The Third and Final Continent

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JHUMPA LAHIRI

Jhumpa Lahiri was born to Bengali parents. The family moved to Rhode Island in 1970 because her father was offered a job as a university librarian. She visited Calcutta (now Kolkata), India frequently as a child to see her extended family. As a college student she attended Barnard College in New York City and graduated in 1989 with a B.A. in English literature, then went on to attend Boston University. There, she earned master's degrees in creative writing, English, and literature, going on to receive a Ph.D. in Renaissance studies. While in graduate school, Lahiri published several of the stories that would later make up her successful debut collection, *The Interpreter of Maladies* (1999). Noteworthy for its depiction of Indian immigrants to America, it won the Pulitzer Prize (1999) and the PEN/Hemingway Award for Debut Fiction (2000). In 2001, Lahiri married Alberto Vourvoulias, a journalist and editor for TIME Latin America. Lahiri went on to write two novels, *The Namesake* (2003) and Lowland (2013), along with an additional short story collection, *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008). In 2012, she moved to Rome, Italy and began writing in Italian. *In altre parole (In Other Words*, 2016) is a meditation on learning Italy's language and culture and *Dove mi trovo (Whereabouts*) is a novel she wrote originally in Italian. Since 2018, she has been part of the creative writing faculty at Princeton University. She and Vourvoulias have two children. Besides receiving the Pulitzer Prize, Lahiri has received an O. Henry Award, inclusion in *Best American Short Stories*, a Guggenheim Fellowship, the National Humanities Medal, and the PEN/Malumud Award for the short story.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"The Third and Final Continent" takes place in 1969, with the narrator arriving in America on, July 20, the same day as the moon landing. The moon landing was reported worldwide, and was considered to be both an incredible achievement and a marker in particular of U.S. power and American nationalist pride. The astronauts who first walked on the moon, Buzz Aldrin and Neil Armstrong, were interviewed by the press and Armstrong called the event "a beginning of a new age." Mrs. Croft, in the story, views the landing with "disbelief and delight." It's important to note that Mrs. Croft, born in 1866, grew up in an era where there were no electric lights, television or radio, or cars. Her constant marveling at the moon landing testify to her event and calls it "splendid!"

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"The Third and Final Continent" was one of nine stories that were collected in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Interpreter of Maladies*, which was published in 1999. The story collection won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. It is one of the few short story collections by a woman to have won. The stories in this collection cover the immigrant experience of Bengali immigrants as well as the lives of Indian-Americans born in America. Lahiri has also portrayed the experiences of this cultural group was in her other works, such as *Unaccustomed Earth*, *The Namesake* and *Lowland*. She also explored her interest in immersion in a different culture in another way in her nonfiction book, *In altre parole*, in which she wrote about her own immersion in the originally unfamiliar to her language and culture of Italy. Lahiri has noted her intense study of Shakespeare and Spenser during her time as a doctoral student as an influence on her writing, and she has also referenced Russian writers Anton Chekov and Nikolai Gogol. The structure of her stories has been influenced by contemporary realists like William Trevor, Alice Munro, and Mavis Gallant. Lahiri has been compared to other Indian-American writers such as Bharati Mukherjee and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni as well as Indian writers including Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Third and Final Continent
- **When Written:** 1999
- **Where Written:** United States
- **When Published:** 1999 in The New Yorker Magazine and in her debut short story collection, *The Interpreter of Maladies*
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Literary Fiction, Realism, Asian American Fiction
- **Setting:** Boston, Massachusetts
- **Climax:** Mala is assessed by Mrs. Croft, and the narrator feels sympathy for Mala for the first time.
- **Antagonist:** The story has no character who could be considered an antagonist. The emotional alienation that immigrants to a new culture feel could be described as a kind of conceptual antagonist.
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

Biographical Component. Lahiri has said in interviews that "Third and Final Continent" is based on her father's journey to the United States. In an essay in *Newsweek* published in 2008, she reveals that, like the son of the story's narrator, she learned the "customs of her parents, speaking Bengali and eating rice and dal with my fingers." Lahiri credits her parents with their

"steadfast presence" in her life and how they helped her understand their immigrant experience.

Pulitzer Prize. The Pulitzer Prize for fiction recognizes a work by an American which deals with an aspect of American life. *The Interpreter of Maladies*, in which "The Third and Final Continent" appears, won this prize in 2000. It is rare for a short story collection to win the award and rarer still for the award to go to a debut.

PLOT SUMMARY

In 1964, the unnamed Indian narrator of the story moves to London to study. There, he lives with a group of Bengali bachelors in the house. In 1969, two significant events happen to change his life: he gets a job in Boston and his family arranges his marriage. While his wife, Mala, waits to receive a green card, the narrator flies to America alone. He arrives in Boston on July 20, the same day as **the moon landing**. In America, he must navigate his own new world, adjusting to changes in currency, driving patterns, shopping, and diet. At first, he stays at the YMCA, but it proves noisy and stuffy. When he sees an advertisement for a room for rent, he decides to go look at it. The house is on a quiet, tree-lined street. Mrs. Croft, the landlady, is very elderly and the narrator initially is put off by her eccentricity. She has several rules—and emphatically insists he call the moon landing "splendid!" Still, the room is nicer than the one he has, so he rents it. Chatting with Mrs. Croft after work becomes part of his daily routine. She is touched by his attention to following her rules and how he places the rent money in her hands, instead of leaving it on the piano.

At the end of the first week, Helen—Mrs. Croft's daughter—comes to deliver her mother cans of soup. Helen tells the narrator that Mrs. Croft thinks he's a "gentleman." She also reveals that Mrs. Croft is 103. The narrator is chagrined. He thought Mrs. Croft was younger due to her strong personality. Due to her age, he starts to see Mrs. Croft as more vulnerable. At the same time, he is amazed that she has survived so long and seen so much. As the weeks pass, He gets used to his daily habits at Mrs. Croft's. At the end of six weeks, the narrator rents an apartment for himself and Mala, whose green card has been approved. He moves out of Mrs. Croft's room. Outwardly, she seems indifferent to his departure and the narrator is somewhat hurt.

When Mala arrives, he finds they have little in common. She's more traditionally Indian in dress, attitude, and taste, while he's had time to become Americanized. Although Mala tries to make their apartment homey, he feels they remain strangers. The narrator takes Mala to visit Mrs. Croft. Helen answers the door and explains that her mother injured her hip in a fall and cannot move from the parlor. Mrs. Croft's personality is still intact, however, and the narrator knows he's supposed to say it's splendid when Mrs. Croft tells him she was able to call the police herself after her accident. Mrs. Croft curiously looks Mala over, assessing her. This moment of evaluation causes the narrator to sympathize with Mala and her immigrant experience, which reminds him of his own. Mrs. Croft approves of her, calling her a "perfect lady." The narrator laughs, and he and Mala share smiles. The barrier between them starts to come down.

The new couple grow closer, exploring new activities in Boston and learning to rely on each other emotionally. When the narrator notices Mrs. Croft's obituary in the newspaper, Mala consoles him. Thirty years later, the narrator and Mala are American citizens, living in town outside of Boston. Their son goes to Harvard. They still visit Calcutta and maintain some Indian rituals, but realize that as time passes, their son may not do so. The narrator worries about his son but feels there is no obstacle he can't overcome. After all, unlike the astronauts who spent only few hours on the moon, the narrator has lived on his "third and final continent" for thirty years. He's amazed by his successful journey.

CHARACTERS

Narrator – The narrator is an Indian man who was born in Calcutta, the younger of two sons. His father dies when the narrator is sixteen and his mother suffers from psychiatric illness as a result. This makes him very emotionally reserved. In 1964, after his mother's death, the narrator goes to London, to study. He embraces his bachelorhood but in 1969, when he is 36, his marriage is arranged by his brother and his wife. Around the same time, he is offered a job as a librarian in Boston. While his new spouse, Mala, stays in Calcutta, the narrator moves to America alone. Their separation is not difficult for him as he does not really know his wife. The narrator adapts to the American currency, work, diet, and city life. He rents a room from the elderly Mrs. Croft. Although initially irritated by her repetitive questions and orders, he politely listens to her talk most nights about the "splendid" **moon landing**. He offers small kindnesses to her, like personally handing her the rent so she doesn't have to retrieve it from her atop her piano where she had initially asked him to leave it. When he learns Mrs. Croft is over a century old, the narrator is filled with admiration at her resilience. However, when Mala's passport is approved, he must move out in order to live with his wife. At first, the narrator feels only duty to his more traditional Indian wife. He slowly adjusts to Mala's presence but doesn't feel any emotional connection until he takes Mala to visit Mrs. Croft. The narrator is pleased to see his former landlady and they fall into old rituals. However, when she evaluates Mala, the narrator feels a new sympathy for his wife and the strangeness of her experience. The narrator's relationship with Mala then

becomes more intimate and he lets down his emotional defenses. Thirty years in the future, the narrator has become a loving husband and father. He still visits Calcutta and tries to pass on some traditions to his son but is now an American citizen. He is amazed at his life, his happy marriage, and how he has navigated his "third and final continent."

Mrs. Croft – Mrs. Croft is the narrator's elderly landlady. When the narrator meets her, he notes that age has "battered her features" and that she wears an old-fashioned dress that goes to her feet. Her home is filled with "claw-footed" furniture, but she has a radio on which she listens to the news. She is very concerned about propriety and does not approve of unchaperoned women or miniskirts. Perhaps because of her age, Mrs. Croft often repeats herself and it's not clear if she can see well enough to read. She doesn't move around much, staying on the piano bench near the entryway of her house, and she sometimes falls asleep after talking. Mrs. Croft orders the narrator about and expects him to respond to her without complaint. Mrs. Croft is both fascinated by the recent **moon landing** and proud of what that accomplishment signals about the United States, remarking often in "disbelief and delight" that there's an American flag on the moon and insisting the narrator agree that this is "splendid." Mrs. Croft's daughter Helen reveals to the narrator that Mrs. Croft is 103 and that after her husband died, Mrs. Croft taught piano lessons for forty years to support her family. In this way, just as the narrator's immigrant status makes him like a kind of "astronaut" to this new country he now calls home, Mrs. Croft can be seen as a kind of "astronaut" who has journeyed from the past into the present, and greets this new world with "disbelief and delight." It is this resilience and wonder that come to define Mrs. Croft. When the narrator brings his wife Mala to visit, it turns out that Mrs. Croft has broken her hip but is proud of herself for calling the police to help her. Further, Mrs. Croft has, likely, never seen a woman in a sari before, but remarks that Mala is a perfect lady, looking at her with "disbelief and delight."

