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***The Vine Basket* Interactive Reading**

The following excerpts are taken from *The Vine Basket* by Josanne La Valley, published by Clarion Press.

From Chapter One:

Mehrigul scanned the crowds at the market, looking for Ata. Surely by now her father had spent the yuan they'd made from the sale of a few peaches. But there was no sign of him along the dirt paths what were lined with the autumn harvest from nearby farms, the green and red peppers, the onions and potatoes piled high on donkey carts or spread out on blankets. Ata was not among those bargaining for turnips or carrots or meat cut from hanging carcasses of sheep.

He'd been gone long enough to get drunk. Wasn't that why he had brought her? Each Wednesday he left her alone with the cart for a longer and longer time.

Her gaze shifted to the mounds of honey peaches that lay unsold, the pile of willow baskets. Uter her brother went away, it had been his job to come to market. Memet had insisted Mehrigul come, too, during her summer vacation. *She arranges radishes so they look good enough to eat*, he'd told Ata.

She could arrange the family's goods, but she had no gift for selling. When Memet was in charge, they'd sold everything, and their legs swung happily from the edge of the empty cart as their old donkey pulled them home.

That seemed a lifetime ago. It had only been eight weeks.

"Are you all right?"

The woman selling yarn next to her had called out to her. Mehrigul was standing, gripping the edge of the cart. She forced her hands to loosen their hold and made a slow turn to face her neighbor, who sat on a crate pulling yarn into her lap, winding it into skeins.

"Would you mind watching my cart? For just a few minutes?" Mehrigul asked.

The woman wave Mehrigul away. "Take your time. Neither of us has many customers today."

Mehrigul bobbed her head. SHe put two peaches into a basket and walked off. A hard-boiled egg would take away the pangs of hunger, if not her troubling thoughts.

What do you think is troubling Mehrigul? Answer in complete sentences and provide textual evidence to support your conclusion.

As usual, the egg woman squatted on the ground next to the seller of pots and pans. Piles of eggs and discarded shells lay on the same green ground cloth she always used. Mehrigul's classmate Hajinsa sat in front of her on a long, rolled-up rush mat she'd obviously just purchased, leaving no room for other customers who would have have squatted in the accustomed manner and purchased or bartered for an egg.

Her high and mighty self sat there, her tall, slender body supple as a willow branch, her perfect red high-platform sandals and red stockings showing beneath her long blue skirt. After paying for an egg, she began peeling it, picking at the shell and carelessly dropping it bit by bit onto the ground.

The egg woman noticed Mehrigul first. Then Hajinsa glanced in her direction.

"Mehrigul, come," Hajinsa said, gesturing for her to share the seat. "Why haven't you been in school?" Rather than wait for an answer, she turned away. Blew a huff of air. "Your headscarf, tied under your chin. You try hard to look like a peasant, don't you?"

Mehrigul found her feet - no, her ugly, cheap baby strap shoes - glued to the dusty pathway.

"Better watch out," Hajinsa said, taking a bite of egg before turning to look at Mehrigul again. "You're the kind they send to work in the factories on the coast." She hitched her shoulder. "Unless, of course, your family has lots of money to pay a fine.

Who are "they" mentioned in the last paragraph? What do you base your inference on?

Mehrigul's eyes blazed hatred at Hajinsa, but the truth in Hajinsa's words left her numb. It was already the end of October, and she hadn't been to school for even one day. She knew her name might be on the local party chief's list of girls to send away to slave in the factories of the Chinese, far from her own Uyghur people.

What do you think about this policy? What problems would this policy pose for the Uyghur? How should authorities deal with truancy?

"Sit, Mehrigul." The voice of the egg woman broke through her stupor. "Sit next to Hajinsa. It's not often there's such a soft place to rest." She held out an egg.

Mehrigul clamped her jaws shut as she forced one offensively ugly shoe after the other over the mat and took her place.

"Have you brought something for me?" the egg seller asked.

Mehrigul handed over the peaches, basket and all, taking the egg in exchange. "My grandfather would want you to have the basket, too. Not many have sold today." Mehrigul allowed her eyes to meet those of the egg woman -- kind eyes. "The basket will be good for holding throwaway eggshells."

"Thank you," the woman said, removing the peaches and setting the basket in front of Hajinsa's red shoes.

