her is too much for Molly to tolerate.



Vivian makes tea and tucks Molly into a chair with a quilt. Vivian asks Molly to share what's going on. Molly tells her everything, from her childhood to the loss of her parents and her journey through the foster care system. She tells her about the fight with Dina and about stealing *Jane Eyre* from the library. She apologizes to Vivian for coming into her home "under false pretenses." Vivian reassures her that she isn't angry, saying, "I suppose we all come under false pretenses one way or another, don't we?" Vivian tells Molly that she has "paid her dues," but Molly responds that it "hasn't felt like punishment." Feeling burdened by the secret about Maisie, Molly then carefully tells Vivian her discovery. She shows her the photo of Maisie online, and Vivian is stunned to see her baby sister's blonde hair turned grey. "All these years, there were two of them," she says.

This passage parallels the scene in Niamh's storyline when Niamh arrives at the door of the schoolhouse, as Vivian's hospitality resembles Miss Larsen's reaction to Niamh's arrival. Like Niamh, Molly is finally in a place where she feels emotionally safe enough to share her story. Vivian's line that "we all come under false pretenses" points to her history of pretending in order to survive, as well as her childhood experience with deceitful adults. Her awareness of human nature and her personal connection to Molly's situation keep her from feeling angry or judgmental.



CHAPTER 34: MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA, 1939

When Vivian is nineteen, her lively friends Lillian and Emily invite her on a trip to Minneapolis to see *The Wizard of Oz*. Mrs. Nielsen encourages Vivian to go, because she worries that Vivian spends too much time working and studying. After they arrive and check into a "ladies' hotel," Vivian realizes that her friends' actual plan is to visit the local nightclubs. Despite her hesitation, Vivian is excited. Vivian and Emily go to the "picture show" while Lillian visits her fiancée, Richard. The movie captivates Vivian. She marvels at the magic of Oz and reflects on how Dorothy's "black and white" home is "already populated with the only characters she'll ever know." Afterward they meet up with Lillian and Richard. Vivian worries she seems prudish among her sophisticated peers. But as they walk to dinner, her "spirits lift" with the feeling that it is "marvelous to be young on a big-city street."

Mrs. Nielsen's view that Vivian spends too much time working and studying shows what a serious young woman Vivian has become. This is probably partly because she still feels the need to please the Niensens and maintain their approval, but her serious disposition likely also stems from the sobering effect of her earlier life experiences. Still, Vivian's sense of excitement and her "lift[ed] spirits" suggest that just like her more carefree peers, she wants to experience the freedom and thrill of exploring the world as a young person. Her reflections on the movie reveal her underlying boredom with her present life and her desire for adventure.



Richard ushers Lillian, Emily, and Vivian to the Grand Hotel for dinner. Upon seeing all of the rich, well-dressed patrons stare at Lillian and Emily's "provocative" outfits, Vivian feels glad that she wore more modest clothing. With his arms around both girls' waists, the "freewheeling" Richard takes Lillian and Emily into the bar. Vivian stays behind, mesmerized by the elegant lobby. Besides, she is "in no hurry" to join Richard, who makes her feel "old-fashioned and humorless." A thin, well-dressed blonde man approaches and tells her she looks familiar. His gazes "makes [her] blush." He calls her Niamh, and she suddenly realizes it is Dutchy.

Vivian's relief that she isn't attracting the same judgment as her friends shows how a sense of belonging can shift from one moment to the next depending on the social context. Vivian's negative feelings toward Richard highlight how she judges the character of others based on her own values rather than popular standards. After all of these years, Niamh and Dutchy's promise to find each other has been realized in this climactic moment. Just as when she was young, his gaze still "makes [her] blush."



CHAPTER 35: MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA, 1939

Dutchy hugs Vivian, holding her “tighter than anyone has ever held [her].” He tells her that he has looked for her “in crowds” over the years. They marvel at having found one another and “cling to each other like survivors of a shipwreck.” Dutchy says he goes by “Luke” now. He is scheduled to play piano at the bar, but he asks her to stay after his performance. They walk into the bar together, and Vivian sits with her friends. They tease her about finding a man so quickly. During dinner, Vivian focuses only on Dutchy’s beautiful songs, which she interprets as messages for her. She realizes how lonely her “journey” has been until now that she has been reunited with her “fellow outsider.” After dinner, Vivian’s friends—who are now drunk and giddy—leave her with her “dreamboat.” Vivian waits for Dutchy to pack his things.