Mala – Mala is the arranged Indian wife of the narrator. She is younger than her husband by nine years. Mala knows how to cook, knit, embroider, sketch, and recite poetry, but she is not conventionally beautiful, and her family feared she might never get married. Her laugh is described as full of kindness, her eyes bright—but during the brief time she and the narrator spend together in Calcutta before his immigration to Boston, she weeps nightly, missing her parents. As she waits for her green card to be ready, she writes a letter to the narrator. She writes in English in "preparation" for her new life but also expresses loneliness and worries about Boston's cold weather. She follows the traditions of a new bride: wearing decorative dye, a bindi on her forehead, and draping her sari over her head to indicate bridal modesty. The narrator worries about her naiveté and emotional vulnerability, sometimes worrying she might be like his emotionally fragile mother. Yet Mala proves herself generous—bringing her new husband homemade gifts like **knitted sweaters**—and polite, complimenting the apartment and the egg curry he has made. She is dedicated to creating a more comfortable and clean home. adding traditional Indian touches, but also listens to the narrator's preferences, even if they might be strange to him. It is when Mala is being regarded by Mrs. Croft that the narrator is able to connect his own feelings of alienation and awkwardness as an immigrant with what his new wife must be feeling, and this begins to lower the barriers between them, a fact indicated by the smile they share after Mrs. Croft announces that Mala is "a perfect lady." Over the ensuing years, she and the narrator grow closer and she becomes more comfortable in America. Eventually, she becomes an American citizen, and no longer drapes her sari or weeps for her parents. She does worry about her son and tries to keep alive some Indian traditions within him, and she can't remember a time when she and her husband were strangers. At the end of the story, she is "happy and strong."

Helen – Helen is the 68-year-old daughter of Mrs. Croft, who delivers groceries to her mother on Sundays. She is short, thick-waisted, wears fashionable clothing, and pink lipstick, but has a bad knee. Helen is the source of major information for the narrator about Mrs. Croft. In general, Helen seems to be a kind, loving, and dutiful daughter who at the same time is willing to stand up to ideas of her mother's that she considers to be over-the-top or out-of-date. For instance, Helen refuses to accept it when Mrs. Croft scolds her for being upstairs alone with the narrator, for revealing her age, and for wearing a dress "so high" above the ankle, all of which Mrs. Croft considers to be improper. These testy, though loving exchanges also help to make clear just how old Mrs. Croft is, and how her age is not simply a number but also gives Mrs. Croft certain cultural beliefs that are no longer applicable to American society.

The Narrator's Mother – The narrator's mother is traditional Indian wife, who wears her sari over her head as is the custom until her husband's death in 1949. After his death, she never adjusts and sinks "into a world of darkness" that neither the narrator, his family members, or professional psychiatrists can help her escape. The narrator, only sixteen, cares for her, but she loses her ability to be function in polite society: she burps and expels gas in front of people and "wanders off half-naked to the tram depot." In 1963, the narrator watches his mother die in a tiny room, and she is cremated. His mother's inability to cope deeply affects the narrator's own ability to connect with other people through much of the story.

The Narrator's Brother – The narrator's older brother lives in Calcutta. When their father dies, the brother "abandons his schooling" and goes to work in a jute mill to "keep the household running." Eventually, he becomes the manager of the mill. Along with the narrator, the brother does try to help their mother when she falls into depression and mental illness. When their mother dies, though, the brother cannot perform the duty

of the eldest son in the cremation ritual because he can't "bear it," so the narrator does it instead. The brother's failure to fill this role also seems play a role in the narrator's distrust of emotion and of people's abilities to cope with pain, sadness, or loss.

THEMES

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

THE ORDINARY AND EXTRAORDINARY

Over the course of "The Third and Final Continent," the narrator comes to see that much of the ordinary world is, in fact, extraordinary. At first, the narrator is notable in part because he is unimpressed with events others find amazing, including the 1969 **moon landing**, to which he reacts with indifference. Much of his life is centered on the logical and the routine. However, once he meets his landlady Mrs. Croft, his feelings shift. Mrs. Croft at first seems to him like a typical elderly woman, until he learns that she's 103. The simple fact that she's lived for more than a century fills the narrator with awe. Each day she lives, he realizes, is "something of a miracle." His growing ability to see the world with wonder becomes particularly important after Mala, his wife from an arranged marriage, joins him in the United States after her green card is approved. He starts to realize that his life is filled with people and things which are quite ordinary, but that life itself is a spectacular gift. This openness allows for his and Mala's growing attachment and successful marriage. Years later, he's become an American citizen, has a pleasant home and garden, a successful son, and a happy marriage. He acknowledges that many people have lived lives like his—seeking their "fortune far from home"—but he cannot help but feel awed by his experience. The story comes full circle as he reflects on the astronauts' 1969 moon landing, as he recognizes both the incredible achievement and experience of that journey, but recognizing at the same time that his own 30 year journey in America which is just as miraculous.

"The Third and Final Continent" begins in 1969, when the narrator flies to America for his new job in Boston, on the very same day as the moon landing. Although, the landing is later described as "man's most awesome achievement," the narrator isn't particularly impressed. While several men cheer and one woman prays when the landing is announced, he himself doesn't have an outward reaction. Although the narrator is coming to a new continent himself—staking a claim in a new world—he doesn't see the parallel to himself and the astronauts. He is, instead, more concerned with navigating his daily life in Boston: finding a place to live, learning what side of the road to drive on, getting used to the food, new currency, and what to call daily items. Later, he reads that the astronauts have traveled "farther than anyone in the history of civilisation" but what strikes him, instead, are the practicalities of their adventure. He notes the astronauts explored the moon for a few hours and "gathered rocks in their pockets." Consumed by trying to get a handle on living everyday life, the narrator's focus is entirely on the ordinary—he sees even the extraordinary in ordinary terms.

After the narrator begins living as a boarder in the home of the elderly Mrs. Croft, his perspective subtly changes, helping him to see that the ordinary itself can be extraordinary. Mrs. Croft is amazed by the moon landing, constantly describing it as "splendid." She expresses "equal measures of disbelief and delight" when she talks about it, and insists that the narrator agree with her. Rather than disappoint her, he begins to call it splendid too. When he reads that the American flag that the astronauts planted on the moon fell over before the astronauts had even flown home, he doesn't "have the heart" to tell Mrs. Croft. While he can't quite embrace the idea of the extraordinary yet, he won't diminish it for her. The key moment of change for the narrator occurs when Mrs. Croft herself becomes something of a miracle to him. Her ordinary existence becomes extraordinary to him when he learns of her age and overcome. He's amazed by the fact she's 103, by what she's seen over that time, and by the fact that she endured the death of her husband and was still able to provide for her family by working as a piano teacher. The narrator's own mother was driven "insane" when she was widowed by the death of the narrator's father, so Mrs. Croft's strength in a similar situation is a revelation to the narrator. When, later in the story, Mrs. Croft is proud of saving herself by calling the police after she injures herself in a fall, the narrator tells her that what she's done is "splendid." In echoing the word that Mrs. Croft used to describe the moon landing, he makes clear that, through his relationship with Mrs. Croft, he's come to see that an ordinary life can in fact be extraordinary.

The narrator's original focus on the pragmatic is on display in regards to his feelings about his arranged wife Mala's imminent arrival to join him in America, which he sees as being "something inevitable, but meaningless." But in this, too, Mrs. Croft shifts his view such that he sees the extraordinary in the ordinary. The narrator's feelings of resentment are captured in how he thinks about setting up a place to live for him and his wife. He focuses on how it is a duty to move out of Mrs. Croft's and get an apartment for the two of them. When Mala does arrive, the narrator struggles with how little he knows her—since the marriage was arranged—and with her more traditional Indian customs. He feels he is now more Americanized and has trouble connecting with her. All this

changes, however, when he has a realization about what he learned from Mrs. Croft's approach to life. When the narrator introduces Mala to Mrs. Croft, Mrs. Croft scrutinizes Mala from "head to toe." The narrator speculates that Mrs. Croft has never seen a woman wearing a sari before and worries about what she will "object to." Instead, Mrs. Croft, in "equal measure of disbelief and delight," declares Mala a "perfect lady." Mrs. Croft's demeanor—her disbelief and delight—connects Mala with the extraordinary event of the moon landing, and causes the narrator to see his wife as extraordinary as well: he suddenly understands his wife's bravery and loneliness in coming to this foreign world, to a largely unknown husband, and begins to feel connected to her.

As the story ends, it's clear that Mrs. Croft has shaped the narrator's way of seeing the world. He looks at his life with amazement, grateful to have a job, his own home, a happy marriage, and a successful son. Although he thinks "his achievement is quite ordinary" since he is not "the only man to seek his fortune far from home," he notes also how much of his life is wondrous. Unlike the astronauts who spent "mere hours" on the moon, he's been in America for thirty years. "As ordinary as it all appears," he says, it is also "beyond [his] imagination." Rather than see the extraordinary in the ordinary, as he did back in 1969, he now sees the extraordinary in the ordinary.

IMMIGRATION

The story's narrator grows up in India and attends school in England, living there as an immigrant with several other Bengali bachelors. When he gets a job in Boston, North America becomes the third continent on which he lives. As the story depicts the narrator's journey from India to England and then his transition to America, it naturally portrays his experiences as an immigrant, and of his efforts to acclimate to his new home and define and find himself. The story also shows the immigrant experience through the narrator's fears and expectations regarding his arrange wife, Mala, as she comes to join him in the United States. The narrator is originally fearful about how Mala's arrival might stunt his own ability to assimilate as well as concerned about whether she herself will be able to emotionally handle the transition. Yet they do successfully make a home in Boston. At the end of the story, thirty years have gone by, and the narrator and Mala are happy with the life they've built, though they worry their college-aged son may not hold onto any Bengali culture at all once they die. Over its course, the story depicts the complexities of immigrant life: the balance and struggle between maintaining traditions, the alienation of being alone in a foreign land, and the pride of building a new life.

Through the contrast of the narrator's life in London and then Boston, the story captures different sorts of immigrant experiences. In London, the narrator lives with several other Bengali bachelors. All are "penniless" and "struggling to educate and establish themselves abroad." Yet by having each other, they continue to maintain the traditions of Bengali life: eating egg curry with their hands, drinking tea, and lounging barefoot in drawstring pajamas. On the weekends, they socialize with other Bengalis, watch cricket, and listen to Bollywood songs. In Boston, in contrast, the narrator lives alone at the YMCA, and has no Bengali community. He reads the newspaper cover to cover in order to "grow familiar with things." He works, but doesn't socialize. The narrator still wears his drawstring pajamas, drinks four cups of tea each day, and does not consume beef or alcohol, all according to his Bengali customs. Yet, in the midst of this time of loneliness, the narrator also changes. For instance, he gives up eating rice for breakfast and instead has cornflakes—a small change, perhaps, but culturally significant, and indicative of the possibility for change that immigration offers.

