

All My Puny Sorrows Study Guide

All My Puny Sorrows by Miriam Toews

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Plot Summary

- The following edition was used for the creation of this guide: Toews, Miriam. *All My Puny Sorrows*. Canada: Knopf Canada, 2014. eBook.

All My Puny Sorrows tells the story of Elfrieda (Elf) von Riesen's suicide. It is narrated by and told from the perspective of her little sister Yolandi (Yoli). Yoli is the author of a series of young adult cowgirl novels and is currently working on a serious novel about sisters. Elf is a successful concert pianist who has always struggled with feelings of overwhelming sorrow. She has finally decided that she simply can't go on.

As the novel opens Elf is in the hospital after she has unsuccessfully attempted to overdose on painkillers. Her mother, Lottie, found her and called 911. This is Elf's second suicide attempt, as the reader learns that she has previously tried to starve herself to death.

Yoli has flown to Winnipeg from Toronto to help Elf's husband Nic and Lottie look after Elf. Nic and Yoli immediately pack Lottie off for a Caribbean cruise so that she can get some much needed rest. They figure Elf will be safe in the hospital so it is a good time for Lottie to have a break.

While this is going on, Yoli is in the middle of divorcing her second husband, Dan. To try to deal with the divorce she has taken two lovers: Finbar, a lawyer in Toronto and Radek, a violinist in Winnipeg. However, Yoli spends most of her evenings with Nic trying to sort out some kind of plan for Elf's life after she is released from the hospital. They never seem to get anywhere, as Nic thinks Elf has to be forced to take her meds and Yoli thinks her survival instinct has to be shocked back to life. Neither has a viable plan to make Elf do anything.

Lottie returns from vacation and Elf appears to be getting better as she is talking about doing her concert tour. Music has always been the defining passion in Elf's life and her family hopes that doing the tour will help her re-develop an interest in life.

At this point, Yoli heads back home to Toronto since her son Will, who has been babysitting Yoli's 14-year-old daughter Nora, needs to get back to university in New York. Yoli is worried because she thought Elf sounded like she was giving a rehearsed speech when discussing her concert, but Yoli doesn't know what else to do. The hospital can't keep Elf because she is there voluntarily. Yoli is cheered by the news that Aunt Tina is coming to visit and will help Lottie keep an eye on Elf since Nic works full time. Yoli gets home only to find that Nora has moved a boyfriend in while she was gone. Unsure what else to do, Yoli agrees it is okay as long as they aren't sharing a room.

Yoli barely has time to settle back into life in Toronto before she is flying back to Winnipeg. This time Tina and Lottie found Elf. She had slit her wrists and swallowed bleach. Back at the hospital Claudio, Elf's agent, calls off Elf's tour. As soon as Elf can



speaking she is begging Yoli to take her to Switzerland because assisted suicide is legal there. This will save Elf from her fear of dying alone. Yoli, though initially appalled, can't get the idea out of her head.

As Elf heals in the hospital, Yoli finalizes her divorces. Aunt Tina has a heart attack and is hospitalized. She appears to be getting better, but then worsens to the point where she must undergo what her doctor and nurses call "routine open heart surgery." Her husband Frank and eldest daughter Sheila fly from Vancouver to be with her. Though the operation appears to be going well there are complications and Tina dies of organ failure. Yoli and Lottie attend Tina's funeral in Vancouver.

After the funeral, Yoli is forced to return to Toronto because Will must start his summer job in New York and Nora's father is still in Borneo. Before she leaves the hospital the staff assure Yoli that they will keep her sister in the ward. Yoli makes plans with Nic and Lottie to take Elf to Toronto after her release. The hope is that the change of scene will spark in Elf a will to live. Yoli tells Elf that if this doesn't happen she will take her to Switzerland.