Hajinsa didn't seem to notice. She pulled money from her pocket. Bought another egg. Again plucked off the shell in tiny pieces, letting them fall anywhere.

Mehrigul cracked her egg with a quick press of hands, peeled it, and carefully placed the shell in her grandfather's basket before taking a bite.

"So, are you coming back to school?" Hajinsa asked.

Mehrigul finished chewing her mouthful of egg. Forced herself to swallow. "Of course," she said, then twisted away for fear her face would reveal the reality she'd never admit to her classmate -- that with Memet gone, there was no hope of her going to school.

Why do you suppose Mehrigul can no longer attend school just because her brother is gone? What does Memet's absence have to do with Mehrigul's schooling?

As she turned from Hajinsa, she saw Ata. His back was to her, but it was unmistakably her father standing there with a group of men around a gambling table, no more than eight meters away. Mehrigul could not mistake the blue jacket she'd washed so often. The *dopa*, Ata's own brimless, four-pointed cap her mother had made for him.

Ata was throwing yuan from their morning's earnings into the pile on the caller's table.

"I must get back to my cart." Mehrigul rose, but not before the egg woman pressed another egg into her empty palm and held her hand for a moment.

Mehrigul walked past the stacks of pots and pans. At the far side she allowed herself to steal a glance back at the gamblers. Her hands shook as she put the eggs -- one half-eaten, one whole -- into her pants pocket, but her mind stayed clear. She did as Memet had taught her: look for a spy. Not Chinese; Han Chinese never came to the local market. He would be Uyghur. One of their own. Sold out to the Chinese. Paid to hang around the market dressed as a peasant, gathering information on men who might be plotting against the government. Reporting them.

Why would a Uyghur snitch on their own people? What would they stand to gain? What might drive a person to rat out their kind? Be specific in your response.

Memet had seen certain he was being watched. He wanted nothing to do with the Chinese Communists and their rules. He was a splittist; he wanted Uyghurs to have their own separate country where they could speak their own language and practice their own ways in freedom. Their land had once been called East Turkestan, and that was what Memet wanted again. He'd had no trouble saying bad things about the Han, only he was careful not to say anything in front of the wrong person. Ata had gotten angry when Memet talked like that, but maybe Ata was a splittist, too. Was he careful about what he said when he was drinking?

What can you infer about Memet's departure?

Mehrigul narrowed her eyes. There was no one behind the gamblers, only empty, shuttered stalls, a parked motorcycle. Nor was any man lingering close enough to overhear what the gambling men were saying. A few women were nearby examining kitchenware, the rows of teakettles and enamel platters and bowls spread out on the ground on the other side of the egg seller. Spies were never women, Memet had told her.

Maybe a man who drank and gambled wasn't of interest to the Chinese, Mehrigul thought as she took a long, fierce look at Ata. He was only harmful to his own family.

Ata's drinking and their poverty had already trapped Ana in her own hopeless world. Withdrawn and silent. Ashamed of being poor, she would no longer see friends. What would her mother do, Mehrigul wondered as she trudged back to the cart, if Ata were arrested and taken to a detention center?

From Chapter Five:

The grapevine was still entwined around Mehrigul's hand as she stirred from her memories. Someone was calling. Not Ana, but a voice she knew. Her friend Pati. She rose and slowly untangled herself from the vine as she tried to clear her thoughts.

Her friend's red jacket was the first thing she saw as she threaded her way back through the peach orchard. Pati always wore red -- a beacon of happiness. Always smiling safe in a family of grandparents, parents who adored her, a brother, a sister, aunts, uncles, little ones.

Mehrigul thought Pati's happiness also came from the rushing stream that flowed through the mill beside her home, the powering turbine that move the huge stone circles to grind wheat or corn. Mehrigul had been known to sit for hours watching the gushing water. She'd gladly be transported there now, but she saw Ata shoveling corn-cobs onto the wagon {ata and her brother had brought over from the mill. Ana was helping. Even Lali.

What can you infer about Pati's family? What do you think they do for a living? Answer with complete sentences and provide textual evidence to support your response.

Pati walked across the field toward Mehrigul, who slowed her steps. She wanted as much time as possible with her friend before going back to work.

They greeted with a hug, Pati not seeming to mind that Mehrigul was grubby and smelly from her day's labor.