Vivian and Dutchy hold hands as they walk onto the streets. At Vivian’s hotel, Dutchy bribes the clerk to let him in. In her bedroom, Dutchy doesn’t ask before lying down on the bed, and Vivian lies down in his arms. Vivian has never been this close to a man (consensually), but it feels normal when Dutchy kisses her. She tells Dutchy everything. Dutchy tells her he ran away several times from the cruel farmer who beat him often. Eventually, a kind neighbor traded the farmer a pig in exchange for Dutchy. The neighbor then sent Dutchy to school and paid for his piano lessons. Music gave Dutchy a way to “express [his] feelings.” They discuss the “relief” they feel at becoming adults. As they fall asleep together, Vivian considers the chain of life events that have precipitated this moment. After experiencing so many “losses and connections” by “chance,” she feels that “fate” has finally intervened.

On the way back to Hemingford the next day, Vivian resists Lillian’s prodding questions and lies about how she knows Dutchy. She tells her it doesn’t matter because “it’s not like [she’s] going to marry him or anything.” But ten months later, in a small ceremony at the Niensens’ church, Vivian marries Dutchy (“Luke Maynard”).

The unlikelihood of Vivian and Dutchy’s chance reunion and all of the emotion it evokes create a powerfully dramatic and romantic scene. Vivian’s sense that she and Dutchy are “survivors of a shipwreck” and “fellow outsiders” implies that traumatic experiences are by nature psychologically alienating. Though they have lived different lives, their shared experiences and parallel journeys give them a sense of understanding and intimacy that they can’t feel with other people. Vivian’s friends’ perception that she has quickly found a new “dreamboat” highlights how little they know about the realities of her life.



The ease of Vivian and Dutchy’s physical interactions reveals their natural sense of safety and intimacy with one another. This highlights their enduring connection and further supports Vivian’s perception that “fate” has brought them together. The stories they share show their parallel journeys as orphans subject to mistreatment and reliant on the kindness of strangers. Their shared “relief” at becoming adults likewise parallels Molly’s distaste for being reliant on the mercy of others. Vivian’s belief in “fate” shows how her reunion with Dutchy has brought a sense of meaning back into her life.



Vivian’s refusal to describe her meeting with Dutchy in detail highlights how deeply personal she considers their love story to be. Even though Vivian’s story now takes a happy turn, her later comments to Molly about her marriage and her lonely life forebode trouble.



CHAPTER 36: HEMINGFORD, MINNESOTA, 1940-1943

Vivian calls Dutchy “Luke” in the company of other people, but “Dutchy” when they are alone. He calls her “Viv” because he thinks it sounds like “Niamh.” Contrary to Mrs. Nielsen’s fears, Dutchy encourages Vivian to continue her studies and her job at the store. With Mr. Nielsen’s help, Dutchy gets a job in Hemingford as a music teacher. Every weekend Vivian goes with him to Minneapolis, where he continues his piano performances. Dutchy is impulsive and passionate, while Vivian is even-tempered and orderly, yet they each temper the other. When they lie together in bed, Dutchy tells her how lucky he feels to have found her. After years of “keeping so much hidden,” Vivian feels like she doesn’t “have to pretend” with him. She realizes that her own parents were never in love the way she and Dutchy are.

One day, a reporter on the radio announces that Pearl Harbor has been attacked. And with that, “everything changes.” Several of Vivian’s former classmates and friends enlist in the army. Business changes and signs everywhere encourage people to make “sacrifices” for their country. Dutchy shamelessly maintains, “they’ll have to come for me”—but when the draft begins, Dutchy is called. Before he leaves, Vivian gives him her **claddagh cross**. While he is in training in San Diego, Vivian discovers she is pregnant. Despite Mrs. Nielsen’s concern for her health, Vivian continues to busy herself with work and volunteering to keep her mind from worry. Dutchy then ships out to the Central Pacific. He and Vivian exchange letters every week. Dutchy is thrilled to become a father, writing that he’ll “finally have a family.” Vivian always includes the same “cliché” words in her letters, meaning them wholeheartedly: “I love you. I miss you. Be careful. Be safe.”