Back in Toronto Yoli tries and fails to get a bank loan to cover the costs of a trip to Switzerland. Though Elf has the money, her wish to keep the trip from Nic ties her financial hands, since all her accounts are joint. Yoli pounds out a new Rhonda book in the hope that it will bring in much needed funds. She tries and mostly fails to reach Elf by phone, terrified that the delay in her plans will cause Elf to take matters into her own hands.

Elf talks the nurses into issuing her a day pass to celebrate her birthday. After a wonderful lunch with Nic, she sends him to the library for books and throws herself in front of a train. She finally succeeds in killing herself. Yoli packs up Nora, calls Will and they all rush to Winnipeg for the funeral.

After the funeral Lottie suffers a heart attack and has to be hospitalized. It is decided that she will move to Toronto when she recovers. Elf has left Yoli her life insurance money. Yoli uses the money to buy a fixer upper in a low rent neighborhood in Toronto. She gets it livable by the time Lottie arrives from Winnipeg. Lottie deals with her grief by becoming an active part of the community, making friends and joining a church group. Yoli prank calls the Winnipeg hospital at all hours asking to speak to her sister and demanding to know why they let her go. Eventually, after her mother confronts her, she moves on. Nic comes for Christmas and they celebrate Elf's life. The book ends with Yoli dreaming she and Elf are in Switzerland.



Chapter 1

Summary

The novel starts with the von Riesen family watching their house being driven away to an unknown destination. The von Riesens were forced to sell the house their father Jacob (Jake) built so that the neighboring car dealership could build a new parking lot. The von Riesen family lived in a Mennonite community called East Village when Yoli and Elf were children. Before they moved to the new house across town they went on a family camping trip to the Badlands. Unfamiliar with camping, Jacob's first attempt at a campfire nearly ended in disaster as their propane stove exploded. They also visited the pictographs and Jacob noted that they were scenes of "forgotten dreams."

In the present, Yolandi remembers these happier family times from her sister Elfrieda's hospital room. Elfrieda, or Elf, has been hospitalized because she tried to kill herself by overdosing on pain killers. Her mother, Lottie, found her and called the paramedics. This is the second time Elf has attempted to commit suicide. The first time she tried to starve herself to death, and Yoli insisted on calling the hospital. In spite of being happily married, with a successful career as a concert pianist, Elf says she is weary of life and cannot go on.

In childhood Elf always rebelled against the community of East Village. During one of these rebellious periods she declared Coleridge her literary boyfriend and created the design AMPS in which the S devoured the other letters from Coleridge's line "all my puny sorrows." She then spray painted this all over town.

After the spray painting incident, the town elders visited the von Riesen household to speak to Jake about Elf's behavior. The elders had also learned that the von Riesen family had a secret piano that Elf had been playing. While the elders were in the house, Elf drowned all their objections out by playing Rachmaninoff's Prelude in G Minor, Opus 23. The elders left the house defeated though Yoli wonders if Elf even realized they were there.

Analysis

The novel opens with Yoli revisiting the moment she and Elf lost their roots. A house symbolizes family, stability, ties to the past and hope for the future. The loss of the house the girls' father built symbolizes the loss of their connection to the past. Without the family home, Elf and Yoli's family stability is no longer secure.

The house's journey can also be read as a metaphor for Elf and Yoli's journeys into the world. Like their family home they, too, were sent out into the world with no clear idea of where they are going. Elf drifts through Europe never finding a place to call home. She left home to study music in Europe, then went to Julliard, then to Italy, and now she is meant to be going on the latest in a series of concert tours. All this movement is simply



a way for Elf to run from a past she doesn't like to a future she doesn't want. Yoli has moved from Manitoba to Toronto. She is also running from her past, but unlike Elf, Yoli is desperate to set down roots, as shown by her two previous marriages; she just doesn't know how to connect.