"I brought a book, Mehrigul," Pati said. "Lessons are difficult this year." She shrugged. "You wouldn't think so, but I do. I need your help...I miss you."

From Chapter Six:

Mehrigul took the cloth from her pocket and held it close to her heart as she searched for the right culm. The bamboo would carry her wish, for there was no tamarisk tree nearby where she could leave her cloth. The tamarisk held more power than the bamboo. Like her Uyghur people, it knew how to survive the drifting sands of the desert, the tree's deep roots anchoring it against the fierce winds. For now, though, it was the power of the secret place she had shared with her brother that she must trust.

She chose a tall, slender culm, one that reminded her of a willowy branch of tamarisk. She tied her strip of cloth -- her token -- to the topmost part of the culm so that it would sway in the breeze, the better to be seen by God.

"Please send me the favor that my hands might make beautiful work. I want to make something special. And...please give me the courage to carry on," Mehrigul whispered, then stood in silence. Not because she believed God would listen to her and give her an answer but because she felt so at one with her people, who believed in the power of such tokens.

Mehrigul knew that if she was to fulfill her prayer, she must be like a stem that swayed with the winds; she must learn to bend but not break. To yield, and yet endure.

What is significant about Mehrigul's actions? Why did she tie a cloth to the tree branch? Are you aware of any similar tradition in your own culture?

From Chapter Eight:

It was Mehrigul's task to build the fire in the bottom of the pit and to keep adding wood until it burned down to glowing hot coals. She covered the coals with a thick layer of green twigs to form a nest of the squash she had picked and washed. The squash were large, so only two or three fit in the oven at a time. Ana managed to appear when it was time to throw in her special ingredients -- wild onions and a weed she never named but that she and said had been used by her family since far back in time. The pit was covered by more green twigs and a layer of flat stones and left for hours.

With that batch cooked, Mehrigul would start over. She had worked late into the night and had begun again before dawn. Soon Ata would harness the donkey and it would be time to leave.

"Ana, please," Mehrigul pleaded again. If Ana went, she'd have many hours to make baskets, with no fear of being seen or called upon to work. And she hate the thought of being alone with Ata.

Ana stood with her hands clasped, her head slightly bowed. It had been years since she'd gone to market. Mehrigul knew Ana was embarrassed by their poverty. Most of all, she could not bear the pity of family and friends when she had no gifts to bring the, on birthdays or at weddings or funerals. She had no more pieces of the precious cotton she had brought with her from her village to give away when she made visits, and was too ashamed to go empty-handed. She no longer went gifting and wanted no one to bring a gift to her for she could not spare the few nuts, or sugar cubes, or small loaves of naan she was expected to give in return. Ana no longer belonged to the world she'd once known and had withdrawn into a bleak and colorless existence. Mehrigul wondered if she even remembered why she didn't want to go to market.

Ana had become even more weary of life since Memet had gone. Hadn't they all lost a part of themselves when he left? But instead of helping with the extra work, Ana now had her headaches and spent more and more time huddled in the dark corner of her platform.

Mehrigul took a good look at Ana standing there -- her eyes dull, her body drooped as if she wanted to descend into the earth. Having the best baked squash at the market would never be reason enough for Ana to go.

She pressed her mother's arm. "Help Ata with the cart. I'm changing into my school skirt," Mehrigul said, and headed for the house. She knew that she herself would never, ever give in to the world Ana had chosen. She'd go to market today and every Wednesday in her skirt, even if it was worn to a rag by the time she got to return to school. Her scarf would be tied in back. Today she'd sell Ana's squash with pride.

What does 'Ana' mean?

What can you infer about the family's economic status? Was it better or worse in the past? Answer with complete sentences and offer textual evidence to support your response.

From Chapter Nine:

Echoes of Memet's voice swirled through Mehrigul's head as she watched the cadre's wife slip back into the bustle of the market.

Don't be taken in, Sister. Don't be taken in. Be careful, Sister, Memet had sung to her just before he left. Mehrigul shivered at the memory. It had been the end of market day. She and Memet sat on the edge of the cart as they headed home. Not saying much, Memet calling out to the dokey now and then when he went too slow. They'd had a good day, but Memet was on edge, sliding off the cart, jumping on again. "If Ata makes a deal to send you far away to work in a Chinese factory, don't go," he'd said suddenly. "He may try to make you do it. Some of his friends who need money are sending their daughters away. A few of the girls even want to go. But don't Mehrigul. Just don't do it."

