

Summer Reading Assignment for Rising 9th Graders (not Honors)



Summer reading for rising 9th graders corresponds with the first unit of study in 9th grade, American Voices. In this unit, students will explore fiction and non-fiction texts in order to answer the unit essential question: What does it mean to be “American”?

Over the summer, students will read three text selections from below. Students will be assessed on the material with a quiz when they return to school. The texts are included in this document.

Directions: All students will read "from When I Was Puerto Rican" and "Finding a Voice: A Taiwanese Family Adapts to America"

Choose One: "American History" or "The Rules of the Game" (An excerpt from Joy Luck Club)

Summer Reading Assignment for Rising 9th Grade Honors Students

Over the summer, honors English 9 students will read the novel Fahrenheit 451. Students will be assessed on the novel with a quiz when they return to school. Students may want to purchase their own copy of the novel, so they can annotate in the book. Students may also borrow a copy of the novel by stopping by Tennessee High School front office. Students will need their lunch number to check out a copy.

from When I Was Puerto Rican

Esmeralda Santiago



About the Author



Author, essayist, and screenwriter **Esmeralda Santiago** (b. 1948) grew up as the oldest of eleven siblings. When she was thirteen, her family moved to New York City from Puerto Rico, and her mother supported the family on her own. Santiago went on to attend Harvard University and later founded an award-winning film and media production company.

BACKGROUND

The High School of Performing Arts in New York City, now the Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts, was the first public school in the nation for students with unique performing arts talents. It served as the inspiration for the 1980 movie *Fame* and its 2009 remake. Auditions for acceptance into the school are highly competitive and rigorous.

NOTES

- 1 **W**hile Francisco was still alive, we had moved to Ellery Street. That meant I had to change schools, so Mami walked me to P.S. 33, where I would attend ninth grade. The first week I was there I was given a series of tests that showed that even though I couldn't speak English very well, I read and wrote it at the tenth-grade level. So they put me in 9-3, with the smart kids.
- 2 One morning, Mr. Barone, a guidance counselor, called me to his office. He was short, with a big head and large hazel eyes under shapely eyebrows. His nose was long and round at the tip. He dressed in browns and yellows and often perched his tortoiseshell glasses on his forehead, as if he had another set of eyes up there.
- 3 "So," he pushed his glasses up, "what do you want to be when you grow up?"

4 “I don’t know.”

5 He shuffled through some papers. “Let’s see here . . . you’re fourteen, is that right?”

6 “Yes, sir.”

7 “And you’ve never thought about what you want to be?”

8 When I was very young, I wanted to be a *jibara*.¹ When I was older, I wanted to be a cartographer,² then a topographer.³ But since we’d come to Brooklyn, I’d not thought about the future much.

9 “No, sir.”

10 He pulled his glasses down to where they belonged and shuffled through the papers again.

11 “Do you have any hobbies?” I didn’t know what he meant. “Hobbies, hobbies,” he flailed his hands, as if he were juggling, “things you like to do after school.”

12 “Ah, yes.” I tried to imagine what I did at home that might qualify as a hobby. “I like to read.”

13 He seemed disappointed. “Yes, we know that about you.” He pulled out a paper and stared at it. “One of the tests we gave you was an aptitude test. It tells us what kinds of things you might be good at. The tests show that you would be good at helping people. Do you like to help people?”

14 I was afraid to contradict the tests. “Yes, sir.”

15 “There’s a high school we can send you where you can study biology and chemistry which will prepare you for a career in nursing.”

16 I screwed up my face. He consulted the papers again.

17 “You would also do well in communications. Teaching maybe.”

18 I remembered Miss Brown standing in front of a classroom full of rowdy teenagers, some of them taller than she was.

19 “I don’t like to teach.”

20 Mr. Barone pushed his glasses up again and leaned over the stack of papers on his desk. “Why don’t you think about it and get back to me,” he said, closing the folder with my name across the top. He put his hand flat on it, as if squeezing something out. “You’re a smart girl, Esmeralda. Let’s try to get you into an academic school so that you have a shot at college.”

21 On the way home, I walked with another new ninth grader, Yolanda. She had been in New York for three years but knew as little English as I did. We spoke in Spanglish, a combination of English and Spanish in which we hopped from one language to the other depending on which word came first.

1. **jibara** (HEE vah rah) *n.* person who lives in Puerto Rico’s countryside.

2. **cartographer** (kahr TOG ruh fuhr) *n.* person who makes maps.

3. **topographer** (tuh POG ruh fuhr) *n.* person who makes maps that show the height and shape of the land.

- 22 “Te preguntó el Mr. Barone, you know, *lo que querías hacer* when you grow up?” I asked.
- 23 “Sí, pero, I didn’t know. *¿Y tú?*”
- 24 “Yo tampoco. He said, *que* I like to help people. *Pero*, you know, *a mí no me gusta mucho la gente.*” When she heard me say I didn’t like people much, Yolanda looked at me from the corner of her eye, waiting to become the exception.
- 25 By the time I said it, she had dashed up the stairs of her building. She didn’t wave as she ducked in, and the next day she wasn’t friendly. I walked around the rest of the day in embarrassed isolation, knowing that somehow I had given myself away to the only friend I’d made at Junior High School 33. I had to either take back my words or live with the consequences of stating what was becoming the truth. I’d never said that to anyone, not even to myself. It was an added weight, but I wasn’t about to trade it for companionship.
- 26 A few days later, Mr. Barone called me back to his office.
- 27 “Well?” Tiny green flecks burned around the black pupils of his hazel eyes.
- 28 The night before, Mami had called us into the living room. On the television “fifty of America’s most beautiful girls” paraded in ruffled tulle dresses before a tinsel waterfall.
- 29 “Aren’t they lovely?” Mami murmured, as the girls, escorted by boys in uniform, floated by the camera, twirled, and disappeared behind a screen to the strains of a waltz and an announcer’s dramatic voice calling their names, ages, and states. Mami sat mesmerized through the whole pageant.
- 30 “I’d like to be a model,” I said to Mr. Barone.
- 31 He stared at me, pulled his glasses down from his forehead, looked at the papers inside the folder with my name on it, and glared. “A model?” His voice was gruff, as if he were more comfortable yelling at people than talking to them.
- 32 “I want to be on television.”
- 33 “Oh, then you want to be an actress,” in a tone that said this was only a slight improvement over my first career choice. We stared at one another for a few seconds. He pushed his glasses up to his forehead again and reached for a book on the shelf in back of him. “I only know of one school that trains actresses, but we’ve never sent them a student from here.”
- 34 Performing Arts, the write-up said, was an academic, as opposed to a vocational,⁴ public school that trained students wishing to pursue a career in theater, music, and dance.
- 35 “It says here that you have to audition.” He stood up and held the book closer to the faint gray light coming through the narrow

4. **vocational** *adj.* related to training for a career.

window high on his wall. “Have you ever performed in front of an audience?”

36 “I was announcer in my school show in Puerto Rico,” I said.
“And I recite poetry. There, not here.”

37 He closed the book and held it against his chest. His right index finger thumped a rhythm on his lower lip. “Let me call them and find out exactly what you need to do. Then we can talk some more.”

38 I left his office strangely happy, confident that something good had just happened, not knowing exactly what.

39 “I’m not afraid . . . I’m not afraid . . . I’m not afraid.” Every day I walked home from school repeating those words. The broad streets and sidewalks that had impressed me so on the first day we had arrived had become as familiar as the dirt road from Macún to the highway. Only my curiosity about the people who lived behind these walls ended where the façades of the buildings opened into dark hallways or locked doors. Nothing good, I imagined, could be happening inside if so many locks had to be breached to go in or step out.

40 It was on these tense walks home from school that I decided I had to get out of Brooklyn. Mami had chosen this as our home, and just like every other time we’d moved, I’d had to go along with her because I was a child who had no choice. But I wasn’t willing to go along with her on this one.

41 “How can people live like this?” I shrieked once, desperate to run across a field, to feel grass under my feet instead of pavement.

42 “Like what?” Mami asked, looking around our apartment, the kitchen and living room crisscrossed with sagging lines of drying diapers and bedclothes.