The two opposing viewpoints that echo throughout this novel are set up when Yoli's parents look at the Alberta Badlands. The Badlands come to represent life's obstacles. Her father, Jake, calls them "Unforgiving" and her mother thinks that they are something to defy together, a unifying force (5). Jake sees only an obstacle that will always be there and can never be overcome, whereas his wife Lottie believes that there is strength to be found in adversity. It is only by climbing the mountain that we can get to the other side, or see the view, or gain bragging rights. Whatever the goal, nothing will be achieved by sitting at home worrying about the judgment of others.

The family's differing views on how to approach life are highlighted again while they are camping. Their propane stove turns out to be faulty and bursts into giant flames. Fire can be read as either the destroyer of life or the giver of life depending on if it is tame or a wildfire. Here, when a campfire goes out of control it represents the failing of familial bonds. There is something wrong in this family since their central hearth is out of control and they cannot fix it. This is seen in their reaction to the fire: James is frozen, like a rabbit in the headlights; Lottie shrugs it off; Elf dances; and Yoli is the only one to try putting it out. Not understanding that gas fires are different than regular fires, Yoli throws water on it and causes the flames to leap higher. This shows how even the best of intentions can have dangerous consequences when you don't know what you're doing. This foreshadows Yoli's later attempts to reunite her family and their likely rate of success.

Even in childhood Elf was fascinated by sorrow. Her artistic depiction of AMPS (all my puny sorrows) with the S larger than all the other letters suggests that she doesn't really believe her sorrows to be small. Instead, she sees her sorrows as an all-consuming force. Spray painting AMPS all over town reads like a child's cry for help. Sorrow took over and Elf did not know what to do.

Discussion Question 1

How do Elf and Yoli react to the loss of their family home?

Discussion Question 2

Why do Jake and Lottie fight over the Badland scenery?

Discussion Question 3

What does AMPS mean and why does Elf take this as a personal slogan?

Vocabulary

pictographs



Chapter 2

Summary

The Chapter begins with Yoli remembering an interview she gave to Elf for school as Elf was leaving for Europe. Looking back at the scene from the present day, Yoli compares Elf's flight to Europe to stories her family told about fleeing religious persecution in Russia. Yoli and Elf were not taught Plautdietsch because they were told it is "the language of shame" (Ch. 2, 1). During the interview in the car, Elf discussed Adorno. Yoli tried to emulate her sister's interest post-modern philosophy but really she was just a country girl who liked horses. Once at the airport, Yoli saw Elf off and promised to write letters while Elf was in Europe studying the piano.

Back in the hospital, Elf listens to Yoli reminisce about their childhood, but Yoli can tell that Elf is angry for her failure to commit suicide. Still, Elf agrees with the nurse, Janice, that it is nice to have visitors. Elf is uninterested in stories of childhood and tells Yoli a story about a blind man regaining his sight and how he was then able to see all the dirt and despair of the world. In spite of this despairing tale Yoli is hopeful because Elf has a five-city tour coming up in a few weeks. Yoli knows that music frees Elf as she always talks after a concert whereas normally she might be silent for days. This reminds Yoli of their father Jake who also had a habit of long silences. Yet, Elf tells Yoli that she can't do the tour. She has a glass piano in her chest that she is afraid will shatter if she moves.

This reminds Yoli of Elf's return from Norway after her European tour. Elf hid in her room and cried for months. Yoli brought her own children Will, then four years old, and Nora, a baby, to visit and to try and cheer Elf up. After a few months, Elf started playing the piano again and met Nic. Nic and Elf are a case of opposites attracting, as he is a scientist. Yoli believes if music and love saved Elf then it can do so again.

Analysis

Elf is living life through her piano. She tells Yoli that she uses her piano playing as a way to emotionally manipulate her audience. This suggests that she only feels in control of life when she is playing. Music, with its specific rules and possibility for perfection appeal to Elf in a way that "real life" does not. With her piano she can control her world, perhaps without the piano, she feels a loss of control or even controlled. Elf's story of the blind man is worrisome. Return of sight should be a joyous renewal of life. Instead, Elf uses this as a metaphor to explain why she wants to die. She is showing Yoli that all she can see of the world is sorrow, dust, and decay.