One day a man from Western Union comes to the store. He reads Vivian and her parents a telegram, announcing that “Luke Maynard” was “killed in action.” Vivian puts her hand over her stomach to touch “the baby – our baby.” As the months go by, Vivian stays busy with her work at the store. Mrs. Nielsen, Mrs. Murphy, Lillian, and Emily keep her company with movies and tea. She gets letters of condolence and Dutchy’s personal items from Jim Daly, Dutchy’s shipmate. It “will be years before” she puts the **claddagh cross** back on. Dutchy’s superstition kept him from telling others about the baby, and in Vivian’s replies to Jim she makes no mention.

The matter of Vivian and Dutchy’s names illustrates how they must always balance their past and present selves with their private and public identities. The fact that Dutchy surprises Mrs. Nielsen by encouraging Vivian’s studies shows how Dutchy and Vivian’s marriage deviated from the gender norms of the time. Unlike most married men, Dutchy doesn’t expect Vivian to become a homemaker. This reflects their individual dispositions as well as the mutual acceptance they have for each other as full people. For the first time in years, Vivian feels free from shame and pretense.



The scene when Vivian hears about Pearl Harbor on the radio shows how quickly political events can alter the lives of individuals. Dutchy’s unapologetic reluctance to join the war effort suggests that he doesn’t feel he owes the country or anyone else his life. His difficult early life experiences already took so much from him, and he is only now beginning to have a normal, healthy life. His words about “finally hav[ing] a family” draw attention to the fact that the birth of their child will give them both a biological family once again. Vivian’s simple words highlight how sincerely she loves Dutchy and how powerless she is to keep him safe.



Vivian’s initial response to touch her belly draws attention to the fact that her child is her last remaining link to Dutchy. This passage offers little insight into Vivian’s state of mind after Dutchy’s death, but rather implies that she occupied herself with work and the company of others to distract herself from the reality of her loss. This suggests that she is surviving her loss by repressing her emotions, as she has had to in the past. By avoiding her necklace, she avoids direct memories of Dutchy.



One night, Vivian goes into labor, and Mrs. Nielsen takes her to the hospital. During her difficult delivery, Vivian finally weeps for Dutchy. She “learned long ago that loss is not only probable but inevitable” and she weeps uncontrollably for the “loss of a future [she’d] dared to envision.” Overwhelmed with sorrow, Vivian decides she can’t bear the idea of loving so deeply “ever again.” Seeing her sadness, Mrs. Nielsen assures her that she’ll “go on for this baby.” But Vivian has already decided. She pushes the baby out. The little girl has blonde hair. She says the name “May” into her baby’s ear, and thinks of how her baby, like she herself, is “the reincarnation of a dead girl.” Without any warning to anyone else, Vivian gives the baby away.

Amidst the emotions and pain of labor, Vivian can no longer repress her grief over losing Dutchy. The immensity of her pain highlights how much she relied on Dutchy to give her life a sense of hope, meaning, and belonging. Losing him means losing the only person who (she feels) truly understood her. Her grief over “a future [she’d] dared to envision” highlights how much she risked just by letting herself believe in love and hope again. She then gives her daughter away because she knows that love always carries the risk of loss, and she feels she can’t tolerate the pain of loss “ever again.”



CHAPTER 37: SPRUCE HARBOR, MAINE, 2011

Vivian has just finished telling Molly about her baby, May. They are going through a trunk with Dutchy’s possessions and the baby blanket Vivian made during her pregnancy. “Oh, Vivian, you gave her away,” Molly says. She asks about Vivian’s second marriage to Dutchy’s shipmate, Jim Daly. Vivian explains that she loved Jim, though they weren’t in love the way she and Dutchy were. They met after the war and found comfort in each other’s company. She says Jim was “enough.” Molly relates deeply to the “depth of emotion” that she senses under Vivian’s “resolute unsentimentality.” Vivian explains that she and Jim got along and managed the business well together. Vivian never told Jim about her daughter, but made it clear that she didn’t want kids. Molly asks whether Vivian wants to find her daughter, but Vivian says she must “live with” her “decision.” Vivian then decides it’s time for bed.