43 “Everyone on top of each other. No room to do anything. No air.”

44 “Do you want to go back to Macún, to live like savages, with no electricity, no toilets . . .”

45 “At least you could step outside every day without somebody trying to kill you.”

46 “Ay, Negi, stop exaggerating!”

47 “I hate my life!” I yelled.

48 “Then do something about it,” she yelled back.

49 Until Mr. Barone showed me the listing for Performing Arts High School, I hadn’t known what to do.

50 “The auditions are in less than a month. You have to learn a monologue,⁵ which you will perform in front of a panel. If you do well, and your grades here are good, you might get into the school.”

5. **monologue** (MON uh lawg) *n.* long speech given by a character in a story, movie, or play.



- 51 Mr. Barone took charge of preparing me for my audition to Performing Arts. He selected a speech from *The Silver Cord*, a play by Sidney Howard, first performed in 1926, but whose action took place in a New York drawing room circa 1905.
- 52 “Mr. Gatti, the English teacher,” he said, “will coach you . . . And Mrs. Johnson will talk to you about what to wear and things like that.”
- 53 I was to play Christina, a young married woman confronting her mother-in-law. I learned the monologue phonetically⁶ from Mr. Gatti. It opened with “You belong to a type that’s very common in this country, Mrs. Phelps—a type of self-centered, self-pitying, son-devouring tigress, with unmentionable proclivities⁷ suppressed on the side.”
- 54 “We don’t have time to study the meaning of every word,” Mr. Gatti said. “Just make sure you pronounce every word correctly.”
- 55 Mrs. Johnson, who taught Home Economics, called me to her office.
- 56 “Is that how you enter a room?” she asked the minute I came in. “Try again, only this time, don’t barge in. Step in slowly, head up, back straight, a nice smile on your face. That’s it.” I took a deep breath and waited. “Now sit. No, not like that. Don’t just plop down. Float down to the chair with your knees together.” She demonstrated, and I copied her. “That’s better. What do you do with your hands? No, don’t hold your chin like that; it’s not

6. **phonetically** (foh NEHT uh klee) *adv.* related to the sound, not the spelling, of words.

7. **proclivities** (proh KLIHV uh teeZ) *n.* tendencies.

ladylike. Put your hands on your lap, and leave them there. Don't use them so much when you talk."

57 I sat stiff as a cutout while Mrs. Johnson and Mr. Barone asked me questions they thought the panel at Performing Arts would ask.

58 "Where are you from?"

59 "Puerto Rico."

60 "No," Mrs. Johnson said, "Porto Rico. Keep your *r*'s soft. Try again."

61 "Do you have any hobbies?" Mr. Barone asked. Now I knew what to answer.

62 "I enjoy dancing and the movies."

63 "Why do you want to come to this school?"

64 Mrs. Johnson and Mr. Barone had worked on my answer if this question should come up.

65 "I would like to study at Performing Arts because of its academic program and so that I may be trained as an actress."

66 "Very good, very good!" Mr. Barone rubbed his hands together, twinkled his eyes at Mrs. Johnson. "I think we have a shot at this."

67 "Remember," Mrs. Johnson said, "when you shop for your audition dress, look for something very simple in dark colors."

68 Mami bought me a red plaid wool jumper with a crisp white shirt, my first pair of stockings, and penny loafers. The night before, she rolled up my hair in pink curlers that cut into my scalp and made it hard to sleep. For the occasion, I was allowed to wear eye makeup and a little lipstick.

69 "You look so grown up!" Mami said, her voice sad but happy, as I twirled in front of her and Tata.

70 "*Toda una señorita*," Tata said, her eyes misty.

71 We set out for the audition on an overcast January morning heavy with the threat of snow.

72 "Why couldn't you choose a school close to home?" Mami grumbled as we got on the train to Manhattan. I worried that even if I were accepted, she wouldn't let me go because it was so far from home, one hour each way by subway. But in spite of her complaints, she was proud that I was good enough to be considered for such a famous school. And she actually seemed excited that I would be leaving the neighborhood.

73 "You'll be exposed to a different class of people," she assured me, and I felt the force of her ambition without knowing exactly what she meant.

74 Three women sat behind a long table in a classroom where the desks and chairs had been pushed against a wall. As I entered I held my head up and smiled, and then I floated down to the chair in front of them, clasped my hands on my lap, and smiled some more.

- 75 “Good morning,” said the tall one with hair the color of sand. She was big boned and solid, with intense blue eyes, a generous mouth, and soothing hands with short fingernails. She was dressed in shades of beige from head to toe and wore no makeup and no jewelry except for the gold chain that held her glasses just above her full bosom. Her voice was rich, modulated,⁸ each word pronounced as if she were inventing it.
- 76 Next to her sat a very small woman with very high heels. Her cropped hair was pouffed around her face, with bangs brushing the tips of her long false lashes, her huge dark brown eyes were thickly lined in black all around, and her small mouth was carefully drawn in and painted cerise.⁹ Her suntanned face turned toward me with the innocent curiosity of a lively baby. She was dressed in black, with many gold chains around her neck, big earrings, several bracelets, and large stone rings on the fingers of both hands.
- 77 The third woman was tall, small boned, thin, but shapely. Her dark hair was pulled flat against her skull into a knot in back of her head. Her face was all angles and light, with fawnlike dark brown eyes, a straight nose, full lips painted just a shade pinker than their natural color. Silky forest green cuffs peeked out from the sleeves of her burgundy suit. Diamond studs winked from perfect earlobes.
- 78 I had dreamed of this moment for several weeks. More than anything, I wanted to impress the panel with my talent, so that I would be accepted into Performing Arts and leave Brooklyn every day. And, I hoped, one day I would never go back.
- 79 But the moment I faced these three impeccably groomed women, I forgot my English and Mrs. Johnson’s lessons on how to behave like a lady. In the agony of trying to answer their barely comprehensible questions, I jabbed my hands here and there, forming words with my fingers because the words refused to leave my mouth.
- 80 “Why don’t you let us hear your monologue now?” the woman with the dangling glasses asked softly.
- 81 I stood up abruptly, and my chair clattered onto its side two feet from where I stood. I picked it up, wishing with all my strength that a thunderbolt would strike me dead to ashes on the spot.
- 82 “It’s all right,” she said. “Take a breath. We know you’re nervous.”
- 83 I closed my eyes and breathed deeply, walked to the middle of the room, and began my monologue.

8. **modulated** *adj.* adjusted to be balanced or proper.

9. **cerise** (*suh REES*) *n.* red.

84 “Ju bee lonh 2 a type dats berry cómo in dis kuntree, Meesseees
Felps. A type off selfcent red self pee tee in sun de boring tie gress
wid on men shon ah ball pro klee bee tees on de side.”

85 In spite of Mr. Gatti’s reminders that I should speak slowly and
enunciate¹⁰ every word, even if I didn’t understand it, I recited my
three-minute monologue in one minute flat.

86 The small woman’s long lashes seemed to have grown with
amazement. The elegant woman’s serene face twitched with
controlled laughter. The tall one dressed in beige smiled sweetly.

87 “Thank you, dear,” she said. “Could you wait outside for a few
moments?”

88 I resisted the urge to curtsy. The long hallway had narrow
wainscoting¹¹ halfway up to the high ceiling. Single bulb lamps
hung from long cords, creating yellow puddles of light on the
polished brown linoleum tile. A couple of girls my age sat on
straight chairs next to their mothers, waiting their turn. They
looked up as I came out and the door shut behind me. Mami
stood up from her chair at the end of the hall. She looked as scared
as I felt.

89 “What happened?”

90 “Nothing,” I mumbled, afraid that if I began telling her about it,
I would break into tears in front of the other people, whose eyes
followed me and Mami as we walked to the EXIT sign. “I have to
wait here a minute.”

91 “Did they say anything?”

92 “No. I’m just supposed to wait.”

93 We leaned against the wall. Across from us there was a bulletin
board with newspaper clippings about former students. On the
ragged edge, a neat person had printed in blue ink, “P.A.” and
the year the actor, dancer, or musician had graduated. I closed my
eyes and tried to picture myself on that bulletin board, with “P.A.
’66” across the top.

