

Miles from Nowhere by Nami Mun

Week: 3 of 3

Chapters/Pages: pp. 143-154, 264-286

Themes: Family relationships, Survival, Personal agency, Pregnancy/Abortion

Recommended Opening: “Finally on my way to yes I bump into all the places where I said no to my life all the untended wounds the red and purple scars. I find them - the old wounds the old misdirections and I lift them one by one close to my heart and I say holy holy.”

Excerpt from “The Healing Time” by Peshia Gertler

- What meaning do these words have for you? What kind of story do you sense behind them?
- Point out the first line: “Finally on my way to yes.” What might it mean to be “on the way to yes”?
- What does it mean to “say no to your life”? What might that look like?
- What is this poem saying about “old wounds” and “misdirections”? Why would the poet lift these experiences to her heart and call them “holy”?
- How do you think this poem might relate to Joon’s story?

Summary of Interim Events:

BGL can share this entire summary, but it’s also fine to just share that a lot happens in Joon’s life including various lovers, going in and out of using drugs, a pregnancy, and suicide attempts. We’re going to pick up at the end of the story where Joon is visiting an employment agency.

- Joon has a lover named Blue Fly, another junkie who also is a sex worker and steals a lot – including from her. They live together in an abandoned building.
- Joon has stopped “selling herself” to sell newspapers instead. Later, when she is sixteen, she becomes an “Avon Lady,” selling makeup door-to-door for the company. At one of her stops, she meets a nun who encourages her to do confession.
- Joon realizes she is pregnant and decides she doesn’t want to have it, she goes to an abortion clinic, but doesn’t end up going through with the abortion there
- Joon gets the idea from one of her Avon customers to try to get rid of the baby herself. She punches her stomach repeatedly and then tries to drown herself. She wakes up in the hospital and finds out the baby is dead.
- Joon stops using and starts work at a nursing home, after lying about everything on her job application. She starts getting close to another assistant there named Benny, who also recognizes her the Narcotics Anonymous meetings she has been going to. Later, they begin a romantic relationship.
- Joon starts using again, especially with Benny, and tries to commit suicide several times. After some of these attempts she calls her dad but hangs up before really talking to him. Finally, she reveals herself to him but hangs up immediately after.
- Joon gets thrown in jail for shoplifting baby food (for Benny – who repackages it and sells it to grocery stores). Her public defender (in exchange for a favor) looks into Joon’s mom, upon her request, and tells Joon that she is dead. Joon remembers all the times her mother would fake being dead after her father left them. She also remembers their last meeting, when she took money from her mother for agreeing to “bring her father back,” which she does not do.
- Years later Joon bumps into her father on the subway. They don’t discuss her mother. He tells her to call him if she needs anything but doesn’t give her his number.
- Joon leaves Benny when she finds out he’s cheating, but misses him a lot. She starts going back to her NA meetings.

Recommended Reading Passages and Questions:

Read pages 264-272:

- How would you describe Mr. Flukinjer’s attitude towards Joon? What was your reaction to this? Why do you think he acts this way? Is he justified in his behavior/tone? Why/why not?

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- What do you think Joon was feeling during her initial conversation with Mr. Flukinjer? Can you think of a time when someone didn't believe in you when you really wanted to do something? What was that like? What did you do?
- How would you explain Mr. Flukinjer behavior at the end of this chapter? What do you think has changed for him?
- How do you feel like Joon has changed since the beginning of the book, if at all?
- What do you think of Mr. Flukinjer's comment that "We all have problems" (269)? How much is Joon responsible for her history?
- What do you think makes someone a good employee? How can you tell whether someone has those skills?

Read pages 273-281 (until "Let's go break into your house."):

- What do you imagine Joon is feeling when she goes back to her old house? Have you ever returned to a place from your past? What was that like? What did it bring up?
- Why do you think she connects not being able to kick the door in to not understanding her mother (275-6)?
- Why do you think Mr. McCommon decides to help Joon?
- Why do you think Joon asks Mr. McCommon how he remembers her family? How do you think she feels about his response? What do you think she was hoping to hear? Why?
- Joon says that some things are best kept in the dark, like her past (280). Do you agree with this? Why? How much do you think one's past should be a part of his/her life? What might be an advantage of facing your past? What might be a drawback of facing your past?
- What do you think is going to happen at the end of the book? Why?

Read pages 281-286:

- How would you describe Joon's feelings about her mother during this passage? Why does she say she feels jealous of Mr. McCommon?
- What does Joon mean when she calls grief a reward (285)? Do you agree with this? Why/why not? What do you think of her assertion that grief only comes to those "who were loyal, those who loved more than they were capable of" (285)?
- How would you define grief? How would you define what Joon seems to be feeling? Why?
- Any thoughts on why Mr. McCommon is so persistent in getting them into her house? How do you think this persistence affects Joon?
- In the end, they can't get in and Joon says that seemed appropriate. What does she mean?
- How do you interpret the last line: "'I even miss seeing her sick,' he said, and that seemed to me a truth I could hold on to about my mother, a place to begin" (286)? How is this a truth about her mother? What is she "beginning"? What do you think will be next from this beginning?
- Does the end of the book seem mostly hopeful or mostly pessimistic? Why?
- What do you think Joon has learned from her experiences?
- What do you think will happen to her in her life?

Recommended Poetry: "How I Survived" by Agripina Garcia

- What's your initial reaction to this poem? What stands out to you about it?
- How would you describe the mood or tone of this poem?
- How do you think the poet would define survival? How would you personally define survival?
- What things seemed to get the speaker through challenges? Why?
- What helps you get through struggles? Why?

Recommended Poetry Prompt: "How I Survive" (v. 2)

What keeps you going? What details make it all worthwhile? Be specific...make the reader see, hear, and feel what you're talking about! You can use one of the lines below to get started, if you want to, or use your own.

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I survive...

I survive knowing...

I survive with the thought that...

Recommended Closing: "In the depth of winter, I finally learned that within me there lay an invincible summer."

—Albert Camus