When the narrator rents a room from the elderly Mrs. Croft, his experience as an immigrant shifts again. Now he no longer lives alone, and must put up with Mrs. Croft's rather overbearing demand that he agree that the landing of American astronauts on the moon—which he doesn't care about at all—is "splendid." Yet he also discovers that traits that he saw as setting himself apart—his formality and polite deference—are traits that Mrs. Croft sees as being the sign of a "gentleman," an exemplar of American polite society. Through Mrs. Croft's eyes, the narrator in this moment can see himself in a new way, as fitting into, being a part of, and offering something to American society in a way he previously had not.

Yet the narrator's feelings about and experience of immigration are complicated by his fears about the arrival of Mala, his new wife. When during a walk around his neighborhood the narrator sees an **Indian woman**'s sari grabbed by a dog on the street, he worries about how Mala will cope in Boston. This worry is not mere compassion. Rather, he feels the burden of having to protect Mala. Whereas earlier the narrator was a new immigrant trying to find his place, now that he feels more comfortable he is worried about how associating with other immigrants—even his own wife—will affect his own life and growing assimilation. When the narrator picks Mala up at the airport, and she is dressed in a traditional sari, with red decorative dye on her feet, the narrator doesn't "embrace her, kiss her, or take her hand." In part, he acts this way because he doesn't know her well, but it is also because he now rejects the traditional Bengali lifestyle that she represents. The **knitted sweaters** she gifts him are "tight under the arms," which again indicate how the reemergence of this traditionally Bengali way of life now feels constrictive to him.

Once again, Mrs. Croft helps to shift the narrator's perception by allowing him to emotionally understand his wife, and to realize he can weave Indian and American culture together. When the narrator brings Mala to meet Mrs. Croft, the elderly woman assesses Mala's appearance. The narrator suddenly

remembers his own immigration to London and feels a deep sympathy for his wife. "Like me," he notes, "Mala had traveled far from home, not knowing where she was going, or what she would find." In seeing his wife being assessed, he recognizes her bravery in immigrating at all, and the way that he and his wife are connected in this bravery and experience.

When Mrs. Croft declares Mala a "perfect lady," just as she once described the narrator as a gentleman, the narrator is further able to see himself in his wife. Seeing through Mrs. Croft's eyes, he realizes their Indianness is not a thing to be left behind but, in fact, embraced as they make a home in this new country. As the narrator and Mala grow closer in the following months, the couple embrace both their heritage and their new life. They meet other Indian immigrants and buy traditional spices like "bay leaves and cloves." However, they also embrace new things like watching sailboats and eating ice cream cones.

At the end of the story, the narrator and Mala live on a tree-lined street, twenty miles from Boston, and their son is enrolled at Harvard. They can't remember a time when they were strangers, either to each other or to the world they now know. They still visit Calcutta and, when they do, they bring back Darjeeling tea and drawstring pajamas. They also know that though their son will go into the adult world "alone and unprotected," possibly forgetting some of his heritage. Still, the narrator believes his son can successfully navigate any adventure with their support. After all, having lived in Massachusetts for thirty years, he and Mala have proved a new world can eventually become home.

ISOLATION AND CONNECTION

As the Indian narrator of "The Third and Final Continent" begins a new job in Boston in 1969, he seems profoundly isolated. Both of his parents are dead and he's lived away from his older brother for several years. His marriage has been arranged and his wife Mala, a decade younger, is literally and emotionally a stranger. As Mala stays in India waiting for her green card, he initially immigrates to America alone. Mrs. Croft, his elderly landlady, has little in common with him since she belongs to a different race, culture, and era. However, over the course of the story, the narrator starts to connect with Mrs. Croft through small acts of care and respect. Later in the story, when Mrs. Croft looks over Mala in her Indian sari, the narrator suddenly realizes that his wife is isolated, too. This wave of empathy lets him connect with Mala and build a foundation for their decades-long marriage. In this way, the story portrays the pain of isolation, but also suggests that a sense of isolation is itself a universal condition. As such, the story shows how a recognition of isolation can itself become a foundation for connection.

As the story begins, the narrator is isolated from those around him, showing little outward connection to anyone. The narrator has been living away from India for quite some time when the story starts. And the narrator, it appears, experienced a profound isolation even before moving to England. His father died when the narrator was a teenager, and his death drove the narrator's mother "insane." The narrator's brother, who lives in Calcutta, has a family of his own. In contrast, Mala, the narrator's new wife, comes from a close-knit family. In the first nights of their marriage, she weeps, missing her parents, an emotion with which he cannot fully sympathize. The narrator, embedded in his own familial isolation, does not at this point expect that he and his wife will ever be more than strangers.

When he moves to Boston, the narrator's isolation becomes even more stark. He ceases to have any connection to a Bengali community. He must learn to adjust to new currency, food, noise, and even to how milk is delivered. Even simple words set him apart: what he knows as a "flask" in America is called a "thermos." To combat this foreignness, he develops the routine of going to work, returning home, and reading the newspaper to "grow familiar with things." But that very routine is defined by how solitary his days are.

When he moves into a room of Mrs. Croft's house, the narrator appears to share almost nothing in common with her. Mrs. Croft is 103 while the narrator is in his 30s. She has lived in America her whole life, while he has traveled to three continents. She is delighted by the recent **moon landing,** while he doesn't think about it much at all. Initially their interaction is largely transactional: Mrs. Croft wants the narrator to do something, like say that the moon landing is "splendid," and he does it. Yet their relationship shifts when the narrator recognizes how physically isolated Mrs. Croft is. He decides to hand her his rent check directly, rather than leave it in the appointed spot, so that she will not have to struggle with her cane to walk over and get it. Mrs. Croft is touched by the narrator's kindness—which is a physical act of connection through handing her the check—and a bond forms between them.

The way that a mutual recognition of isolation can lead to connection is even more clearly portrayed in the narrator's relationship with Mala. When Mala first comes to join him in the United States, the narrator sees her as a burden. He worries about her ability assimilate, is annoyed by her traditional Bengali ways, and just generally can't find a way to connect to her or get used to having her around. But when he brings Mala to meet Mrs. Croft, and Mrs. Croft scrutinizes Mala "head to toe," the narrator realizes that his wife's experience of moving to America must be just as isolating and alienating as his own experience. In this mutual experience of isolation, he feels the first connection with her, and realizes he will grow to love her, and she him. Soon after this experience, the narrator begins to share his emotions with Mala, and opens up to her in an act of trust.

Over the next thirty years, the narrator and Mala build a life in Boston together. They have a son, buy a home, and become

American citizens. They build a broad and deep connection, and a happy marriage. But the foundation for that happiness is the initial realization of shared experience: a shared experience of what it feels like to be isolated.

FRAGILITY AND RESILIENCE

In "The Third and Final Continent," the Indian narrator's encounters with his elderly landlady, Mrs. Croft, allow him to believe in the human capacity for tenacity and resilience in the face of life's challenges. As a young man in Calcutta, the narrator takes care of his mother after she suffers an emotional and mental breakdown in the wake of his father's death. His mother's helplessness at navigating the hardships of her life makes the narrator quietly fearful that both he and others will be unable to handle traumatic events, and so he protects himself from the potential pain of losing someone to such a failure by avoiding connections in the first place. As a thirty year old man, he continues to shy away from people who react emotionally, holding himself back or going stoically about his daily life. He worries that Mala, his wife from his arranged marriage, who is soon to join him as an immigrant in Massachusetts, will be too emotional to be resilient. However, observing Mrs. Croft, who is over a century old, subtly teaches him how to be both stoic and flexible. Through her profound example of admirable resilience, he comes to see that resilience is possible, and as a result is better able to navigate his own emotional world as well as aid Mala when she arrives.

Because of his mother's inability to adjust to widowhood, the narrator comes to believe that being emotional leads to a loss of control. Therefore, he hides his feelings and takes refuge in practical tasks. When the narrator is sixteen, his father dies. His mother then sinks "into a world of darkness from which neither [he], nor [his] brother, nor concerned relatives, nor psychiatric clinics" could save her. The narrator's brother then, in turn, can't face their mother's death, and abandons his customary role as the eldest child during her funeral preparations and ceremony. The narrator takes on the burden of both becoming his mother's caretaker in life and performing the necessary funeral rites, which takes a heavy toll on him. He seems to get through it by focusing on practical things, like cleaning his mother's fingernails, but the story implies that this focus blocks him off from an emotional interaction with others and with the world: he neither connects with other people, nor can he appreciate the immensity of the successful moon landing.

The narrator also becomes suspicious of others who show strong emotion, particularly his wife Mala, who he fears is fragile like his mother. When they spend their first five days together, Mala cries each night because she misses her parents. Rather than console her, he avoids her by doing a practical thing: he reads a "guidebook by flashlight," preparing for his move to Boston. Later, when he receives a letter from Mala in which she tells him she's lonely, he is "not touched"—he seems to have no capacity at this time to sympathize with the pain or hurt of another person. His resistance to connecting with Mala is partly because they're literal strangers, but also because he connects her with traditional women, especially his mother. When Mala cries at night, he directly thinks of how his mother died. When she arrives in Boston, he notes that she wears her sari with "bridal modesty over her head, just as it had draped my mother until the day my father died." This connection highlights his fear that Mala, like his mother, won't be able to cope with the difficulties of life.

However, Mrs. Croft offers the narrator a different example—of strength and resilience—and this example allows him to broaden his understanding of how people may be able to cope with hardship. As he lives with Mrs. Croft, the narrator learns that she is 103 years old and that after her own husband died she found a way to support her family by giving piano lessons for so long that they eventually ruined her hands. The narrator specifically contrasts Mrs. Croft with his own mother. He notes that widowhood "had driven my own mother insane." Mrs. Croft, however, not only adjusted and found a way to survive, but still finds delight in the word, as exemplified by her reaction to the moon landing that she constantly describes as "splendid." The narrator is further impressed by the fact that, when Mrs. Croft falls and breaks her hip, she has the presence of mind to call the police for assistance. In this moment, the narrator tells Mrs. Croft that what she did was "splendid," equating her deed with the moon landing as a way to show how much he truly admires her resilience.