94 The door at the end of the hall opened, and the woman in beige
poked her head out.

95 “Esmeralda?”

96 “Sí, I mean, here.” I raised my hand.

97 She led me into the room. There was another girl in there,
whom she introduced as Bonnie, a junior at the school.

98 “Do you know what a pantomime is?” the woman asked. I
nodded. “You and Bonnie are sisters decorating a Christmas tree.”

99 Bonnie looked a lot like Juanita Marín, whom I had last seen
in Macún four years earlier. We decided where the invisible
Christmas tree would be, and we sat on the floor and pretended

10. **enunciate** (ih NUHN see ayt) *v.* pronounce clearly.

11. **wainscoting** (WAYN skuh tihng) *n.* lower part of an interior wall that is paneled or
lined differently from the rest of the wall.

we were taking decorations out of boxes and hanging them on the branches.

100 My family had never had a Christmas tree, but I remembered how once I had helped Papi wind colored lights around the eggplant bush that divided our land from Doña Ana's. We started at the bottom and wound the wire with tiny red bulbs around and around until we ran out; then Papi plugged another cord to it and we kept going until the branches hung heavy with light and the bush looked like it was on fire.

101 Before long I had forgotten where I was, and that the tree didn't exist and Bonnie was not my sister. She pretended to hand me a very delicate ball, and just before I took it, she made like it fell to the ground and shattered. I was petrified that Mami would come in and yell at us for breaking her favorite decoration. Just as I began to pick up the tiny fragments of nonexistent crystal, a voice broke in. "Thank you."

102 Bonnie got up, smiled, and went out.

103 The elegant woman stretched her hand out for me to shake. "We will notify your school in a few weeks. It was very nice to meet you."

104 I shook hands all around then backed out of the room in a fog, silent, as if the pantomime had taken my voice and the urge to speak.

105 On the way home Mami kept asking what had happened, and I kept mumbling, "Nothing. Nothing happened," ashamed that, after all the hours of practice with Mrs. Johnson, Mr. Barone, and Mr. Gatti, after the expense of new clothes and shoes, after Mami had to take a day off from work to take me into Manhattan, after all that, I had failed the audition and would never, ever, get out of Brooklyn.

106 Epilogue

107 *El mismo jíbaro con diferente caballo.*
Same jíbaro, different horse.

108 A decade after my graduation from Performing Arts, I visited the school. I was by then living in Boston, a scholarship student at Harvard University. The tall, elegant woman of my audition had become my mentor through my three years there. Since my graduation, she had married the school principal.

109 "I remember your audition," she said, her chiseled face dreamy, her lips toying with a smile that she seemed, still, to have to control.

110 I had forgotten the skinny brown girl with the curled hair, wool jumper, and lively hands. But she hadn't. She told me that

the panel had had to ask me to leave so that they could laugh, because it was so funny to see a fourteen-year-old Puerto Rican girl jabbering out a monologue about a possessive mother-in-law at the turn of the century, the words incomprehensible because they went by so fast.

111 “We admired,” she said, “the courage it took to stand in front of us and do what you did.”

112 “So you mean I didn’t get into the school because of my talent, but because I had chutzpah?”¹² We both laughed.

113 “Are any of your sisters and brothers in college?”

114 “No, I’m the only one, so far.”

115 “How many of you are there?”

116 “By the time I graduated from high school there were eleven of us.”

117 “Eleven!” She looked at me for a long time, until I had to look down. “Do you ever think about how far you’ve come?” she asked.

118 “No.” I answered. “I never stop to think about it. It might jinx the momentum.”

119 “Let me tell you another story, then,” she said. “The first day of your first year, you were absent. We called your house. You said you couldn’t come to school because you had nothing to wear. I wasn’t sure if you were joking. I asked to speak to your mother, and you translated what she said. She needed you to go somewhere with her to interpret. At first you wouldn’t tell me where, but then you admitted you were going to the welfare¹³ office. You were crying, and I had to assure you that you were not the only student in this school whose family received public assistance. The next day you were here, bright and eager. And now here you are, about to graduate from Harvard.”

120 “I’m glad you made that phone call,” I said.

121 “And I’m glad you came to see me, but right now I have to teach a class.” She stood up, as graceful as I remembered. “Take care.”

122 Her warm embrace, fragrant of expensive perfume, took me by surprise. “Thank you,” I said as she went around the corner to her classroom.

123 I walked the halls of the school, looking for the room where my life had changed. It was across from the science lab, a few doors down from the big bulletin board where someone with neat handwriting still wrote the letters “P.A.” followed by the graduating year along the edges of newspaper clippings featuring famous alumni.

124 “P.A. ’66,” I said to no one in particular. “One of these days.”

12. **chutzpah** (KHUTS puh) *n.* self-confidence or boldness.

13. **welfare** *n.* government program for low-income or unemployed people that helps pay for their food and housing.

Finding a Voice: A Taiwanese Family Adapts to America

Diane Tsai



About the Author



Diane Tsai (b. 1990) spent her early childhood in Taiwan before moving to California. A daughter of immigrants, she inherited from her parents a sense of adventure, a love of classical music, and an appreciation for Taiwanese food. A video journalist at TIME magazine, she is a graduate of Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism.

BACKGROUND

Taiwan, officially part of the Republic of China, is an island nation off the southeast coast of the Chinese mainland. Taiwanese immigration to the United States peaked in the 1960s and 1970s, and there continues to be a large immigrant Taiwanese-American population. The primary language spoken in Taiwan is Mandarin Chinese.

NOTES

- 1** It was the first day of second grade. My older sister Linda, then eight years old, was wearing a blouse and a blue skirt with two pockets in the front. One pocket was heavy with coins, just enough to pay for her lunch. She had already made a new friend, Sarah, who was leading her through the lunch line. As they made their way toward the cafeteria lady, my sister pulled the coins from her pocket. She stopped, and counted the coins. She was missing a quarter.
- 2** Frantically, she counted the money again, but the total was the same. Still one quarter short. A feeling of dread started to come over her. All she wanted was to eat her lunch, but she didn't have enough money to pay for it. The lunch lady was staring at her, and Sarah was staring too.
- 3** My sister looked from one face to the other, and burst into tears. The frustration was too much to handle—there were so many thoughts in her head, so many emotions she wanted to express, but she couldn't find a single word to explain her

predicament. Her Mandarin Chinese vocabulary was useless at her public elementary school in Costa Mesa, California. Although Linda and I were born in the States, our family moved to Taiwan when I was two months old, and we didn't return to the U.S. until I was six. At that time, we had only attended school in Taiwan and could barely speak any English.

4 Linda was absolutely alone in her misery, isolated by a language barrier that prevented the concerned adults around her from being able to solve the simple problem. So she continued to cry, until finally, she was taken to the principal's office, which notified our mother, who then brought her home.

5 Meanwhile, I was having similar problems in kindergarten. My shyness at that age was accentuated by the fact that there was an invisible wall between the rest of the children and myself. After spending the day as a silent observer during playtime, I came home and asked my mother how to say, "Can I play with you?" in English.

6 Today, 16 years later, my sister and I speak English effortlessly, without any traces of an accent. As we grew up, we shed our distant Taiwanese childhoods, and quickly adopted the identity of second-generation¹ Taiwanese Americans—teasing our parents for the way they pronounced simple words like "vanilla," and wishing my mom would, just once, make tacos for dinner. My non-Asian friends would marvel at our bilingual conversations, in which our parents spoke to us in Chinese and we replied solely in English, complete with a colorful variety of American teenage slang.

7 My sister and I thought our parents were the "immigrants": they had moved to the U.S. as poor graduate students, without the financial or emotional support of having family close by. They fought to make a place for themselves in the workplace, in spite of employers who were skeptical of their accented English and coworkers who mistook their meek demeanor as a sign of lack of ambition.

8 Our transition was much less difficult in comparison. Sometimes, it's easy to forget that Linda and I are immigrants as well, and we that experienced the same feelings of being excluded and misunderstood. The foundation laid by our parents created a safety net for us to rely on as we encountered similar struggles, softening the blow of hardships that came our way.