Sound is terribly important throughout the novel. Both Elf and her father, Jake, are known to stop speaking for long periods of time. Jake once stopped for an entire year, only to start again after a vaudeville show. The silence represents Jake and Elf's inability to interact with the world around them. People are social creatures, silence is a



way of isolating oneself from society. Piano playing re-introduces sound into Elf's world and for a time pulls her back into the social world of her peers. This is a world Elf can only connect to through her music, without her music she has nothing to say to other people. The music itself becomes Elf's way of seeing the world. Her world is on not of sight, which she abhors, but sound. It is through music that she escapes the sorrow her eyes show her.

This is a dangerous and consuming way to live. Elf tells Yoli that there is a glass piano inside of her that she is afraid of breaking. Glass is fragile and easy to break. A piano can spread joy, sorrow, aggravation, boredom, or ecstasy depending upon how it is played and who is listening. The fact that Elf has internalized a piano that could kill her suggests that she is worried about her talent. It further suggests that she feels her talent has consumed and is destroying her. Piano playing is Elf's entire life and it is killing her. The beauty she finds in music does not exist, for her, in the real world.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Elf want to die?

Discussion Question 2

What is the significance of silence in Chapter 2?

Discussion Question 3

Does Elf need an audience when she is performing?

Vocabulary

vaudeville, rapturous



Chapter 3

Summary

This chapter begins with Yoli still in the hospital with Elf. Elf asks Yoli to leave so that she can think. As Yoli leaves her room, Elf comments on the futility of measuring time. While Yoli is leaving the hospital she asks Janice about Elf's head wound and learns that Elf fell in the shower. Elf is still weak from lack of food and standing makes her dizzy. On her way out the door, Yoli notices that Elf's name is misspelled on the whiteboard at the nurses' station.

This makes Yoli remember Elf's previous suicide attempt. Lottie called Yoli in Toronto to tell Yoli that Elf wasn't eating and had begged Lottie and Nic not to call a doctor. Yoli flew to Winnipeg and called an ambulance. This is when Yoli first met Janice. Yoli quickly learned that suicidal patients are treated as idiots. This second time, Elf took an unknown number of pills. Lottie found her and called 911. Elf left a note saying that she hoped all the people who loved her would understand. Yoli once more rushed to Winnipeg to help Elf. That was three days ago. Since then, Nic and Yoli have sent Lottie to the Caribbean on a cruise for a much-needed break.

While lost in her memories Yoli leaves the hospital and buys Elf a new pillow. She considers the similarities between Elf and their father Jake. Yoli runs errands and adds getting a new shower curtain to her list of chores as she remembers her mother telling her the curtain worked fine, in spite of the minor flood. As Yoli readies herself for bed, she tries to call Elf, but the hospital has a strict policy of forcing patients to come to the phone and so she can't get through. Elf recent troubles remind Yoli of her father's death. He threw himself in front of a train.

Analysis

Elf sees telling time as "beautifully futile" (Ch. 3, 4). Time is a symbol of order and unity. Everyone in Winnipeg agrees that 9 a.m. means the same thing to each of them. If someone makes an appointment at 3:30 p.m. they are part of a social contract to arrive at that time. That Elf sees the construct of time as futile suggests she no longer sees a point in this social contract. The concept of dividing the day into hours and minutes lacks meaning to Elf because it is a way to interact with other people. Elf is withdrawing from society. She is even losing her identity as evidenced by the misspelling of her name on the whiteboard behind the nurses' desk.