Mrs. Croft's resilience inspires the narrator's epiphany regarding his own approach to life. A meeting with Mrs. Croft and Mala proves pivotal in showing him that one can be emotional without falling apart. When the narrator brings Mala to meet Mrs. Croft, and Mrs. Croft scrutinizes his wife, the narrator feels a wave of sympathy at his wife getting evaluated as a stranger, at her bravery in immigrating to this new country where she will face so much scrutiny just to be with him. The narrator becomes aware in this moment that Mala came to Boston for no other reason than "to be my wife." He suddenly recognizes that her death would affect him and his death would affect her. This is a breakthrough: he is able to feel emotional connection even in the knowledge of eventual loss.

After this revelation, the narrator lets himself be emotional with Mala. They discover "pleasure and solace in each other's arms." He shares stories about his life with her and when he tells her about his mother, she weeps. She also consoles him when Mrs. Croft dies. Thirty years later, the narrator has a strong marriage, and Mala is "happy and strong." At the end of the story, the narrator sees himself as strong and resilient, too. He proudly notes he is "still living" and that he has "remained in this new world for nearly thirty years." But his strength does not arise from hiding from emotion. Instead, he looks around at

the now familiar world of Boston, and at his aging wife, and successful son, and brims with emotion. He is "bewildered" at "each mile," "each meal," "each person," and "each room" he has encountered. He, unlike his mother, has adjusted to the challenges of life, and can feel a connection with the world even as he knows that such connections will inevitably lead to loss in the face of death.

SYMBOLS

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

THE MOON LANDING

The most important symbol in "The Third and Final Continent" is the 1969 **moon landing**. The moon landing is announced as having occurred by the captain on the narrator's flight to Boston and is covered by *The Boston Globe*. The narrator reads about how it's viewed as "man's most awesome achievement," important because the astronauts traveled "farther than anyone in the history of civilisation." Like the astronauts, the narrator is exploring an unknown world. Boston—and America by extension—is as foreign to him as the "magnificent desolation" of the moon is to the astronauts. In this way, the moon landing comes to symbolize any sort of journey into the foreign and unknown, and the way that the unknown has a way of making those who venture into it feel alienated and alone. As the story progresses, it becomes clear that this sort of voyage into the unknown applies not just to the narrator and his wife's own journey to America, but also to Mrs. Croft's journey through 103 years of time, from her birth in the 19th century up to this moment of technological achievement marked by the moon landing.

While the moon landing can be seen as "splendid," as Mrs. Croft describes it, the narrator also experiences it as making little difference in most people's daily lives. The narrator acknowledges that the astronauts are considered "heroes forever," but seems to indicate that ordinary American immigrants are important, too. While astronauts spent a "few hours" on the moon "gathering rocks," people new to America spend years assimilating into the culture, learning to navigate their new world. The narrator has done so particularly successfully and at the end of the story notes that unlike the transitory nature of landing on the moon, he has "remained in this new world for nearly thirty years." This juxtaposition uses the symbol of the moon landing to assert that "ordinary" immigrant journey's like the narrator's are in fact just as extraordinary as epic voyages like the moon landing.

THE INDIAN WOMAN

An encounter that the narrator witnesses between an unknown **Indian woman** on the street and an American woman's dog is symbolic of the challenges immigrants face in their new homes. The Indian woman is walking down the street with her child in a stroller when the small black dog attacks her sari. Although the dog does not hurt the woman, the incident does make her child cry. The American woman does scold the dog and apologize, but she walks "quickly away" leaving the Indian woman to "fix" her sari and comfort her child alone. The American woman's behavior seems to subtly imply that the responsibility for the incident rests with the Indian woman, with her foreign way of dressing that confused and irritated the dog. After seeing the incident, the narrator feels that he will have to warn his wife about how to "wear her sari so that the free end did not drag on the footpath" as well as "what streets to avoid." The incident captures the complicated experience of being an immigrant: the way that having traits or behaviors that are outside the ordinary creates friction that is no doing of your own but makes you stick out even further, causes you discomfort even when it doesn't cause harm, and leads to a desire to find ways to conform. And it also captures the ways that the United States can be unfriendly to immigrants, even in daily small ways.

SWEATERS

When Mala arrives in Boston after receiving her green card approval, she brings the narrator gifts from home, including tea and drawstring pajamas. She has also taken the time to knit him two **sweaters** in a bright blue wool yarn. These sweaters are both a bit too small; they're "tight under the arms." This is a small symbol of how the narrator feels constricted by and a bit uncomfortable in his marriage, which has been arranged by his family as is customary in India at the time. Earlier in the story, he has noted that he feels Mala's arrival is "something inevitable, but meaningless." He is used to Boston, to his work, to his routine as a border living at Mrs. Croft's, but not to Mala. The tightness of the area of the sweater, under the arm, would restrict movement much as the narrator initially sees Mala's arrival as restricting his future. Eventually, as the narrator changes his feelings and expectations about his wife and marriage, this fear and feeling disappears, and he grows comfortable in his new life in marriage and America as he grows to know and love his wife.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Mariner Books edition of *The Interpreter of Maladies* published in 2000.

The Third and Final Continent Quotes

Apart from our jobs we had few responsibilities. On weekends we lounged barefoot in drawstring pajamas, drinking tea and smoking Rothmans, or set out to watch cricket at Lord's. Some weekends the house was crammed with still more Bengalis . . . and we made yet more egg curry, and played Mukhesh on a Grundig reel-to-reel, and soaked our dirty dishes in the bathtub.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), Mrs. Croft, Mala

Related Themes:

Page Number: 173-174

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the narrator describes the time he spent studying in London during his late twenties and early thirties, living a bachelor lifestyle with his Bengali housemates.. In the first, in London, the narrator is student, living communally with other students of a similar background, remaining immersed in his cultural practices because of his surrounding community. These young men all hope to "establish themselves abroad." This ambition shows how the narrator strives for success, hoping to better his life, but it also shows how at this stage he is just in preparation: he has "few responsibilities" and often just relaxes with the other bachelors.

The narrator touches on this time only briefly, the description of his life in London serves as a counterpoint to the narrator's lifestyle after he moves to Boston, in which he is more culturally isolated, has more responsibilities as he must support both himself and his soon-to-be-arriving wife. Further, when he is in Boston he seems to want to break away from his Bengali cultural traditions in a way that differs from his time in London. Through the juxtaposition of the narrator's time in London with the coming description of his life in Boston, the story captures two different sorts of immigration experiences.

In a week I had adjusted, more or less. I ate cornflakes and milk, morning and night, and bought some bananas for variety, slicing them into the bowl with the edge of my spoon. In addition I bought tea bags and a flask, which the salesman in Woolworth's referred to as a thermos (a flask, he informed me, was used to store whiskey, another thing I had never consumed). For the price of one cup of tea at a coffee shop, I filled the flask with boiling water on my way to work each morning and brewed the four cups I drank in the course of a day.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 175-176

Explanation and Analysis

After moving to Boston, the narrator quickly learns to adjust to a life very different from one he has known in London. His ritual of eating a very popular and quintessentially American food—boxed cornflakes—indicates that these changes are not just enforced upon him. He is not behaving differently solely because he is isolated from other Bengali's. He wants to adjust, to assimilate, to American culture. He even creatively adapts the normal uses of his utensils, using "the edge of his spoon" rather than a knife to slice his bananas. These small details show his adaptability.

At the same time, assimilation is difficult, and he is constantly faced with all the knowledge and understanding that he lacks, and the lack of which sets him apart. For instance, the English language contains the word "flask" in both London and Boston, but the meaning of that word is very different. Through these details the story captures how assimilation works, with progress made in fits and starts. Just as adjustments are made, something new is discovered.

This passage also captures the ways that the narrator's assimilation shifts over time. He doesn't for instance, give up his practice of drinking tea. And, in fact, he is able to ingeniously figure out how to make four cups of tea for the price of one. Just as continuing to drink tea points to cultural practices he maintains, so too does his avoidance of whisky. Consuming alcohol, which is so common in American society, would be against religious protocol in India. And yet even this moment has a further resonance. The use of the word "consume" in relation to whisky recalls the narrator's comment earlier in the story that he "had yet to consume any beef." Consumption of beef, like whisky, would be profoundly frowned upon in his Bengali culture. But the "yet" in the narrator's comment about beef implies that, eventually, he *will* eat beef. Even as he maintains certain traditions, he will give up others. In America, by himself, he is redefining himself, over time.

For a few hours they explored the moon's surface. They gathered rocks in their pockets, described their surroundings (a magnificent desolation, according to one astronaut), spoke by phone to the president, and planted a flag in lunar soil. The voyage was hailed as man's most awesome achievement. I had seen full-page photographs in the *Globe*, of the astronauts in their inflated costumes, and read about what certain people in Boston had been doing at the exact moment the astronauts landed, on a Sunday afternoon.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), Mrs. Croft

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 179

Explanation and Analysis

When the narrator goes to see Mrs. Croft about renting a room as a boarder in her house, she talks to him about the 1969 moon landing and insists that he echo her in calling the event "splendid." He's irritated by her rather overbearing demand, feeling like an insulted schoolboy.

In this passage, he describes how he thinks about the moon landing. He is aware of it, and aware that many people consider it a breathtaking achievement that they will remember throughout their lives. But the narrator himself lacks any sense of awe about the event even though he knows it's been called "man's most awesome achievement."

While Mrs. Croft considers the event emotionally—Lahiri later says it fills her with "disbelief and delight"—the narrator instead observes it objectively, pragmatically, without any personal response. The narrator's flat recitation of what the astronauts did on the moon—collecting rocks in a desolate area—rather than focusing on the astounding fact that they were collecting moon rocks, speaks to his intense, almost strange focus on the ordinary and inability to recognize the extraordinary.

At the same time, the narrator's focus on the ordinary is also a focus on the people. He concentrates on how the astronauts did their job, their "inflated costumes," and recalls what the average citizen in Boston was doing at the time of the landing. This concentration on the everyday activities of humans is a focus on the ordinary, but over time (and because of Mrs. Croft's age and resilience) the narrator will come to see those ordinary lives as themselves being extraordinary. This passage captures the narrator's focus on the ordinary versus the extraordinary, but also prepares the reader for the narrator's emotional growth and revelation that the ordinary often *is* extraordinary.

My wife's name was Mala. The marriage had been arranged by my older brother and his wife. I regarded the proposition with neither objection nor enthusiasm. It was a duty expected of me, as it was expected of every man.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), Mala, The Narrator's Brother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 181

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator's views on marriage offer a window into his views on emotion and personal connection more generally at this point in the story. As was common in India at the time, his marriage arranged by his family. His lack of input might certainly play a role in the narrator's apathetic feelings about this marriage, and his more general belief that marriage is just a "duty" rather than an emotional union or connection. Yet it's also possible to believe that other newly married men might be excited about marriage, even if it was arranged.