9 I'm grateful for all the wisdom my parents have imparted to me. Their steadfast confidence in our ability to adapt and grow—regardless of our cultural upbringing, or even our English skills—is both a comfort and an inspiration.

10 I still remember the advice my mom gave me on that lonely afternoon when I came home from kindergarten: "You don't have to ask, just go play with them!" 🐼

1. **second-generation** *adj.* describes the children of parents who have immigrated to a certain country.



American History

Judith Ortiz Cofer

BACKGROUND

On November 22, 1963, President John F. Kennedy was shot and killed in Dallas, Texas, and the United States was plunged into mourning. Most people who lived through that time can still remember where they were when they heard the news. Kennedy's assassination and the nation's grief defined a generation. Key events in this story take place on that fateful day.

- ¹ I once read in a "Ripley's Believe It or Not" column that Paterson, New Jersey, is the place where the Straight and Narrow (streets) intersect. The Puerto Rican tenement known as *El Building* was one block up from Straight. It was, in fact, the corner of Straight and Market; not "at" the corner, but *the* corner. At almost any hour of the day, El Building was like a monstrous jukebox, blasting out *salsas*¹ from open windows as the residents, mostly new immigrants just up from the island, tried to drown out whatever they were currently enduring with loud music. But the day President Kennedy was shot there was a profound silence in El Building; even the abusive tongues of viragoes,² the cursing of the unemployed, and the screeching of

1. **salsas** (SAHL suhz) songs written in a particular Latin American musical style.

2. **viragoes** (vih RAH gohz) fierce, irritable women with loud voices.

NOTES

CLOSE READ

ANNOTATE: In paragraph 5, mark words and phrases related to temperature.

QUESTION: Why is the narrator so focused on feelings of hot and cold?

CONCLUDE: How do these details help readers understand Elena's feelings of isolation?

anticipated (an TIHS uh payt ihd) v. eagerly expected

small children had been somehow muted. President Kennedy was a saint to these people. In fact, soon his photograph would be hung alongside the Sacred Heart and over the spiritist altars that many women kept in their apartments. He would become part of the hierarchy of martyrs they prayed to for favors that only one who had died for a cause would understand.

2 On the day that President Kennedy was shot, my ninth grade class had been out in the fenced playground of Public School Number 13. We had been given “free” exercise time and had been ordered by our P.E. teacher, Mr. DePalma, to “keep moving.” That meant that the girls should jump rope and the boys toss basketballs through a hoop at the far end of the yard. He in the meantime would “keep an eye” on us from just inside the building.

3 It was a cold gray day in Paterson. The kind that warns of early snow. I was miserable, since I had forgotten my gloves, and my knuckles were turning red and raw from the jump rope. I was also taking a lot of abuse from the black girls for not turning the rope hard and fast enough for them.

4 “Hey, Skinny Bones, pump it, girl. Ain’t you got no energy today?” Gail, the biggest of the black girls had the other end of the rope, yelled, “Didn’t you eat your rice and beans and pork chops for breakfast today?”

5 The other girls picked up the “pork chops” and made it into a refrain: “pork chop, pork chop, did you eat your pork chop?” They entered the double ropes in pairs and exited without tripping or missing a beat. I felt a burning on my cheeks and then my glasses fogged up so that I could not manage to coordinate the jump rope with Gail. The chill was doing to me what it always did; entering my bones, making me cry, humiliating me. I hated the city, especially in winter. I hated Public School Number 13. I hated my skinny flat-chested body, and I envied the black girls who could jump rope so fast that their legs became a blur. They always seemed to be warm while I froze.

6 There was only one source of beauty and light for me that school year. The only thing I had **anticipated** at the start of the semester. That was seeing Eugene. In August, Eugene and his family had moved into the only house on the block that had a yard and trees. I could see his place from my window in El Building. In fact, if I sat on the fire escape I was literally suspended above Eugene’s backyard. It was my favorite spot to read my library books in the summer. Until that August the house had been occupied by an old Jewish couple. Over the years I had become part of their family, without their knowing it, of course. I had a view of their kitchen and their backyard, and though I could not hear what they said, I knew when they were arguing, when one of them was sick, and many other things. I knew all this by watching them at mealtimes. I could see their kitchen table, the sink, and the stove. During good times, he

sat at the table and read his newspapers while she fixed the meals. If they argued, he would leave and the old woman would sit and stare at nothing for a long time. When one of them was sick, the other would come and get things from the kitchen and carry them out on a tray. The old man had died in June. The last week of school I had not seen him at the table at all. Then one day I saw that there was a crowd in the kitchen. The old woman had finally emerged from the house on the arm of a stocky, middle-aged woman, whom I had seen there a few times before, maybe her daughter. Then a man had carried out suitcases. The house had stood empty for weeks. I had had to resist the temptation to climb down into the yard and water the flowers the old lady had taken such good care of.

- 7 By the time Eugene's family moved in, the yard was a tangled mass of weeds. The father had spent several days mowing, and when he finished, from where I sat, I didn't see the red, yellow, and purple clusters that meant flowers to me. I didn't see this family sit down at the kitchen table together. It was just the mother, a red-headed tall woman who wore a white uniform—a nurse's, I guessed it was; the father was gone before I got up in the morning and was never there at dinner time. I only saw him on weekends when they sometimes sat on lawn chairs under the oak tree, each hidden behind a section of the newspaper; and there was Eugene. He was tall and blond, and he wore glasses. I liked him right away because he sat at the kitchen table and read books for hours. That summer, before we had even spoken one word to each other, I kept him company on my fire escape.

I saw then that he was blushing deeply. Eugene liked me, but he was shy.

- 8 Once school started I looked for him in all my classes, but P.S. 13 was a huge, overpopulated place and it took me days and many discreet questions to discover that Eugene was in honors classes for all his subjects; classes that were not open to me because English was not my first language, though I was a straight A student. After much maneuvering, I managed "to run into him" in the hallway where his locker was—on the other side of the building from mine—and in study hall at the library where he first seemed to notice me, but did not speak; and finally, on the way home after school one day when I decided to approach him directly, though my stomach was doing somersaults.
- 9 I was ready for rejection, snobbery, the worst. But when I came up to him, practically panting in my nervousness, and blurted out: "You're Eugene. Right?" he smiled, pushed his glasses up on his nose, and nodded. I saw then that he was blushing deeply. Eugene liked me, but he was shy. I did most of the talking that day. He nodded and smiled a lot. In the weeks that followed, we walked home together. He would linger at the corner of El Building for a few minutes then walk down to his two-story house. It was not until

infatuated (ihn FACH oo ayt
ihd) *adj.* briefly but intensely
in love

enthralled (ehn THRAWLD) *v.*
captivated

devoted (dih VOHT ihd) *adj.*
loving, loyal, and concerned
with another's well-being

Eugene moved into that house that I noticed that El Building blocked most of the sun, and that the only spot that got a little sunlight during the day was the tiny square of earth the old woman had planted with flowers.