The broken shower curtain is important. Both for itself and because it creates a flood. Floods can be symbolic of destruction, God's wrath, fertility, rebirth and wiping things clean. The flood in the bathroom represents Elf's withdraw from her family and her attempt to destroy herself. "Working well" is a relative concept and often depends on what else is going on in a person's life (Ch.3, 18). Broken things are used by the author



as a metaphor for broken people. Something broken can represent shattering, loss of a beloved object, or a chance to repair and rebuild. Yoli by buying thinking for Elf and attempting to do chores it trying to fix what has been broken. Restoring normality is a way to restore order. The broken shower curtain represents Elf and the resultant flood represents her attempted suicide. The broken shower curtain can also be read as a metaphor for Elf's interactions with the hospital. The hospital has only one way to deal with people who are suicidal and that way is not working for Elf. Systems that cannot bend break, either themselves or the people in them. The psychiatric ward at the hospital punishes anyone who deviates from their way, instead of attempting to find a better way.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Elf consider time futile?

Discussion Question 2

Why is Elf in the psych ward and how does this affect her care?

Discussion Question 3

Why do Nic and Yoli send Lottie on vacation while Elf is in the hospital?

Vocabulary

anorexia, futility



Chapter 4

Summary

Yoli visits with her best friend and cousin, Julie, and they discuss the merits of euthanasia. Julie points out that even handing Elf the pills can be considered manslaughter in Canada. Julie also worries that Yoli will be unable to live with herself if she helps Elf die. Yoli wonders if she could live with herself if she didn't help. After her conversation with Julie, Yoli researches ways to help Elf and learns that you can buy Seconal in pet stores in Mexico. The only problem is that because of a rise in "death tourists" you have to go fairly deep into Mexico to get the drugs. Yoli realizes that if she wants to do this she will have to take Elf with her. At that point, she files the plan away since Elf is currently hospitalized for an unknown period of time.

Back at Lottie's house, Yoli thinks back to when she moved to Toronto, a move necessitated by Nora's ballet career. Elf seemed to collapse with Yoli so far away. When Yoli lived in Winnipeg, Elf and Yoli used to play a game called Blind Tennis in which they played tennis in the dark.

Needing to get out of the house, Yoli looks up Radek, whom Julie had introduced her to last time she was in town, and they have dinner. Radek tells Yoli he always felt Elf was expressing a "private pain" during her concerts (Ch. 4, 8).

Analysis

In this chapter, the importance of family is emphasized. Family is the social group into which we are born. Family is one of the sub-themes of the novel. Family represents a sense of belonging, safety, and friendship. We see here a united familial group as Yoli and her cousin Julie struggle to find a way to help Elf. The main theme in this book is Euthanasia. Yoli is trying to work out if the best way to help Elf is to help her kill herself. Elf manages to be isolated from her family even as they rally to help her. The dark side of a family is pain, danger, and isolation as no one can hurt you like those who know you best. This is the reason Elf is forever pushing away her family and the happy memories they offer away: she is leaving her family mentally, in preparation for her death, and physical departure. She may feel that they abandoned her first with Yoli's defection to Toronto, choosing her daughter Nora over her sister. Elf has been using Yoli and Yoli's children as a connection to the world and a reason to live. With them suddenly on the other coast, she is left without anything to pull her out of her music and into the world. Elf feels life has gone on without her already and Yoli will now be okay living in a world without Elf. This has an echo of the attention-grabbing, false suicidal, they'll all be sorry when I'm dead type of thinking with the exception that Elf truly means to die.



Sound is again important as Radek comments on Elf's audience becoming unintentional voyeurs as she exhibits her private pain through her music. Elf is using music as a vehicle for her sorrow. Yet, instead of being cathartic, Elf's playing seems to increase her agony. This is perhaps because of her extreme empathy for negative emotions. Elf uses her piano as an amplifier for her emotions. Elf can, therefore, nurture and grow her sorrow while ignoring more positive emotions. Her ability to do so is helped by Yoli's move and Lottie's and Nic's often blind acceptance of her word. Yoli is the only one in the family willing to challenge Elf and as already mentioned once Yoli goes to Toronto Elf retreats into her music. Elf is interested in the game of Blind Tennis because it forces the players to listen to the world around them. Elf uses the lack of light to give primacy to her hearing. This suggests that to Elf the world is made of sound, not visual objects. Her wish to hide from her sight may also suggest a wish to hide from the ugliness of a world she feels she cannot survive in.