The narrator's sense of marriage as a "duty" rather than as an opportunity to share a life with someone he is deeply committed to, then, seems to derive not simply from the arranged nature of the marriage but rather from the narrator's orientation towards human connection more generally. The narrator always seems to focus on duty, on what is practical and pragmatic. While the narrator never explicitly explains why he acts this way, the story implies it when the narrator relates how his mother fell into depression and insanity after the death of her husband, forcing the narrator to act as her caretaker. In providing that care, the narrator seems to have protected himself by focusing on the practical tasks he had to do to keep his mother alive. That emotional self-protection seems also to extend to the way he approaches all potential emotional attachments—he focuses on duty, and thereby avoids emotional entanglement, as a way to protect himself from pain.

This quote functions as an early hint of that deeper psychology of the narrator's.

'A flag on the moon! Isn't that splendid?'

I nodded, dreading what 1 knew was coming. 'Yes, madame.'

"Say 'splendid'!"

This time I paused, looking to either side in case anyone were there to overhear me, though I knew perfectly well that the house was empty. I felt like an idiot. But it was a small enough thing to ask. 'Splendid!' I cried out.

Related Characters: Mrs. Croft, Narrator (speaker), Helen

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 183

Explanation and Analysis

This exchange takes place the first evening the narrator spends as a boarder renting a room at Mrs. Croft's, shortly after his return from work. In this moment, Mrs. Croft insists that the narrator call the moon landing "splendid," just as she did when he initially stopped by to rent the room. The narrator dreads this exchange because he's embarrassed both by the odd question and the expectation of his forced response. He deeply cares what others think, even checking an empty house, to make sure only Mrs. Croft can hear his reply. At the same time, even though he doesn't fully understand why the American flag on the moon is so important to Mrs. Croft and resents her for forcing him to repeat her words, he treats her respectfully. Even though he feels idiotic, he says the word because it is a "small enough thing to ask." This act of deference, of jumping over a difference to be nice, paves the way for the growing respect between them.

The narrator's willingness to say the word—this momentary softness toward Mrs. Croft—begins a ritual, a nightly exchange in which the narrator supports Mrs. Croft's excitement about the moon landing. The narrator's awareness of Mrs. Croft's fragility starts here as well, although he may not realize it until he later puts her rent money in her hands so she won't have to walk on her cane to retrieve it. These tiny, good deeds are why Mrs. Croft will later tell her daughter Helen that the narrator is a "gentleman."

This passage also expands upon a characteristic of Mrs. Croft's: her enthusiasm for new things. She truly thinks the moon landing *is* splendid and wants everyone to agree with her. In part, she wants to be right—she is bossy—but in part she has seen enough of the world in her 103 years to appreciate unusual achievements. Lahiri shows that despite not fully knowing what another person feels or think, connection is possible through small kindnesses, even when radical differences exist between people, including race, gender, and age.

"I come once a week to bring Mother groceries. Has she sent you packing yet?"

"It is very well, madame."

"Some of the boys run screaming. But I think she likes you. You're the first boarder she's ever referred to as a gentleman."

"Not at all, madame."

Related Characters: Narrator, Helen (speaker), Mrs. Croft

Related Themes:

Page Number: 185

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mrs. Croft's mid-60 year old daughter Helen talks with the narrator on her first weekly visit to deliver Mrs. Croft's weekly supply of soup. In their conversation, it becomes clear that Mrs. Croft isn't just demanding of the narrator, she's like that with everyone—that's why the other "boys run screaming. It's also easy to imagine that Mrs. Croft's sharp tongue might grow sharper if her demands are not followed.

The narrator is surprised here by Helen's assertion that Mrs. Croft considers him a gentleman. As he sees it, he is merely acting as he would ordinarily and has not, in his mind, done anything exceptional. Until this moment he doesn't realize how many people overlook or refuse to accommodate an elderly woman—how few would spend the time of a few minutes conversation about the moon landing.

However, Mrs. Croft *has* noticed that the narrator exhibits kindness where he does not have to do so. The narrator simply completes what are ordinary tasks to him: he follows her rules in locking up, is polite and deferential to her authority, and cares enough to place his rent in her hands, rather than making her walk on her cane to retrieve it. These add up to making him different than the other boarders. For Mrs. Croft, he is a "gentleman," both a man with social graces but also a "gentle" man, who takes care with others. Even though the narrator's ethnicity might set him apart in his new country, the politeness he exhibits make this very exceptionality an asset.

> ...a week later we were still strangers. I still was not used to coming home to an apartment that smelled of steamed rice, and finding that the basin in the bathroom was always wiped clean, our two toothbrushes lying side by side, a cake of Pears soap from India resting in the soap dish.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), Mala

Related Themes:

Page Number: 192

Explanation and Analysis

A week after Mala's arrival in the United States, the narrator still cannot get used to her and feels his wife is a stranger. This efficient description captures multiple overlayed reasons for the narrator's discomfort.

Mala's arrival marks the first time as an adult that the narrator has not lived as a bachelor, alone. That the narrator is disconcerted to be part of a couple is implied by the fact that he's unused to the "toothbrushes, lying side by side." Living with Mala forces the narrator out of the lifestyle to which he is accustomed. For years, he's prepared his own meals and has his own routine for the day. This is disrupted. He's also become comfortable living in a certain degree of mess. In earlier scenes, the used dishes remain dirty in the Bengali bachelors' bathtub while at Mrs. Croft's his "the neckties draped over the doorknob" and a "box of cornflakes [rests] on the chest of drawers." Now, Mala cleans the apartment in order to make it nice—perhaps even to make it nice *for him*—but this marks a major change for the narrator.

Another part of what he cannot get used to is the return of Indian smells, objects, and practices in his life. The last time he lived with an Indian woman was when his mother was ill. The implication here is that Mala's actions in cleaning the apartment and using typical Indian soap and cooking Indian food actually force the narrator to confront the painful memories he thought he left behind. In addition, the narrator has over time slowly left behind a number of Bengali customs. In assimilating to where he is living, he has redefined himself in new ways that don't align with traditional Bengali practices. Mala's arrival, and the return of the traditional Bengali practices, doesn't just enact a change to the narrator's routines. It poses a threat to his self-definition, and to his efforts to assimilate.

> Mala rose to her feet, adjusting the end of her sari over her head and holding it to her chest, and, for the first time since her arrival, I felt sympathy. I remembered my first days in London . . . Like me, Mala had traveled far from home, not knowing where she was going, or what she would find, for no reason other than to be my wife. As strange as it seemed, I knew in my heart that one day her death would affect me, and stranger still, that mine would affect her.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), Mala, Mrs. Croft

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 195

Explanation and Analysis

When the narrator takes Mala to visit Mrs. Croft, Mrs. Croft examines her carefully Mala head to toe. As Mala is being evaluated in this way, the narrator has a sudden surge of sympathy for his new wife. This is the first time he reacts to Mala emotionally. In this moment as he watches his wife being looked over, he realizes that, like himself, Mala is negotiating the difficulties of immigration, and particularly how her Indianness is seen by others. Earlier in the story, the narrator observed an Indian woman, who's sari is dragging on the street. A dog attacks the sari and the Indian woman is startled. In that past moment, the narrator thinks that he will have to protect Mala by telling "her to wear her sari so that the free end did not drag." Now, in this moment, Mala is holding her own sari to herself, but she is still being judged. This brings back to the narrator memories of his own difficulties in navigating life as an immigrant: his confusion over terminology, dialects, and transportation.

From this sympathy he moves to empathy, equating Mala's experience with his own. Moreover, the fact Mala has traveled to America for him, in order to be *his* wife, fills him with love. He no longer feels his marriage as an obligation in a negative way. This genuine emotional response shows a huge amount of growth in the narrator and shows him opening up to a connection with another person. That the narrator realizes that this love he feels is necessarily connected to loss marks even further growth. The narrator became closed off after his mother became depressed and insane following the death of the narrator's father. The narrator's life after that time can be interpreted as an effort to avoid any such emotional attachments, out of fear to either cause or feel pain. But now, feeling love for his wife, he accepts that pain and loss will be a part of that love.

At night we kissed, shy at first but quickly bold, and discovered pleasure and solace in each other's arms. I told her about my voyage on the *SS Roma*, and about Finsbury Park and the YMCA, and my evenings on the bench with Mrs. Croft. When I told her stories about my mother, she wept. It was Mala who consoled me when, reading the *Globe* one evening, I came across Mrs. Croft's obituary.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), Mala, Mrs. Croft, The Narrator's Mother

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 196

Explanation and Analysis

Mala and the narrator's movement toward greater intimacy occurs after the couple's visit to Mrs. Croft's and the older woman's declaration that Mala is "a perfect lady!" Mrs. Croft's excited declaration recalls her earlier declarations about both the moon landing and the narrator being a gentleman, and refashions Mala as extraordinary. Through these correlations, the story implies that marriage is a new territory for the couple, much like the moon, or the continent of America, and that the narrator is on the brink of discovering Mala's splendidness.

This passage—which follows that earlier moment—shows the ramifications of the narrator's changed understanding of his wife. The narrator previously held himself apart from deep connection and has been suspicious of emotion. When Mala and the narrator's physical intimacy begins, they are "shy at first" but soon discover "solace in each other's arms." Bodily pleasure becomes comforting and familiar, growing into something treasured. This solace also implies a contrast to a prior distress, perhaps a distress that the narrator himself didn't entirely understand that he was enduring.

The narrator also starts to feel safe in expressing his emotions to Mala. This is a significant change in his ability to connect with others. One of the keys to successful romance is the sharing of stories, the ability to connect with the beloved's experiences. Here, the narrator finally opens up. He tells Mala of times when he felt isolated—his journey via the *SS Roma* and at the YMCA—as well as his previous adjustments to living with other people—life with the Bengali bachelors in London and with Mrs. Croft. Usually, people will only open up to those they trust about vulnerabilities, and it is significant the narrator trusts Mala enough to tell her about his mother. His mother's emotional response to his father's death motivated the narrator's own emotional reticence. The fact that Mala weeps for the narrator suggests she understands the magnitude of his caring for a depressed person as well as his sorrow at her death. Mala also consoles the narrator when Mrs. Croft, his other mother figure, dies. By letting Mala care for him, he learns that it is okay to be emotional. It is this honesty and openness with Mala that paves the way for their long and successful marriage.