- 10 I did not tell Eugene that I could see inside his kitchen from my bedroom. I felt dishonest, but I liked my secret sharing of his evenings, especially now that I knew what he was reading since we chose our books together at the school library.
- 11 One day my mother came into my room as I was sitting on the window-sill staring out. In her abrupt way she said: "Elena, you are acting 'moony.'" *Enamorada*³ was what she really said, that is—like a girl stupidly **infatuated**. Since I had turned fourteen my mother had been more vigilant than ever. She acted as if I was going to go crazy or explode or something if she didn't watch me and nag me all the time about being a *señorita*⁴ now. She kept talking about virtue, morality, and other subjects that did not interest me in the least. My mother was unhappy in Paterson, but my father had a good job at the bluejeans factory in Passaic and soon, he kept assuring us, we would be moving to our own house there. Every Sunday we drove out to the suburbs of Paterson, Clifton, and Passaic, out to where people mowed grass on Sundays in the summer, and where children made snowmen in the winter from pure white snow, not like the gray slush of Paterson which seemed to fall from the sky in that hue. I had learned to listen to my parents' dreams, which were spoken in Spanish, as fairy tales, like the stories about life in the island paradise of Puerto Rico before I was born. I had been to the island once as a little girl, to grandmother's funeral, and all I remembered was wailing women in black, my mother becoming hysterical and being given a pill that made her sleep two days, and me feeling lost in a crowd of strangers all claiming to be my aunts, uncles, and cousins. I had actually been glad to return to the city. We had not been back there since then, though my parents talked constantly about buying a house on the beach someday, retiring on the island—that was a common topic among the residents of El Building. As for me, I was going to go to college and become a teacher.
- 12 But after meeting Eugene I began to think of the present more than of the future. What I wanted now was to enter that house I had watched for so many years. I wanted to see the other rooms where the old people had lived, and where the boy spent his time. Most of all, I wanted to sit at the kitchen table with Eugene like two adults, like the old man and his wife had done, maybe drink some coffee and talk about books. I had started reading *Gone with the Wind*. I was **enthralled** by it, with the daring and the passion of the beautiful girl living in a mansion, and with her **devoted** parents and the slaves who did everything for them. I didn't believe such a world had ever really existed, and I wanted to ask Eugene some questions since he and his

3. *Enamorada* (ay nah moh RAH dah) Spanish for "enamored; lovesick."

4. *señorita* (seh nyoh REE tah) Spanish for "young lady."



parents, he had told me, had come up from Georgia, the same place where the novel was set. His father worked for a company that had transferred him to Paterson. His mother was very unhappy, Eugene said, in his beautiful voice that rose and fell over words in a strange, lilting way. The kids at school called him “the hick” and made fun of the way he talked. I knew I was his only friend so far, and I liked that, though I felt sad for him sometimes. “Skinny Bones” and the “Hick” was what they called us at school when we were seen together.

13 The day Mr. DePalma came out into the cold and asked us to line up in front of him was the day that President Kennedy was shot. Mr. DePalma, a short, muscular man with slicked-down black hair, was the science teacher, P.E. coach, and disciplinarian at P.S. 13. He was the teacher to whose homeroom you got assigned if you were a troublemaker, and the man called out to break up playground fights, and to escort violently angry teenagers to the office. And Mr. DePalma was the man who called your parents in for “a conference.”

14 That day, he stood in front of two rows of mostly black and Puerto Rican kids, brittle from their efforts to “keep moving” on a November day that was turning bitter cold. Mr. DePalma, to our complete shock, was crying. Not just silent adult tears, but really sobbing. There were a few titters from the back of the line where I stood shivering.

15 “Listen,” Mr. DePalma raised his arms over his head as if he were about to conduct an orchestra. His voice broke, and he covered his face with his hands. His barrel chest was heaving. Someone giggled behind me.

16 “Listen,” he repeated, “something awful has happened.” A strange gurgling came from his throat, and he turned around and spat on the cement behind him.

17 “Gross,” someone said, and there was a lot of laughter.

“You are going out today?” The way she said “today” sounded as if a storm warning had been issued.

elation (ee LAY shuhn) *n.* great happiness and excitement

- 18 “The President is dead, you idiots. I should have known that wouldn’t mean anything to a bunch of losers like you kids. Go home.” He was shrieking now. No one moved for a minute or two, but then a big girl let out a “Yeah!” and ran to get her books piled up with the others against the brick wall of the school building. The others followed in a mad scramble to get to their things before somebody caught on. It was still an hour to the dismissal bell.
- 19 A little scared, I headed for El Building. There was an eerie feeling on the streets. I looked into Mario’s drugstore, a favorite hangout for the high school crowd, but there were only a couple of old Jewish men at the soda-bar talking with the short order cook in tones that sounded almost angry, but they were keeping their voices low. Even the traffic on one of the busiest intersections in Paterson—Straight Street and Park Avenue—seemed to be moving slower. There were no horns blasting that day. At El Building, the usual little group of unemployed men were not hanging out on the front stoop making it difficult for women to enter the front door. No music spilled out from open doors in the hallway. When I walked into our apartment, I found my mother sitting in front of the grainy picture of the television set.
- 20 She looked up at me with a tear-streaked face and just said: “*Dios mio*,”⁵ turning back to the set as if it were pulling at her eyes. I went into my room.
- 21 Though I wanted to feel the right thing about President Kennedy’s death, I could not fight the feeling of **elation** that stirred in my chest. Today was the day I was to visit Eugene in his house. He had asked me to come over after school to study for an American history test with him. We had also planned to walk to the public library together. I looked down into his yard. The oak tree was bare of leaves and the ground looked gray with ice. The light through the large kitchen window of his house told me that El Building blocked the sun to such an extent that they had to turn lights on in the middle of the day. I felt ashamed about it. But the white kitchen table with the lamp hanging just above it looked cozy and inviting. I would soon sit there, across from Eugene, and I would tell him about my perch just above his house. Maybe I should.
- 22 In the next thirty minutes I changed clothes, put on a little pink lipstick, and got my books together. Then I went in to tell my mother that I was going to a friend’s house to study. I did not expect her reaction.
- 23 “You are going out *today*?” The way she said “today” sounded as if a storm warning had been issued. It was said in utter disbelief.

5. **Dios mío** (DEE ohs MEE oh) Spanish for “My God!”

Before I could answer, she came toward me and held my elbows as I clutched my books.

24 “*Hija*,⁶ the President has been killed. We must show respect. He was a great man. Come to church with me tonight.”

25 She tried to embrace me, but my books were in the way. My first **impulse** was to comfort her, she seemed so distraught, but I had to meet Eugene in fifteen minutes.

26 “I have a test to study for, Mama. I will be home by eight.”

27 “You are forgetting who you are, *Niña*⁷. I have seen you staring down at that boy’s house. You are heading for humiliation and pain.” My mother said this in Spanish and in a resigned tone that surprised me, as if she had no intention of stopping me from “heading for humiliation and pain.” I started for the door. She sat in front of the TV holding a white handkerchief to her face.

28 I walked out to the street and around the chainlink fence that separated El Building from Eugene’s house. The yard was neatly edged around the little walk that led to the door. It always amazed me how Paterson, the inner core of the city, had no apparent logic to its architecture. Small, neat, single residences like this one could be found right next to huge, dilapidated apartment buildings like El Building. My guess was that the little houses had been there first, then the immigrants had come in droves, and the monstrosities had been raised for them—the Italians, the Irish, the Jews, and now us, the Puerto Ricans and the blacks. The door was painted a deep green: *verde*, the color of hope, I had heard my mother say it: *Verde-Esperanza*.⁸

29 I knocked softly. A few suspenseful moments later the door opened just a crack. The red, swollen face of a woman appeared. She had a halo of red hair floating over a delicate ivory face—the face of a doll—with freckles on the nose. Her smudged eye make-up made her look unreal to me, like a mannequin seen through a warped store window.

30 “What do you want?” Her voice was tiny and sweet-sounding, like a little girl’s, but her tone was not friendly.

31 “I’m Eugene’s friend. He asked me over. To study.” I thrust out my books, a silly gesture that embarrassed me almost immediately.

32 “You live there?” She pointed up to El Building, which looked particularly ugly, like a gray prison with its many dirty windows and rusty fire escapes. The woman had stepped halfway out and I could see that she wore a white nurse’s uniform with St. Joseph’s Hospital on the name tag.

33 “Yes. I do.”

34 She looked intently at me for a couple of heartbeats, then said as if to herself, “I don’t know how you people do it.” Then directly to me: “Listen. Honey. Eugene doesn’t want to study with you. He is a smart

NOTES

impulse (IHm puls) *n.* sudden urge to act or do something

CLOSE READ

ANNOTATE: In paragraphs 29 and 30, mark details that describe Eugene’s mother’s appearance and behavior.

QUESTION: Which details suggest softness or sweetness, and which suggest hardness or harshness?

CONCLUDE: What is the effect of these contrasting details?

6. **Hija** (EE hah) Spanish for “daughter.”

7. **Niña** (NEE nyah) Spanish for “child,” used here as an endearment.