"Why?" Mehrigul had asked.

He wouldn't answer. Wouldn't look at her.

Now he was gone.

Mehrigul had learned the meaning of Memet's warning by listening carefully to the whispered chatter of the women at market. She heard stories of girls who were sent south and never returned. The leaders didn't want their daughters here at home, the women said, where they'd marry Uyghur men and Uyghur babies. They hoped the girls who were sent away might find Chinese men and marry them; there was a shortage of Han Chinese women. Mehrigul learned it was ever worse for the girls who did return home. No Uyghur man would marry one; he couldn't be certain that a girl who'd been sent away was still a virgin.

What can you infer from the last sentence? What do you think often happens to the girls that are sent away?

From Chapter Eleven:

"A lady from America saw the old basket I'd hung on the donkey cart and bought it. She asked me to make others. She'll come back to the market a week from Wednesday...to buy more. That's why I want to learn English."

Pati swung her shoulders left to right, back and forth, in what Mehrigul knew to be her greatest show of delight.

"That's exciting," Pati said. Then again there was a question in her eyes. "Has your grandfather seen your baskets?"

"Not yet. I'm waiting until Ata goes on pilgrimage, then I'll bring them for him to see. He must be the first one in the family to see them," Mehrigul said. "It will be important that he likes them."

Where do you suppose Ata is going on pilgrimage? What is the purpose?

Pati shrugged. "He might think using cornhusks is too common for an American lady."

"But look." Mehri gul held out her basket. "Don't you think they add texture and color?" A grin suddenly crossed her face. "If you just happen to see a certain young man tomorrow, and he just happens to have leftover scraps of red or blue felt, I'd be very glad to weave them into my baskets. You're right, a lady from America might like that better."

Do you think it is very likely that Mehri gul met an American woman that wants to buy her baskets? How does the idea of an American helping Mehri gul compare to movies like *The Last Samurai*, *Dances with Wolves*, or *Avatar* where a character infiltrates another culture and ends up "saving" the local people?

From Chapter Twelve:

Mehri gul's concern was forgotten when the two men from the cab walked into the yard, toward Chong Ata, who squatted there in his bare feet, working to finish another basket before Ata left. She rushed to her grandfather. "The men going on pilgrimage with Ata are coming to pay their respects, Chong Ata. Let me help you up," she said.

Guilt washed over her. Why hadn't she thought to get him ready? Why hadn't Ata? Guests always paid homage to her grandfather. It was Ana who would have remembered he needed a clean shirt, reminded him to wear shoes when visitors were expected. Today she was resting. She would not see Ata off, nor had she helped in the preparations.

Still, there was a dignity in the way Chong Ata rose, his eyes old and soft above his almost pure-white beard.

The thickest older man reached Chong Ata first. "*As-salam alaykum*," he said. "Peace be unto you." His right hand rose to his chest, palm open. He gave a slight bow.

Chong Ata offered the same gesture. "*Wa alaykum as-salam*. And unto you peace," he said, his gaze steady.

The driver, the younger man, repeated the greeting and the raising of his hand, as did Chong Ata.

What other cultures share this type of greeting?

From Chapter Fifteen:

She'd learned this from Ata, too, in a different way. Ata never used many words, but he was one with their land. He knew its seasons, its signs. Listened to the birds. Taught Mehri gul their names, their calls. He was no longer that person, and hadn't been for a long time. Even as a small child she sensed that things had changed for Ata, for all of them, on the day Uncle Kasim moved away for his job in

Turpan. Leaving sorrow and empty, decaying spaces in their family compound. Leaving all the work of the farm to Ata. As Memet grew, he began to carry some of the burden; the spaces did not seem so empty when he was around. Now he was gone.

How does this paragraph compare to the information you learned in the videos and the article “The Other Tibet”?

Thinking back to the article “The Other Tibet,” how does the writing compare to the excerpts from *The Vine Basket*? What patterns can you observe in non-fictional and fictional writings? Can you observe any similarities in the writing styles of “The Other Tibet” and *The Vine Basket*? Answer in complete sentences and cite examples from the texts to illustrate your observations.