While the astronauts, heroes forever, spent mere hours on the moon, I have remained in this new world for nearly thirty years. I know that my achievement is quite ordinary . . . Still, there are times I am bewildered by each mile I have traveled, each meal I have eaten, each person I have known, each room in which I have slept. As ordinary as it all appears, there are times when it is beyond my imagination.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), Mala, Mrs. Croft

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 198

Explanation and Analysis

At the very end of the story, the narrator's thoughts come full circle. He immigrated to Boston thirty years prior on the day of the moon landing, and now he thinks of the astronauts one more time. While the astronauts are considered extraordinary heroes for spending just a few hours navigating new territory, the narrator is in awe that he has survived and thrived for thirty years in America. Although he insists twice that his achievement is "ordinary," he also realizes it is "splendid."

The landscape of life might, like that of the moon, be one of "desolation," full of isolation and at times despair. But the narrator has learned it also "magnificent," full of wonder and everyday surprises. Every experience he's had fills him with a kind of "bewilderment" or awe. He's learned this from the varied people around him. Mrs. Croft taught him each day of survival is a "miracle." Mala has taught him that love and connection are possible even if loss is inevitable. And he will teach his son that all obstacles can be conquered. He has learned that every ordinary moment—each mile, each meal, each room—is also extraordinary. And America—his third and final continent—is no longer a strange planet, but his extraordinary home.

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.

THE THIRD AND FINAL CONTINENT

In 1964, the narrator leaves India to study in England. There he lives with other Bengali bachelors, working in a university library. Then, in 1969—when the narrator is 36—he earns a job at the library at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and his older brother arranges a marriage for him. He flies to Calcutta for his wedding, and then leaves his new wife in India to board a plane to Boston.

The opening of the story shows the places the narrator has lived: India, England, and soon, America, the "third continent" of the title. For several years, the narrator's been living comfortably in London, finding a sense of community among other Bengali bachelors, who are all hoping to "establish themselves abroad"—all of them wish to make it not in India, but in the Western world to which they have immigrated. Now, the narrator undertakes three new adventures at once: a new job, a new city, and a new marriage. In 1969, it was traditional for marriages in India to be arranged by the husband's family. The narrator's parents are dead, so his older brother is the head of the household and thus, arranges the marriage. Oftentimes, Indian brides and grooms didn't know each other at all before the wedding. The narrator hardly knows the woman who is his wife so he easily departs from his new bride, eager for his new life in Boston, working at MIT, one of the most prestigious universities in Massachusetts.

On the flight across the Atlantic, the narrator reads a guidebook to North America, learning that Americans drive on the right side of the road, are too ambitious, and do not take time for English tea. As they land, the captain announces that Americans have landed on the **moon**, to which the narrator does not react, even as some people around him cheer.

As a librarian, the narrator is comfortable learning things from written accounts and the guidebook becomes a treasured tool for navigating America. His careful reading of the guidebook again hints at the narrator's desire to successfully fit in, to assimilate. The narrator is also emotionally reserved and is unsure of how to respond to actual situations, shown by his non-reaction to the first ever moon landing, an event which most people throughout the world thought was extraordinary. Like the astronauts on the moon, the narrator is exploring new territory, although he doesn't himself make this correlation.

The narrator initially lives at the YMCA, where he is overwhelmed by the sights and sounds at night: car horns, buses, flashing sirens. He begins going to work at his job in the MIT library, and he gets a bank account, rents a post office box, and learns about American currency. Since he can't cook in his room, he buys a bowl and spoon for cornflakes and milk. Buying milk at the grocery store is new for him, since in London, his milk was delivered in bottles each morning. He starts having cornflakes for every meal.

New environments can feel disorienting and Boston is filled with things for the narrator to get used to: a new diet, new currency, new traffic. Although London is a major city as well, the narrator finds Boston to be noisier and hotter. He is also far more isolated. He doesn't have companions like the other Bengali students to share his experience, or with whom he can behave in traditional Bengali ways. He must adjust to going to the post office box and the grocery store alone. He also must learn new terms to function in daily life. A lift, for example, is called an elevator in America. Because he can't cook in his room, he must give up his traditional meal of rice at breakfast for cornflakes. This part of the story shows both the difficulties of adjusting and assimilating to a new culture, but also his willingness to adjust.

The narrator uses the *Boston Globe* to learn about life in his new country, reading the entire thing each day, even the advertisements. This is how he discovers a room for rent in a house on a quiet street. Struggling to sleep in his hot and noisy room at the Y.M.C.A., he calls the number in the advertisement.

The narrator again turns to reading material for guidance, using the Boston Globe *to "grow familiar with things." His reserved nature is shown here as he only decides to move when he sees the ad, not because he finds himself uncomfortable. Before seeing the ad, he was "resolved to stay." This shows the narrator's stubborn streak. Despite his willingness to move across the Atlantic for work, he's hesitant regarding change.*

The woman on the phone tells the narrator she only rents the house to boys from Harvard or MIT, and when he assures her that he works at MIT, she makes an appointment to show him the room. Eager to make a good impression, he dresses up and uses Listerine for his interview. He has never lived with anyone who is not Indian before.

Enrollment in MIT and Harvard is important to the woman who rents the room. Since both are known prestigious colleges, she uses this as a "code" to discover her renter's level of intelligence and responsibility. Although the narrator does not say he is nervous about being accepted, he shows concern about assimilation here. He wears a suit, uses mouthwash, and tries to be polite. This is a new experience for him, never having lived with a non-Indian before. This new arrangement will force the narrator to be less isolated.

The landlady, Mrs. Croft, proves to be very old, dressed in outdated Victorian style. Though her face is "ancient," battered by age, she also looks "fierce." She shouts at the narrator to lock the door immediately, instructing him to do this each time he enters. The house is old-fashioned—there's an abandoned cane, a closed-up piano, old-fashioned table coverings, claw-footed furniture. Mrs. Croft does have a telephone and a radio. She remarks that he was on time for their appointment, and she expects that he will also be on time with the rent.

This scene introduces Mrs. Croft, a very elderly woman, although it's unclear exactly how elderly at first. She seems to be living both in the present—indicated by her possession of a radio and telephone—and in the long ago past. Her ties to the Victorian era are indicated by her dress, the old-fashioned table coverings and claw-footed furniture. Her fragility is shown by the cane, but its abandonment shows that she resists using it, suggesting either stubbornness or a "fierce" will. Mrs. Croft's penchant for rules and order is show by her treatment of the narrator whom she both shouts at to lock the door and compliments for his punctuality.

As they chat, Mrs. Croft asks the narrator to check the lock again. She informs him that the American flag is flying on the moon, which is something he hasn't thought much about, despite it being all over the newspapers. The astronauts spent a few hours exploring and gathering rocks; one astronaut described the moon's landscape as "magnificent desolation." Mrs. Croft insists that the narrator call the **moon landing** "splendid," making him feel a little insulted as she forces him to repeat the word.

Mrs. Croft's repetition of requests or information reveals what is important to her. The lock represents safety and order while the moon landing is "splendid," or special to her. The narrator is aware of the moon landing but not particularly interested in it. When he describes the landing, he focuses on the tangible and ordinary work of the astronauts over their extraordinary achievement, noting simply how they "gathered rocks." The description of the moon's landscape as a "magnificent desolation" can also be seen as a description of the new landscapes the narrator encounters during his immigrant experience: Mrs. Croft's house feels both magnificent and desolate, as does Boston. The city is thrilling in its newness, but the narrator still feels like an outsider and alone. When Mrs. Croft insists he call the moon landing splendid, it's clear the narrator hasn't made up his mind about any of these new locations. He only calls the moon landing splendid because he wants to please his potential landlady and because he respects her as his elder. At the same time, Mrs. Croft's insistence that the landing is splendid hints at the fact that, despite her age, she still views the world with wonder and delight.

Pleased, Mrs. Croft orders him to inspect the room. The narrator finds it satisfactory. Mrs. Croft gives him a key, tells him to leave the rent on the ledge above the piano keys each Friday, and she asks him not to have women over. When he protests that he's married, she seems not to hear.

Mrs. Croft seems to use the discussion of the moon landing as a test of the narrator's ability to follow her orders. Pleased that he does, she approves him as a renter. Mrs. Croft's loss of hearing regarding the narrator's notation of his marriage might be an effect of age or another insistence that he follow her rules, even the outdated ones. Nineteenth-century custom dictated that an unmarried woman could not be alone with a man without a chaperone. By 1969, this custom had long since fallen out of favor. Again, this hints that Mrs. Croft's is much older than the narrator suspects, tied to a bygone era. This scene is the first time the narrator mentions he is married to anyone, another indication of his isolation and a hint that his marriage doesn't even seem quite real to him.

The narrator's wife's name is Mala. Their marriage was arranged, and the narrator has neither "objection nor enthusiasm" for it—it's simply his duty. After the wedding, they spent five nights together, and each night she wept, turning away from the narrator as she did so. He did nothing to console her, and instead read his guidebook in bed. His mother had died six years earlier in the room next to his and Mala's. He cared for her as she descended into depression, and even as she began to play with her own excrement, until she died. He also performed the rituals of her burial because his brother could not bear to.

It is not surprising that the narrator feels he has little in common with his new wife, who is nearly a decade his junior. He hasn't spent much time with her. Yet his behavior seems particularly cold, and that he then discusses his mother's final days in the same part of the story suggests that his emotional coldness and his mother's death are connected. The implication is that his mother's emotional fragility traumatized the narrator, and he is wary of outward signs of emotion because of it. This in turn causes his need to self-isolate. He engages in practical activities (reading the guidebook, performing the rituals) to avoid emotion (comforting Mala, confronting his brother's grief).

After moving into Mrs. Croft's house, the narrator notices that she rarely moves from sitting on her piano bench. When he comes home from work the first night, she orders him to sit beside her on the bench. Again, she asks him to check the lock and makes him call the American flag on the **moon** "splendid." Although he feels foolish, he does as she asks, and this becomes their routine each night: they awkwardly discuss the moon landing before Mrs. Croft falls asleep. The narrator knows that the flag on the moon fell over before the astronauts left, but he can't bring himself to say so.

The circumference of Mrs. Croft's current life is small, centering on daily activities within this part of her house, like listening to music or the news. She is too frail to move, but is powerful in her verbal demands. Though they have little in common, separated by age, culture, and era—it becomes clear that she likes to share the narrator's company after he returns from his work at the library. While he finds this nightly conversation awkward, he completes the ritual out of respect for her. This passage shows a shift in the narrator's emotions as he begins to feel tenderly toward Mrs. Croft and her observations regarding the moon landing. He notes he doesn't "have the heart" to tell her the flag has fallen over on the moon, a consideration for her feelings. The narrator has recognized Mrs. Croft's own isolation and weakness, and despite their lack of any other similarity beyond their separate isolation, his kindness—even a limited kindness—begins to forge a connection.