Molly’s words, “Oh, Vivian, you gave her away,” show her shared sense of sorrow rather than any judgment—since like Vivian, Molly was a motherless child. Molly’s sadness reflects her empathy both for Vivian’s loss and for the daughter who was given away. In Vivian’s explanation of her marriage to Jim Daly, she implies that Jim provided company without bringing the danger of loss that comes with intense love. The “depth of emotion” Molly perceives in Vivian refers to her deep capacity for love, as well as her grief, loneliness, and fear of loss. Molly’s parallel life experiences have given her the same intense feelings that she has guarded with the same “resolute unsentimentality.”



CHAPTER 38: SPRUCE HARBOR, MAINE 2011

When Molly wakes up in the morning, she is surprised to find the ocean outside her window. She goes downstairs to make tea and breakfast, and waits for Vivian. Jack calls. On the phone, she tells him that Ralph and Dina threw her out and she is at Vivian’s. He is angry that she didn’t ask him for help first. She explains that she didn’t want “to burden” him and that she and Vivian are “friends.” When Jack expresses his concern for his mother’s position, Molly assures him that Vivian is understanding and won’t give Terry any problems. She tells Jack that she can’t keep relying on him to save her, because it isn’t healthy. She adds that her relationship with Terry will improve if Terry stops assuming the worst of her. Before hanging up, she says she’s done “something important” in helping Vivian reconcile her past by sorting through the **attic**.

The ease with which Molly gets up and prepares breakfast and her assertive, patient manner with Jack suggests that she feels peaceful and in control of herself. Molly’s honest, calm explanation of her situation, feelings, and concerns further suggests that she is experiencing a moment of clarity. In contrast with her feelings during previous arguments, Molly no longer feels guilty, anxious, or defensive about Jack’s concerns and his mother’s judgments. Her sense of peace seems related to the security and honesty she has found in her friendship with Vivian.



A couple days later, Molly texts Ralph, telling him that she is safe with Vivian. Ralph calls and demands that Molly return until social services can relocate her. Molly casually suggests that they just not tell social services what happened. Ralph considers her proposal. Molly implies that he and Dina can keep the money the state sends, and Ralph comments that because Vivian isn't a "certified" foster parent, she wouldn't want him to "report her missing." They each agree to report nothing.

Terry isn't pleased when she discovers Molly staying at Vivian's house. Vivian tells her that she "invited" Molly to stay and that Molly "graciously accepted." When Terry raises further objections, Vivian assures her that she likes having Molly there and then closes the conversation. Vivian gives Molly two rooms – one to study for finals and one to sleep – at the opposite end of the house. With Vivian, Molly feels free to do as she pleases without the "judgment and criticism" she has become so accustomed to. She realizes she's been "walking on thin wire" and now feels she is "on solid ground."

CHAPTER 39: SPRUCE HARBOR, MAINE, 2011

At their next meeting, Lori the social worker notices that Molly has removed the "skunk stripe" from her hair and toned down her look. She reviews Molly's paperwork from her completed community service hours. She asks if Molly finished cleaning out the **attic**, and Molly says she did. Molly thinks of the boxes, sorted through and neatly organized into an attic that is now easier to navigate. Lori remarks, "you can get a lot done in fifty hours." Lori shows Molly a note from Mr. Reed, stating that he's nominating her for a national history prize for her **portaging** project. Lori tells Molly she's proud of her. Molly responds by joking that she's just glad she's not in "juvie." Lori jokes back, and Molly smiles genuinely.

Molly settles into life at Vivian's and starts helping Terry with her chores. One day, Vivian "announces" that she wants a computer. Molly helps her purchase one online and Jack sets up the internet. After watching video tutorials, Vivian sets up an email account. She then begins reading through the plethora of online resources about the orphan trains. She discovers online record archives, articles, books, and information about yearly reunions. In many of the personal stories, the riders frame the orphan train as the catalyzing event that led to their ultimately happy adult lives. Molly questions the "human" tendency to "find [...] meaning even in the worst experiences." Vivian is happy to find out that Carmine grew up to be a successful salesman, got married, and had children and grandchildren. One day Vivian asks Molly, with a face "unguarded and full of longing," to help her find her daughter, May.