Discussion Question 1

Why is Elf obsessed with sound and how does this obsession manifest?

Discussion Question 2

What happens to Elf when she plays the piano?

Discussion Question 3

How does Yoli's move to Toronto affect Elf?

Vocabulary

euthanasia, voyeur



Chapter 5

Summary

As this chapter begins Yoli is back at the hospital. She tells Elf a story about an elderly couple she saw cleaning their garage on the way to the hospital. The woman was holding onto her husband as he removed graffiti from their garage door. This leads Yoli to remember how Elf rescued her when bullies locked her in the hospital morgue.

Yoli talks to Elf about her new book, which she has with her in a Safeway bag. Elf is very interested in Yoli's book and begs Yoli to read it to her. Yoli refuses and is only willing to share the first letter. She does tell Elf that it is about sisters. The girls remember their strict religious upbringing and Yoli wonders if it has damaged them. They were both taught that a good woman got married, had children and supported her man from the home through silence and obedience. They each feel a measure of guilt for instead making their own way in the world. Yoli and Elf then argue about the quintessential question of life: "To be or not to be." Elf considers life worthless and Yoli tries to convince Elf that she has much left to live for. After their argument, Yoli wonders about the place of religious faith in the real world. If prayer doesn't save your loved ones what's the point?

Yoli moves the conversation from the philosophical to the practical. She tells Elf that she is getting her tattoo of a jester removed because she got it with her husband. She also mentions that her boyfriend Finbar broke up with her over text message because her life is too complicated. She doesn't blame Elf for anything but the implication is there. She also relays messages from her children Nora and Will who both want Elf to get better. Elf was a large part of their childhood and often babysat for Yoli. Elf listens to Yoli but seems to be in her own world. The chapter ends with Elf repeating her request for Yoli to take her to Switzerland.

Analysis

Yoli is writing a book about sisters that she carries around in a plastic Safeway bag. Yoli is writing the story of herself and Elf. She is carrying it with her to keep it safe. She even keeps it in a Safeway bag to symbolize security. Yet, in spite of the name, a Safeway bag is just a plastic grocery bag and is innately fragile. To Yoli, her novel has come to symbolize Elf and Yoli feels if she can protect it she can protect Elf. The fragility of the container the story is in shows that Elf cannot be protected and will eventually break out of the wrapping of her family's protective guard.

In the girls' childhood sex was a taboo subject. It was something good girls only did behind closed doors within the confines of the marriage bed and as such it was a topic that their husbands would take care of. They have each rebelled against this repression in their own way. Yoli tried to find true love first with Will's father and then Nora's. Yoli is



now exploring her sexuality as she takes up with multiple lovers and continues to try and equate sex with love. She is still good friends with both her ex-husbands, she just feels that something was lacking in the relationship. Yoli tries to reconcile traditional views of proper womanhood with her yearning for education and self-sufficiency. Elf chose a less direct route and poured all her sexual energy into her piano and her husband Nic was forced to take piano lessons to seduce her. Though the sisters express it in different ways, the sisters' childhood caused them to sublimate their sexuality. This is one of the root causes of Elf's obsession with the piano and may help explain why it has become so unhealthy.

Family comes up again as in the past Elf babysat Will and Nora. This caused Will and Nora to become close to Elf and see her as a mother figure. Given the turmoil of Yoli's divorces, Elf has become a point of stability for Yoli's children. Will and Nora have come to rely on Elf to provide the discipline their own mother is afraid to invoke for fear of losing their love. Elf's recent actions have deeply wounded Will and Nora as it is almost like they are losing their mother. Elf tries to distance herself from the children by only speaking to them through Yoli, thus forcing Yoli back into her role of mother.