On Friday, when his rent is due, the narrator almost puts the money on the piano ledge, but sees Mrs. Croft is sitting on the piano bench in the hallway. Rather than leaving the money unattended and making her walk with her cane to retrieve it, he puts it straight into her hands instead. When he returns from work, she doesn't order him to sit next to her as she usually does, but he sits anyway. She tells him twice that "It was very kind of you," and he sees that she's still holding the money

This is an important exchange for both the narrator and Mrs. Croft. The narrator breaks Mrs. Croft's rule of where to put the money, but does so to create a convenience for her. She is moved by this tiny act of kindness, thanking him twice, and holding on to the envelope of money as if it were the kind act itself. The action breaks up her ability to follow routine—she doesn't order him to sit or talk about the moon—but he sits as usual. This, too, is an act of kindness. Mrs. Croft realizes the narrator is polite without her having to force him to be. Her fondness for him grows.

Mrs. Croft's daughter Helen arrives on Sunday. She looks briskly at the narrator's room, then tells him that she thinks her mother likes him; he's the first boarder she's ever called a "gentleman." From downstairs, Mrs. Croft shouts at them, and as they head towards her, Helen says that her mother slips sometimes, which makes the narrator suddenly think of her as "vulnerable."

The narrator's feelings about Mrs. Croft shift again when he realizes several things about her during her daughter Helen's visit. First, Helen's age serves to indicate that Mrs. Croft is much older than he thought. When Helen also notes her mother sometimes slips, and should use her cane, he realizes Mrs. Croft might need more care than he imagined. That she may prove to be more fragile than he perceived heightens his anxiety. His worry about her health and well-being increases from this point on. Second, he learns Mrs. Croft likes him. The respect he's given her, along with his kind actions, make him a "gentleman" in her eyes. This makes him special, as he has achieved something over the other male boarders who have run "screaming." This helps solidify his growing attachment to his landlady, but it also begins to connect the idea of the ordinary and the extraordinary—that ordinary kindnesses and connections can be marks of extraordinary gentlemanliness, for instance.

Furious, Mrs. Croft says it's "improper" for an unmarried man and woman to speak to each other alone. Helen replies that she is 68 years old, and when Mrs. Croft criticizes Helen's hemline for being above her ankle, Helen reminds her mother that it is 1969 and girls now wear miniskirts.

Mrs. Croft's childhood was spent in an era when women were not allowed to be in any room with an unmarried man unchaperoned and dresses covered most of a woman's body. Mrs. Croft seems somewhat muddled here since both Helen, who is 68, and the narrator are married and these customs in behavior and dress have long since fallen away. There are several possible reasons for Mrs. Croft's confusion here. She is isolated in her house, and despite her awareness of news events, she may not fully realize how much time as passed. Due to her age, she may have trouble with her memory and forgets Helen has grown to have a life of her own. She may be frustrated that her firm rules are not being followed by the narrator as she early insisted that the narrator have no lady visitors. She also could be angry that she must rely on Helen to help her and is frustrated by her own inability to climb the stairs. Helen, for her part, refuses to be ordered about by her mother and helps situate her into the present time period.

In the kitchen, Helen opens cans of soup for her mother because she can no longer open them herself; her hands were "killed" by the piano lessons she gave for forty years after her husband's death. Helen serves the narrator tea, and he asks her if the soup is enough food for Mrs. Croft. Helen says she won't eat anything else; she stopped eating solids three years ago, after she turned 100. The narrator feels "mortified," as he had assumed Mrs. Croft was in her 80s—he's never known someone who lived more than a century.

Despite their disagreement, Helen loves her mother. Each week, she comes to prepare her food for her, opening the cans into pans so her mother can reheat the soup. Helen tries to give her mother as much agency as she can to live an active life. Meanwhile, when the narrator learns that Mrs. Croft is 103, he is flooded with embarrassment that he hadn't realized how old she actually was. When Helen reveals that Mrs. Croft's hands were damaged by her teaching piano, the narrator is doubly startled. Until now, he hasn't thought of Mrs. Croft's personal travails beyond his own encounters. He never imagined her working to support her family nor that she suffered tragedies. These revelations about her age and life give the narrator a new respect for Mrs. Croft. The news also makes him aware that Mrs. Croft's time on Earth has been very long and her future is limited.

The narrator cannot believe that, as such an old woman, Mrs. Croft lives alone. After his own father died, the narrator's mother refused to adjust to being widow, sinking "deeper into a world of darkness." She began to behave inappropriately and could not be helped by family, friends, nor visits to psychiatric clinics. As a teenager, the narrator looked after his mother while his brother went to work to keep the family afloat.

The narrator is in awe at Mrs. Croft's ability to fend for herself and to support her family as a widow. His own mother became so depressed in widowhood that she could no longer function. Although he tried to help his mother, she could not heal. His mother's extreme response and his feelings of failure in helping her have colored the narrator's view of all relationships. For him, connection brings loss, and loss is something that people are too fragile to cope with. The narrator's emotional distance now makes sense: it is a defense against forming connections, which he believes will lead to inevitable pain.. However, Mrs. Croft's longevity and strength challenge the narrator's notions regarding fragility in the face of crisis, and suggests that resilience in the face of loss is also possible.

Now that he knows Mrs. Croft's age, the narrator worries about her constantly. Suddenly, each day that she's still alive seems like a "miracle." They pass the summer continuing their routine, although some nights after she falls asleep on the piano bench, the narrator stays by her, marveling at how long her life has been and at how different the world is now from when she was born in 1866. He sometimes checks on her at night, and each Friday he puts the rent directly into her hands, but beyond these "simple gestures" there's not very much he can do.

After he learns Mrs. Croft's age and status as a widow, he begins to see her as a source of both worry and wonder. He worries about her physical fragility and begins to check on her nightly to make sure she hasn't hurt herself. Yet, he is also in "awe" at her ability to survive so many years (no matter how "ordinary" those years might have been), admiring the many changes she must have gone through from the time she was a girl who had "chaste conversations" in a parlor. He imagines what her youthful vibrancy and talent was like. He begins to see Mrs. Croft as having a whole, rich life. She is not just an old woman who asks for his rent. Due to this increase in sympathy, he is driven to continue his acts of small kindness toward her.

At the end of August, just before Mala is set to arrive, the narrator receives a letter from her. It doesn't have a salutation, because using his name would have "assumed an intimacy we had not yet discovered." Written in broken English to practice for Boston, the letter expresses her loneliness and her concern about snow. The narrator doesn't feel anything because he does not know her; he sees her arrival as something "inevitable but meaningless." He can't even remember her face.

Although the narrator has grown more comfortable with, and fond of, Mrs. Croft, he is still a far more stoic personality than his wife, Mala. In her letter to him, she states she is lonely, but the narrator is not moved. Once again, he shows an inability to feel sympathy. In part, this is because the couple has only spent a limited amount of time together—a few days during their wedding festivities. For instance, Mala doesn't even feel comfortable writing his name in her letter. But the narrator's extreme emotional coldness once again hints at the deeper trauma of his mother's death, and that he is not just unemotional but actually scared of emotion. Although the narrator does not see it, though, Mala's emotionally honest letter reveals her openness to not just the "duty" of marriage but to actually sharing a life with him. She does not hold back from emotion and feels confident in expressing it, even when negative. She is stronger than he thinks, and expressing emotion is not the path to failure and despair that he seems to fear.

A few days later, the narrator observes a "mishap" with an **Indian woman** in a sari strolling her child on the street. An American woman's dog briefly bites the sari, and the narrator suddenly realizes that it's his "duty" to protect Mala from this kind of thing—to welcome her, care for her, and protect her. Irritated, he remembers that being five miles from her parents had made her cry.

The narrator observes the Indian woman's sari being bitten but doesn't offer to help. He watches the American apologize, the Indian woman comfort her crying child, and everybody goes on their way. This shows the narrator's inability to immediately engage with his surroundings. Yet, the incident also highlights his fears about his new wife's capabilities. He sees Mala as highly vulnerable, based on her emotional reaction to moving even a small distance from her parents. He worries her emotional vulnerability will increase as well. And, because of his experience with his mother, he thinks that emotional pain will lead to collapse, and that he will then have to care for her entirely. The narrator's resentment of Mala's emotion is an expression of his fear that he will have to end up caring for her, just as he had to care for his mother.

The narrator is used to America by now: his cornflakes and his evenings with Mrs. Croft. Mala will be the only thing that's unfamiliar, but he nonetheless rents a bigger apartment before she comes. When he moves out of Mrs. Croft's house, she expresses no emotion, and it disappoints him. But he then realizes that in her long life, their time together is a brief interlude, that "[c]ompared to a century, it was no time at all."

The narrator is nervous about Mala's arrival and its inevitable disruption of his now comfortable routine. He is not looking forward to breaking his recent connection to Mrs. Croft, who has become familiar and comforting in her predictability. Yet, he is aware that as a husband he has responsibilities to his new wife. That he sees this shift in his life as a duty rather than a new chapter to enjoy is conveyed when he describe renting an apartment as doing "what [he] had to do." At the same time, it is interesting that the narrator wishes that Mrs. Croft were sadder to see him go. Despite himself, he did form an emotional attachment with her—a sign that he is capable of emotional attachment, even if he himself doesn't see it in those terms. The narrator's thoughts about why Mrs. Croft isn't sad to see him go also brings him to a revelation about how the length of one's perspective changes the way one sees life, that looking back on a life is not the same as living it.


At the airport, Mala is dressed in the way customary for brides. Instead of touching her, the narrator asks if she's hungry; she is, and he says he has egg curry at home. In Mala's suitcase, she has two **sweaters** that she knitted for him (neither fits), new pajamas, and tea. He hasn't gotten her anything besides the curry, but she compliments the house and the food. He tells her that she doesn't have to keep her head covered at home, but she keeps it covered anyway.

Mala's arrival at the airport shows the couple's awkwardness with each other. As strangers, it's hard for them to act like a married couple. The narrator, as is his reticent nature, acts practically rather than emotionally, offering Mala a meal over a physical display of affection, though he does try to be kind by preparing a traditional egg curry which would be familiar to her. At the same time, his previous status as a bachelor is shown by the fact that this is the one meal he knows how to make, as the Bengalis in London made over and over. Mala is equally awkward with her new husband. She, too, has tried to be kind, arriving with traditional gifts from home: drawstring pajamas and Darjeeling tea. She has also taken the time to knit him two sweaters, but they are both tight under the arms because she hasn't been able to measure his size. This tightness also suggests the constriction both feel around each other. The narrator tells her she doesn't have to wear her sari in the traditional way, suggesting he doesn't need her to act with traditional deference her in America, but she isn't yet comfortable enough to break that tradition. The details of these first few moments together show that while the couple seems to be bound to each other only by duty, they are both kind people doing the best they know how.