8. **Verde-Esperanza** (vehr day ehs pay RAHN sah) Spanish for “green-hope.”

boy. Doesn't need help. You understand me. I am truly sorry if he told you you could come over. He cannot study with you. It's nothing personal. You understand? We won't be in this place much longer, no need for him to get close to people—it'll just make it harder for him later. Run back home now."

35 I couldn't move. I just stood there in shock at hearing these things said to me in such a honey-drenched voice. I had never heard an accent like hers, except for Eugene's softer version. It was as if she were singing me a little song.

36 "What's wrong? Didn't you hear what I said?" She seemed very angry, and I finally snapped out of my trance. I turned away from the green door, and heard her close it gently.

37 Our apartment was empty when I got home. My mother was in someone else's kitchen, seeking the solace she needed. Father would come in from his late shift at midnight. I would hear them talking softly in the kitchen for hours that night. They would not discuss their dreams for the future, or life in Puerto Rico, as they often did; that night they would talk sadly about the young widow and her two children, as if they were family. For the next few days, we would observe *luto*⁹ in our apartment; that is, we would practice restraint and silence—no loud music or laughter. Some of the women of El Building would wear black for weeks.

38 That night, I lay in my bed trying to feel the right thing for our dead President. But the tears that came up from a deep source inside me were strictly for me. When my mother came to the door, I pretended to be sleeping. Sometime during the night, I saw from my bed the streetlight come on. It had a pink halo around it. I went to my window and pressed my face to the cool glass. Looking up at the light I could see the white snow falling like a lace veil over its face. I did not look down to see it turning gray as it touched the ground below. ❧

9. *luto* (LOO toh) Spanish for "mourning."

Rules of the Game

from
The Joy Luck Club

Amy Tan

BACKGROUND

Chess is a game of strategy that has gained world-wide popularity. Winning a game of chess requires capturing the opposing king piece, using your own pieces. Chess organizations record the rankings of players. The most successful players are called *grand masters*.

- 1 **I** was six when my mother taught me the art of invisible strength. It was a strategy for winning arguments, respect from others, and eventually, though neither of us knew it at the time, chess games.
- 2 “Bite back your tongue,” scolded my mother when I cried loudly, yanking her hand toward the store that sold bags of salted plums. At home, she said, “Wise guy, he not go against wind. In Chinese we say, Come from South, blow with wind—poom!—North will follow. Strongest wind cannot be seen.”
- 3 The next week I bit back my tongue as we entered the store with the forbidden candies. When my mother finished her shopping, she quietly plucked a small bag of plums from the rack and put it on the counter with the rest of the items.

* * *

NOTES

Mark context clues or indicate another strategy you used that helped you determine meaning.

deftly (DEHFT lee) *adv.*

MEANING:

- 4 My mother imparted her daily truths so she could help my older brothers and me rise above our circumstances. We lived in San Francisco's Chinatown. Like most of the other Chinese children who played in the back alleys of restaurants and curio shops, I didn't think we were poor. My bowl was always full, three five-course meals every day, beginning with a soup full of mysterious things I didn't want to know the names of.
- 5 We lived on Waverly Place, in a warm, clean, two-bedroom flat that sat above a small Chinese bakery specializing in steamed pastries and dim sum.¹ In the early morning, when the alley was still quiet, I could smell fragrant red beans as they were cooked down to a pasty sweetness. By daybreak, our flat was heavy with the odor of fried sesame balls and sweet curried chicken crescents. From my bed, I would listen as my father got ready for work, then locked the door behind him, one-two-three clicks.
- 6 At the end of our two-block alley was a small sandlot playground with swings and slides well-shined down the middle with use. The play area was bordered by wood-slat benches where old-country people sat cracking roasted watermelon seeds with their golden teeth and scattering the husks to an impatient gathering of gurgling pigeons. The best playground, however, was the dark alley itself. It was crammed with daily mysteries and adventures. My brothers and I would peer into the medicinal herb shop, watching old Li dole out onto a stiff sheet of white paper the right amount of insect shells, saffron-colored seeds, and pungent leaves for his ailing customers. It was said that he once cured a woman dying of an ancestral curse that had eluded the best of American doctors. Next to the pharmacy was a printer who specialized in gold-embossed wedding invitations and festive red banners.
- 7 Farther down the street was Ping Yuen Fish Market. The front window displayed a tank crowded with doomed fish and turtles struggling to gain footing on the slimy green-tiled sides. A hand-written sign informed tourists, "Within this store, is all for food, not for pet." Inside, the butchers with their bloodstained white smocks **deftly** gutted the fish while customers cried out their orders and shouted, "Give me your freshest," to which the butchers always protested, "All are freshest." On less crowded market days, we would inspect the crates of live frogs and crabs which we were warned not to poke, boxes of dried cuttlefish, and row upon row of iced prawns, squid, and slippery fish. The sanddabs made me shiver each time; their eyes lay on one flattened side and reminded me of my mother's story of a careless girl who ran into a crowded street and was crushed by a cab. "Was smash flat," reported my mother.
- 8 At the corner of the alley was Hong Sing's, a four-table café with a recessed stairwell in front that led to a door marked "Tradesmen." My brothers and I believed the bad people emerged from this door

1. **dim sum** small dishes of traditional Chinese foods meant to be shared.

at night. Tourists never went to Hong Sing's, since the menu was printed only in Chinese. A Caucasian man with a big camera once posed me and my playmates in front of the restaurant. He had us move to the side of the picture window so the photo would capture the roasted duck with its head dangling from a juice-covered rope. After he took the picture, I told him he should go into Hong Sing's and eat dinner. When he smiled and asked me what they served, I shouted, "Guts and duck's feet and octopus gizzards!" Then I ran off with my friends, shrieking with laughter as we scampered across the alley and hid in the entryway grotto of the China Gem Company, my heart pounding with hope that he would chase us.

9 My mother named me after the street that we lived on: Waverly Place Jong, my official name for important American documents. But my family called me Meimei, "Little Sister." I was the youngest, the only daughter. Each morning before school, my mother would twist and yank on my thick black hair until she had formed two tightly wound pigtails. One day, as she struggled to weave a hard-toothed comb through my disobedient hair, I had a sly thought.

10 I asked her, "Ma, what is Chinese torture?" My mother shook her head. A bobby pin was wedged between her lips. She wetted her palm and smoothed the hair above my ear, then pushed the pin in so that it nicked sharply against my scalp.

11 "Who say this word?" she asked without a trace of knowing how wicked I was being. I shrugged my shoulders and said, "Some boy in my class said Chinese people do Chinese torture."

12 "Chinese people do many things," she said simply. "Chinese people do business, do medicine, do painting. Not lazy like American people. We do torture. Best torture."

* * *

13 My older brother Vincent was the one who actually got the chess set. We had gone to the annual Christmas party held at the First Chinese Baptist Church at the end of the alley. The missionary ladies had put together a Santa bag of gifts donated by members of another church. None of the gifts had names on them. There were separate sacks for boys and girls of different ages.

14 One of the Chinese parishioners had donned a Santa Claus costume and a stiff paper beard with cotton balls glued to it. I think the only children who thought he was the real thing were too young to know that Santa Claus was not Chinese. When my turn came up, the Santa man asked me how old I was. I thought it was a trick question; I was seven according to the American formula and eight by the Chinese calendar. I said I was born on March 17, 1951. That seemed to satisfy him. He then solemnly asked if I had been a very, very good girl this year and did I believe in Jesus Christ and obey my parents. I knew the only answer to that. I nodded back with equal solemnity.

15 Having watched the other children opening their gifts, I already knew that the big gifts were not necessarily the nicest ones. One girl my age got a large coloring book of biblical characters, while a less greedy girl who selected a smaller box received a glass vial of lavender toilet water. The sound of the box was also important. A ten-year-old boy had chosen a box that jangled when he shook it. It was a tin globe of the world with a slit for inserting money. He must have thought it was full of dimes and nickels, because when he saw that it had just ten pennies, his face fell with such undisguised disappointment that his mother slapped the side of his head and led him out of the church hall, apologizing to the crowd for her son who had such bad manners he couldn't appreciate such a fine gift.