Molly's suggestion highlights her familiarity with the foster system and her confidence that she can motivate Ralph with money. Ralph's comment about Vivian not being certified appears to be a gentle threat to report Molly as missing if she tells the authorities that Ralph and Dina are illegally collecting on her. They essentially form a mutual pact to keep each other quiet.



Vivian frames the story of Molly's arrival to highlight her own agency and remove any blame from Molly. Given Vivian's childhood, her hospitality toward Molly seems natural; it is as if she is giving Molly the home she herself once needed. In contrast with Molly's previous homes, Molly isn't afraid that she's going to do something wrong and lose her place with Vivian. Vivian thereby gives her the safety and freedom to be fully herself.



Molly's toned down look suggests that she no longer relies on her "persona" to give her a sense of agency or to keep people at a distance. This indicates that in the stable, accepting space that Vivian gives her, Molly has become more comfortable with herself. The attic, a metaphor for Vivian's relationship to her past, is now sorted and easier to navigate. This symbolizes Vivian's acknowledgement and peace with her memories. Molly's sincere smile is another sign of her new feelings of belonging, safety, and human connection.



By volunteering to help Terry with her chores, Molly shows her willingness to earn her keep and improve her relationship with Terry. After years without a computer, Vivian's decision to buy one signals her readiness to emerge from her isolation and connect with the outside world, particularly with others (like the other passengers on the orphan train) who shared her experience. Vivian's relationship with Molly has reopened her heart to love and connection. Molly's friendship and the process of reconciling her past have prepared Vivian emotionally for the next step of finding her daughter.



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Molly finds a national adoption registry online and mails in Vivian's registration forms along with a copy of her daughter's birth certificate. Ten days later, Vivian gets a call from the registry. They inform her that fourteen years before, a North Dakota woman matching her details registered to find her birth mother. They give Vivian the name and number of the woman, Sarah Dunnell. Vivian calls Sarah, who immediately books a flight to visit her, bringing along her husband and granddaughter Becca, who "loves adventure." Vivian and Molly learn that Sarah is a retired musician who has several grandchildren. Over the phone, Sarah tells Vivian that she has always "wondered who [she] was and why [she] gave [her] away." Molly, Terry, and Jack excitedly help Vivian prepare the house for the visit.

On the day of Sarah and her family's arrival, Jack goes to pick them up from the airport. Sitting by the window, Molly thinks of how much "self-acceptance" and "perspective" she has gained from Vivian's friendship. She considers the meaning this gives to the positive and negative life events that have brought her to Vivian. Jack pulls into the driveway, and Molly and Vivian walk onto the porch, holding hands. Becca gets out of the car first. Vivian and Molly both gasp when they see her long red hair and freckles. When Sarah emerges, Molly is deeply moved by her expression of "yearning and wariness and hopefulness and love." Molly looks at **Vivian's necklace** and considers its meaning: "love, loyalty, friendship – a never-ending path that leads away from home and circles back." Vivian nearly falls, but Molly holds onto her. Vivian smiles at Becca and says, "Now then. Where shall we begin?"

Vivian's earlier fears that she "had no right" to look for her daughter are proven wrong when she learns that Sarah has been searching for her, too. When she tells Vivian she has "always wondered" who her mother was and why she gave her away, it becomes apparent that just like Molly, Sarah's life is also haunted by unresolved questions. Sarah's immediate decision to plan a visit suggests that she, too, is ready to face the past and find answers to her questions. Their collective efforts to prepare for Sarah's visit show that Vivian, Molly, Terry, and Jack have developed a sense of community together.



As if in response to her own earlier comment about the human tendency to "find meaning" in experiences, Molly now realizes how her friendship with Vivian gives meaning to the life events that predated their meeting. This echoes the feeling of peace and belonging that Vivian felt when she reunited with Dutchy. The parallel between both moments illustrates the novel's attitude toward love as a feeling of meaningful connection that encompasses family, friendship, and romantic relationships. Vivian's reunion with her daughter then gives special meaning to the word "home" as a state of human connection rather than a physical place. The novel then ends with a state of hopeful expectation, an anticipation for a better future that does not deny the pain of the past, but rather uses that pain to build stronger and more poignant connections.





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