After a week, they're still strangers to each other; he's not used to coming home to a clean house with fresh food, or to the sight of her toothbrush next to his. At first, she tries to make him a Bengali breakfast, but he tells her that cornflakes will do, and she starts laying out his cornflakes in the morning. One day, she asks for a few dollars, and when he comes home, she's bought a tablecloth and prepared a curry with fresh garlic and ginger.

The narrator is particularly disconcerted by Mala's presence as a roommate: she is the first Indian woman he's lived with since his mother. He can't get used to her scent and sounds or the "two toothbrushes" rather than one. The narrator's discomfort on the one hand is a product of a disruption to his previous lifestyle. But that he is particularly uncomfortable with Bengali items and traditions that Mala brings into their apartment suggests also that he wants to be assimilating, to be the self that he created in his time alone in America, and feels constricted by the return of these traditions. At the same time, Mala also adjusts: she prepares the breakfast he likes, while also beautifying their home, and engaging in Bengali traditions. Despite the narrator saying he can't get used to Mala, there's a subtle growth of connection here, as the two characters learn to compromise.

On Friday, the narrator suggests they go out. Mala dresses up as though they're going to a party. This makes him regretful, as he hadn't planned anything more than a walk. He leads them to Mrs. Croft's house to show her where he lived before she arrived. She remarks that it's a big house and wonders who cares for Mrs. Croft, but the narrator says she seems to care for herself.

The narrator clearly miscommunicates his plans for a night out but Mala doesn't complain. She is amenable to the shift in plan, showing her flexibility. At first the couple just strolls and window shops, but then the narrator leads Mala "without thinking" to Mrs. Croft's. Subconsciously, he wants to show Mala something comfortable and familiar to him. Mrs. Croft's is also an important part of his first American experience. His taking Mala there shows he wants her to understand him better, although he isn't quite aware of this himself. Mala's response before going in shows she's thoughtful and kind. She's concerned for Mrs. Croft and her isolation. The difference of living communally in apartments in India is contrasted here with the largeness of an American home in which there can be a single resident.

When the narrator rings the bell, Helen opens the door, explaining that Mrs. Croft has been hurt. He and Mala go to the parlor where she is lying down, and Mrs. Croft treats the narrator as though "no time had passed." She complains about breaking her hip and asks what he thinks about her calling the police—he says it's "splendid," which makes Mala laugh.

Earlier, when living with Mrs. Croft, the narrator worried about her falling, which he felt could be catastrophic. Now he learns that his worst fear for her actually happened, but rather than fall apart Mrs. Croft resiliently handled the moment. As usual, the narrator validates her feelings, telling her that calling the police for help was "splendid." He knows this familiar phrase will please her, but it also thematically connects her act of calling the police after she well with the moon landing—it connects what might be considered an ordinary act with an extraordinary accomplishment, and suggests that the narrator has begun to see that the ordinary can in fact be extraordinary. Mala's laughter seems to indicate an appreciation for the same way of seeing the world.

Glaring at Mala, who has settled on the piano bench, Mrs. Croft asks who she is, and the narrator says she's his wife. As Mrs. Croft orders her to stand up and examines her, the narrator feels sympathy for Mala for the first time, remembering the difficulty of adjusting to life in London. Mala has moved across the world simply to be with him, and he realizes that when she dies, it will affect him, and when he dies, it will affect her.

Mrs. Croft's harshness when she asks Mala to stand is typical of her tendency to order people about—but hints of jealousy are present, too, as Mala sits on the beloved piano bench, taking over Mrs. Croft's usual spot. Mrs. Croft also seems to be evaluating whether Mala is the right choice for the narrator as a wife. The scrutiny she gives Mala, then, can be interpreted as being a function of both her curiosity and her protectiveness. For his part, the narrator changes profoundly in this scene. His wife's discomfort under Mrs. Croft's gaze makes the narrator, for the first time, able to equate his own difficulties in adjusting as an immigrant to a new culture to those his wife is now facing. This empathy allows him to be even more profoundly moved by the fact that she has travelled miles, and endured these difficulties, to be with him. In this moment of recognizing his and Mala's shared experiences and sacrifices, he realizes that they will come to love each other. And he understands that such love also means love—that they will each mourn the other's death. Rather than avoid that prospect by cutting himself off emotionally, he accepts it. The narrator has moved past his anxiety about the emotional vulnerability of human connection and love.

The narrator realizes Mrs. Croft may have never seen a woman in a sari before. He assumes Mrs. Croft will find fault in Mala, but instead the old woman declares with delight that Mala is a "perfect lady." The narrator laughs and he and Mala smile at each other for the first time.

If this is the first time Mrs. Croft has seen an Indian woman in traditional dress, the sight must be extraordinarily different from anything she has known. Earlier she was judgmental regarding her daughter Helen's clothes as well as disapproving of girls in miniskirts, so the narrator's expectation of her disapproval makes sense. The elderly woman's reaction, though, is exactly the same as her reaction to the moon landing. She reacts to Mala with "equal measures of disbelief and delight" just as she had when discussing the flag on the moon earlier. She may have never seen anyone like Mala, with a traditional bindi and sari, but she lets awe and wonder win the day. Mrs. Crofts also calls Mala is a "lady," a term that is the female match to the narrator, who she earlier described as a "gentleman." The narrator laughs, seeing Mala as extraordinary through Mrs. Croft's eyes, just as he once saw himself in the same way. The smile he and Mala share is the first time they bond together in common understanding.

This moment in Mrs. Croft's parlor is when the "distance" between the narrator and Mala "began to lessen." Afterwards, they explore the city together, make friends with other Bengalis, take pictures together that Mala can send home to her parents, and discover physical intimacy. They find Indian spices in local shops but also watch boats rowing crew on the Charles River and eat ice cream in Harvard Yard. The narrator tells her all about his life, about his experiences adjusting to London and Boston. When he tells Mala about his mother, she weeps.

The narrator and Mala blend their lives together. This means not just spending time together, but doing things that literally blend their lives. They find Indian spices and they eat ice cream, things quintessentially Indian and American. Together, they embrace their new definition as Indian-Americans. Meanwhile, they become both physically and emotionally intimate. The narrator, for instance, becomes accepting of Mala's deep connection to her parents, and helps her document their new life in photos that Mala can send home. The narrator's growing emotional openness with Mala is most evident in his willingness to tell Mala the story of his mother, something he has previously kept bottled up and looked at with embarrassment. That Mala expresses her sympathy by weeping and he does not object further shows his growth: he no longer worries that deep emotions will lead to collapse, but instead understands that shared emotions can actually forge a stronger union between them.

Mala also who consoles him when he learns in the newspaper that Mrs. Croft has died. He is deeply sad; this is the first death he has mourned in America, and "hers was the first life [he] had admired."

By admiring the qualities of longevity and resilience Mrs. Croft possessed, the narrator embraces the traits that have allowed him to escape the fear of emotional fragility that engulfed him after his mother's death. Now more emotionally resilient himself, he allows Mala to comfort him during his grief. Letting Mala do so is significant for the narrator, who has self-isolated for the majority of his adulthood. It's also worth noting that Mrs. Croft led a pretty normal life, even with the tragedy of her husband's early death. The narrator's admiration for her is also a testament to his growing understanding of the extraordinary that is a part of the ordinary.

In the thirty years since the narrator arrived in Boston, the narrator and Mala have become American citizens. They own a house on a tree-lined street like Mrs. Croft's. While they sometimes visit Calcutta, they have decided to grow old near Boston where their son goes to Harvard. Mala no longer covers her head or cries for her parents, but she sometimes cries, missing their son. The narrator and Mala make sure to spend time with him, but both know he may not eat rice or speak Bengali once they die.

On his initial flight to Boston in 1969, the narrator read in his guidebook that in America, "Everybody feels he must get to the top." Now 66, the narrator has achieved success by American standards: he has a home with a garden on a quiet tree-lined street, a son at Harvard, a job in his field, and a thirty-year-long happy marriage. He and Mala are now fully assimilated into American life. At the same time, the narrator, looking back, can see that all of this joy and success comes with tradeoffs too. Their successful assimilation means that they have lost some connection with their traditions, and that their son has moved even further away from that cultural heritage. This recognition isn't momentously sad; it's just an understanding that change—even good change—leads to loss, and the narrator is now able to accept loss.

Sometimes the narrator shows his son Mrs. Croft's house and is transported back to that summer of 1969, amazed that he and Mala were ever strangers. Whenever he worries about his son's future after he and Mala have one day died, he remembers that he himself has survived on three continents. The astronauts spent only a few hours on the **moon**, but he has persisted for thirty years in "this new world." While this is a common achievement, he still finds himself bewildered by his own life—by the distances he has traveled and the people he has known. While this is all "ordinary," it's still "beyond [his] imagination."

The narrator continues to honor the way that his experiences with Mrs. Croft changed him. The story comes full circle, as the narrator once more considers the moon landing. In the early stages of the story, the narrator saw no personal meaning in the moon landing, and did not connect that momentous adventure with his own setting out into a foreign land. Now he explicitly makes that connection. Thirty years ago he also thought little of the extraordinary nature of the moon landing, now he recognizes the immensity of that accomplishment. But he also recognizes the immensity of his own extraordinary journey. Like the astronauts earlier, he landed on a new planet. Unlike them, his stay has a longevity that allows for deep connection to his "third and final continent." Further, the narrator understands that his own journey is not unique; he sees the extraordinary in his own life, and in the lives of other people. He also realizes their son will one day have to face the loss of his own parents, but whereas such a prospect may have once filled him with terror, now he knows from his own life that his son will be able to endure, and to thrive. The narrator ends the story amazed and grateful for his "splendid" life.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Butterworth-McDermott, Christine. "*The Third and Final Continent.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 29 Oct 2021. Web. 29 Oct 2021.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Butterworth-McDermott, Christine. "*The Third and Final Continent.*" LitCharts LLC, October 29, 2021. Retrieved October 29, 2021. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-third-and-final-continent.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Third and Final Continent* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Lahiri, Jhumpa. The Third and Final Continent. Mariner Books. 2000.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Lahiri, Jhumpa. The Third and Final Continent. New York: Mariner Books. 2000.