16 As I peered into the sack, I quickly fingered the remaining presents, testing their weight, imagining what they contained. I chose a heavy, compact one that was wrapped in shiny silver foil and a red satin ribbon. It was a twelve-pack of Life Savers and I spent the

rest of the party arranging and rearranging the candy tubes in the order of my favorites. My brother Winston chose wisely as well. His present turned out to be a box of intricate plastic parts; the instructions on the box proclaimed that when they were properly assembled he would have an authentic miniature replica of a World War II submarine.

Vincent got the chess set, which would have been a very decent present to get at a church Christmas party, except it was obviously used and, as we discovered later, it was missing a black pawn and a white knight. My mother graciously thanked the unknown benefactor, saying, "Too good. Cost too much." At which point, an old lady with fine white, wispy hair nodded toward our family and said with a whistling whisper, "Merry, merry Christmas."

As I peered into the sack, I quickly fingered the remaining presents, testing their weight, imagining what they contained.

18 When we got home, my mother told Vincent to throw the chess set away. "She not want it. We not want it," she said, tossing her head stiffly to the side with a tight, proud smile. My brothers had deaf ears. They were already lining up the chess pieces and reading from the dog-eared instruction book.

* * *

19 I watched Vincent and Winston play during Christmas week. The chess board seemed to hold elaborate secrets waiting to be untangled. The chessmen were more powerful than Old Li's magic herbs that cured ancestral curses. And my brothers wore such serious faces that I was sure something was at stake that was greater than avoiding the tradesmen's door to Hong Sing's.

20 "Let me! Let me!" I begged between games when one brother or the other would sit back with a deep sigh of relief and victory,

the other annoyed, unable to let go of the outcome. Vincent at first refused to let me play, but when I offered my Life Savers as replacements for the buttons that filled in for the missing pieces, he **relented**. He chose the flavors: wild cherry for the black pawn and peppermint for the white knight. Winner could eat both.

21 As our mother sprinkled flour and rolled out small doughy circles for the steamed dumplings that would be our dinner that night, Vincent explained the rules, pointing to each piece. "You have sixteen pieces and so do I. One king and queen, two bishops, two knights, two castles, and eight pawns. The pawns can only move forward one step, except on the first move. Then they can move two. But they can only take men by moving crossways like this, except in the beginning, when you can move ahead and take another pawn."

22 "Why?" I asked as I moved my pawn. "Why can't they move more steps?"

23 "Because they're pawns," he said.

24 "But why do they go crossways to take other men. Why aren't there any women and children?"

25 "Why is the sky blue? Why must you always ask stupid questions?" asked Vincent. "This is a game. These are the rules. I didn't make them up. See. Here. In the book." He jabbed a page with a pawn in his hand. "Pawn. P-A-W-N. Pawn. Read it yourself."

26 My mother patted the flour off her hands. "Let me see book," she said quietly. She scanned the pages quickly, not reading the foreign English symbols, seeming to search deliberately for nothing in particular.

27 "This American rules," she concluded at last. "Every time people come out from foreign country, must know rules. You not know, judge say, Too bad, go back. They not telling you why so you can use their way go forward. They say, Don't know why, you find out yourself. But they knowing all the time. Better you take it, find out why yourself." She tossed her head back with a satisfied smile.

28 I found out about all the whys later. I read the rules and looked up all the big words in a dictionary. I borrowed books from the Chinatown library. I studied each chess piece, trying to absorb the power each contained.

29 I learned about opening moves and why it's important to control the center early on; the shortest distance between two points is straight down the middle. I learned about the middle game and why tactics between two adversaries are like clashing ideas; the one who plays better has the clearest plans for both attacking and getting out of traps. I learned why it is essential in the endgame² to have foresight, a mathematical understanding of all possible moves, and patience; all weaknesses and advantages become evident to a strong adversary and are obscured to a tiring opponent. I discovered that

NOTES

Mark context clues or indicate another strategy you used that helped you determine meaning.

relented (rih LEHNT ihd) v.

MEANING:

2. **endgame** final stage of a chess game, when few pieces remain.

for the whole game one must gather invisible strengths and see the endgame before the game begins.

30 I also found out why I should never reveal “why” to others. A little knowledge withheld is a great advantage one should store for future use. That is the power of chess. It is a game of secrets in which one must show and never tell.

31 I loved the secrets I found within the sixty-four black and white squares. I carefully drew a handmade chessboard and pinned it to the wall next to my bed, where at night I would stare for hours at imaginary battles. Soon I no longer lost any games or Life Savers, but I lost my adversaries. Winston and Vincent decided they were more interested in roaming the streets after school in their Hopalong Cassidy cowboy hats.

32 On a cold spring afternoon, while walking home from school, I detoured through the playground at the end of our alley. I saw a group of old men, two seated across a folding table playing a game of chess, others smoking pipes, eating peanuts, and watching. I ran home and grabbed Vincent’s chess set, which was bound in a cardboard box with rubber bands. I also carefully selected two prized rolls of Life Savers. I came back to the park and approached a man who was observing the game.

33 “Want to play?” I asked him. His face widened with surprise and he grinned as he looked at the box under my arm. “Little sister, been a long time since I play with dolls,” he said, smiling benevolently. I quickly put the box down next to him on the bench and displayed my retort.

34 Lau Po, as he allowed me to call him, turned out to be a much better player than my brothers. I lost many games and many Life Savers. But over the weeks, with each diminishing roll of candies, I added new secrets. Lau Po gave me the names. The Double Attack from the East and West Shores. Throwing Stones on the Drowning Man. The Sudden Meeting of the Clan. The Surprise from the Sleeping Guard. The Humble Servant Who Kills the King. Sand in the Eyes of Advancing Forces. A Double Killing Without Blood.

35 There were also the fine points of chess etiquette. Keep captured men in neat rows, as well-tended prisoners. Never announce “Check” with vanity, lest someone with an unseen sword slit your throat. Never hurl pieces into the sandbox after you have lost a game, because then you must find them again, by yourself, after apologizing to all around you. By the end of the summer, Lau Po had taught me all he knew, and I had become a better chess player.

36 A small weekend crowd of Chinese people and tourists would gather as I played and defeated my opponents one by one. My mother would join the crowds during these outdoor exhibition games. She sat proudly on the bench, telling my admirers with proper Chinese humility, “Is luck.”



37 A man who watched me play in the park suggested that my mother allow me to play in local chess tournaments. My mother smiled graciously, an answer that meant nothing. I desperately wanted to go, but I bit back my tongue. I knew she would not let me play among strangers. So as we walked home I said in a small voice that I didn't want to play in the local tournament. They would have American rules. If I lost, I would bring shame on my family.

38 "Is shame you fall down nobody push you," said my mother.

39 During my first tournament, my mother sat with me in the front row as I waited for my turn. I frequently bounced my legs to unstick them from the cold metal seat of the folding chair. When my name was called, I leapt up. My mother unwrapped something in her lap. It was her *chang*, a small tablet of red jade which held the sun's fire. "Is luck," she whispered, and tucked it into my dress pocket. I turned to my opponent, a fifteen-year-old boy from Oakland. He looked at me, wrinkling his nose.

40 As I began to play, the boy disappeared, the color ran out of the room, and I saw only my white pieces and his black ones waiting on the other side. A light wind began blowing past my ears. It whispered secrets only I could hear.

41 "Blow from the South," it murmured. "The wind leaves no trail." I saw a clear path, the traps to avoid. The crowd rustled. "Shhh! Shhh!" said the corners of the room. The wind blew stronger. "Throw sand from the East to distract him." The knight came forward ready for the sacrifice. The wind hissed, louder and louder. "Blow, blow, blow. He cannot see. He is blind now. Make him lean away from the wind so he is easier to knock down."

42 “Check,”³ I said, as the wind roared with laughter. The wind died down to little puffs, my own breath.

* * *

43 My mother placed my first trophy next to a new plastic chess set that the neighborhood Tao society had given to me. As she wiped each piece with a soft cloth, she said, “Next time win more, lose less.”

44 “Ma, it’s not how many pieces you lose,” I said. “Sometimes you need to lose pieces to get ahead.”

45 “Better to lose less, see if you really need.”

46 At the next tournament, I won again, but it was my mother who wore the triumphant grin.

47 “Lost eight piece this time. Last time was eleven. What I tell you? Better off lose less!” I was annoyed, but I couldn’t say anything.

48 I attended more tournaments, each one farther away from home. I won all games, in all divisions. The Chinese bakery downstairs from our flat displayed my growing collection of trophies in its window, amidst the dust-covered cakes that were never picked up. The day after I won an important regional tournament, the window encased a fresh sheet cake with whipped-cream frosting and red script saying, “Congratulations, Waverly Jong, Chinatown Chess Champion.” Soon after that, a flower shop, headstone engraver, and funeral parlor offered to sponsor me in national tournaments. That’s when my mother decided I no longer had to do the dishes. Winston and Vincent had to do my chores.

49 “Why does she get to play and we do all the work,” complained Vincent.

50 “Is new American rules,” said my mother. “Meimei play, squeeze all her brains out for win chess. You play, worth squeeze towel.”

51 By my ninth birthday, I was a national chess champion. I was still some 429 points away from grand-master status, but I was touted as the Great American Hope, a child prodigy and a girl to boot. They ran a photo of me in *Life* magazine next to a quote in which Bobby Fischer⁴ said, “There will never be a woman grand master.” “Your move, Bobby,” said the caption.

52 The day they took the magazine picture I wore neatly plaited braids clipped with plastic barrettes trimmed with rhinestones. I was playing in a large high school auditorium that echoed with phlegmy coughs and the squeaky rubber knobs of chair legs sliding across freshly waxed wooden floors. Seated across from me was an American man, about the same age as Lau Po, maybe fifty. I remember that his sweaty brow seemed to weep at my every move. He wore a dark, malodorous suit. One of his pockets was stuffed with

3. **Check** term in chess meaning a player’s king is in danger.

4. **Bobby Fischer** (1943–2008) American chess prodigy who attained the top rank of grand master in 1958.

a great white kerchief on which he wiped his palm before sweeping his hand over the chosen chess piece with great flourish.

- 53 In my crisp pink-and-white dress with scratchy lace at the neck, one of two my mother had sewn for these special occasions, I would clasp my hands under my chin, the delicate points of my elbows poised lightly on the table in the manner my mother had shown me for posing for the press. I would swing my patent leather shoes back and forth like an impatient child riding on a school bus. Then I would pause, suck in my lips, twirl my chosen piece in midair as if undecided, and then firmly plant it in its new threatening place, with a triumphant smile thrown back at my opponent for good measure.

* * *

- 54 I no longer played in the alley of Waverly Place. I never visited the playground where the pigeons and old men gathered. I went to school, then directly home to learn new chess secrets, cleverly concealed advantages, more escape routes.
- 55 But I found it difficult to concentrate at home. My mother had a habit of standing over me while I **plotted** out my games. I think she thought of herself as my protective ally. Her lips would be sealed tight, and after each move I made, a soft “Hmmmph” would escape from her nose.
- 56 “Ma, I can’t practice when you stand there like that,” I said one day. She retreated to the kitchen and made loud noises with the pots and pans. When the crashing stopped, I could see out of the corner of my eye that she was standing in the doorway. “Hmmmph!” Only this one came out of her tight throat.
- 57 My parents made many **concessions** to allow me to practice. One time I complained that the bedroom I shared was so noisy that I couldn’t think. Thereafter, my brothers slept in a bed in the living room facing the street. I said I couldn’t finish my rice; my head didn’t work right when my stomach was too full. I left the table with half-finished bowls and nobody complained. But there was one duty I couldn’t avoid. I had to accompany my mother on Saturday market days when I had no tournament to play. My mother would proudly walk with me, visiting many shops, buying very little. “This my daughter Wave-ly Jong,” she said to whoever looked her way.
- 58 One day, after we left a shop I said under my breath, “I wish you wouldn’t do that, telling everybody I’m your daughter.” My mother stopped walking. Crowds of people with heavy bags pushed past us on the sidewalk, bumping into first one shoulder, then another.

NOTES

Mark context clues or indicate another strategy you used that helped you determine meaning.

plotted (PLOT ihd) *v.*

MEANING:

concessions (kuhn SEHSH uhnz) *n.*

MEANING:

My mother had a habit of standing over me while I plotted out my games. I think she thought of herself as my protective ally.


- 59 “Aiii-ya. So shame be with mother?” She grasped my hand even tighter as she glared at me.
- 60 I looked down. “It’s not that, it’s just so obvious. It’s just so embarrassing.”
- 61 “Embarrass you be my daughter?” Her voice was cracking with anger.
- 62 “That’s not what I meant. That’s not what I said.”
- 63 “What you say?”
- 64 I knew it was a mistake to say anything more, but I heard my voice speaking. “Why do you have to use me to show off? If you want to show off, then why don’t you learn to play chess.”
- 65 My mother’s eyes turned into dangerous black slits. She had no words for me, just sharp silence.
- 66 I felt the wind rushing around my hot ears. I jerked my hand out of my mother’s tight grasp and spun around, knocking into an old woman. Her bag of groceries spilled to the ground.
- 67 “Aii-ya! Stupid girl!” my mother and the woman cried. Oranges and tin cans careened down the sidewalk. As my mother stooped to help the old woman pick up the escaping food, I took off.
- 68 I raced down the street, dashing between people, not looking back as my mother screamed shrilly, “Meimei! Meimei!” I fled down an alley, past dark curtained shops and merchants washing the grime off their windows. I sped into the sunlight, into a large street crowded with tourists examining trinkets and souvenirs. I ducked into another dark alley, down another street, up another alley. I ran until it hurt and I realized I had nowhere to go, that I was not running from anything. The alleys contained no escape routes.
- 69 My breath came out like angry smoke. It was cold. I sat down on an upturned plastic pail next to a stack of empty boxes, cupping my chin with my hands, thinking hard. I imagined my mother, first walking briskly down one street or another looking for me, then giving up and returning home to await my arrival. After two hours, I stood up on creaking legs and slowly walked home.
- 70 The alley was quiet and I could see the yellow lights shining from our flat like two tiger’s eyes in the night. I climbed the sixteen steps to the door, advancing quietly up each so as not to make any warning sounds. I turned the knob; the door was locked. I heard a chair moving, quick steps, the locks turning—click! click! click!—and then the door opened.
- 71 “About time you got home,” said Vincent. “Boy, are you in trouble.”
- 72 He slid back to the dinner table. On a platter were the remains of a large fish, its fleshy head still connected to bones swimming upstream in vain escape. Standing there waiting for my punishment, I heard my mother speak in a dry voice.
- 73 “We not concerning this girl. This girl not have concerning for us.”
- 74 Nobody looked at me. Bone chopsticks clinked against the insides of bowls being emptied into hungry mouths.

- 75 I walked into my room, closed the door, and lay down on my bed. The room was dark, the ceiling filled with shadows from the dinnertime lights of neighboring flats.
- 76 In my head, I saw a chessboard with sixty-four black and white squares. Opposite me was my opponent, two angry black slits. She wore a triumphant smile. "Strongest wind cannot be seen," she said.
- 77 Her black men advanced across the plane, slowly marching to each successive level as a single unit. My white pieces screamed as they scurried and fell off the board one by one. As her men drew closer to my edge, I felt myself growing light. I rose up into the air and flew out the window. Higher and higher, above the alley, over the tops of tiled roofs, where I was gathered up by the wind and pushed up toward the night sky until everything below me disappeared and I was alone.
- 78 I closed my eyes and pondered my next move. 🐼

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Comprehension Check

Complete the following items after you finish your first read. Review and clarify details with your group.

1. How does Waverly first obtain a chess set?
2. What advice does Waverly's mother give her about finding out "why" important things are done?
3. Why does Waverly become angry with her mother at the market?
4.  **Notebook** Write a summary of the story to check your understanding.

RESEARCH

Research to Explore Choose an aspect of the story to research. For example, you may want to learn more about chess or San Francisco's Chinatown.