The sisters present a binary, both comparatively and within themselves. Yoli is chaos. She is interested in civilized behavior, but she also talks to strangers. Elf is order. She believes that libraries are the bedrock of society and yet she has stopped reading. Elf holds that humans are the sum of their memories while Yoli argues they are shaped by others' expectations. This is the nature versus nurture argument. The fact the Elf has stopped reading is worrisome. It suggests that she is retreating from civilization. Books no longer matter because the living are no longer important.

Travel is another secondary theme. Elf performs in Oslo when she meets her agent Claudio. Claudio is Italian. There is a sense here of the global village. Still, all this travel leads to a sense of alienation and foreignness, feeling lost, being uprooted. Food can be a source of comfort. In the hospital, dining is a forced communal experience. Elf refuses to leave her room and participate. She would rather starve than be part of a community. Life is a social experience and Elf no longer wants to be a part of it.

Yoli got her jester tattoo to represent the slaying of hypocrisy and duplicity. It now represents the failure of her marriage and leaves her with an unwanted tie to her husband. Like the tattoo, her husband was once a part of her. The removal of the tattoo is a symbolic divorce and frees Yoli of her last tie to him.

Discussion Question 1

What does Yoli's jester represent to her now?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Elf refuse to speak to Will and Nora?



Discussion Question 3

What part does sisterhood play in Chapter 5?

Vocabulary

nervosa, hypocrisy, graffiti, repression



Chapter 6

Summary

This chapter begins as Yoli leaves the hospital. Before she leaves Elf tells her sister that her sorrow comes from their father Jake and it is her duty as his daughter to bear it. Yoli is horrified by the idea of inherited pain and refuses to take Elf to Switzerland. After leaving Elf's room, she asks at the nurses' station to speak to Janice, who is doing art therapy, about Elf's refusal to take her medication. When she tries to exit the hospital, Yoli gets lost in a tunnel.

Finally out of the hospital, Yoli meets up with Nic. As they stand talking, they see two boys walk past carrying a canoe and intending to take the river home. Since the river is unsafe this time of year, Nic convinces them to take the bus and holds onto their canoe for safekeeping. Yoli praises Nic for saving the boys lives.

They then head to Nic and Elf's house, to discuss what will happen after Elf gets out of the hospital. Nic is reluctant to invade Elf's privacy as he wonders what to do about the new suicide manual, *Final Exit*, that has just arrived in the mail. Yoli offers to throw it out for him. They compromise and hide the book. Yoli, getting desperate and fanciful, suggests that they place Elf in a life or death situation to reactivate her survival instinct. Yoli heads back to Lottie's house. On the way, she wonders about the nature of depression. Perhaps it is a terminal illness that can only be "treated" with death.

The chapter ends with Lottie's return from the Caribbean.

Analysis

Yoli confronts the question, is depression a terminal illness? She wonders is the only real treatment for Elf's "overwhelming sorrow" the death Elf craves? Euthanasia usually comes up as a topic only when discussing cancer patients or others with untreatable illnesses that cause unbearable levels of physical pain. Yoli wonders if Elf's mental pain isn't really the same thing. How can anyone judge another's pain except by their words and Elf is saying that her pain is unbearable. Is it not then ethical to end that suffering? This is the central question of the book. When and how should we interfere in the lives of others? The author has no real answer, she merely raises the question.

When Janice comes to speak to Yoli she is called away from art therapy. Art is a way to express without words. Pictures can scream, cry or laugh. Art gives patients a way to outwardly express inward agony. This is a reference to Elf's piano playing as it is another form of art. Art therapy shows how artistic expression is meant to help soothe inward pain by letting the artist share their emotions with the world. However, Elf has subverted this process by using her piano playing to control her audience and intensify her sorrow. To Elf, art is a way to bring people inside her agony. Once others have experienced Elf's pain it is shared and magnified like placing two mirrors across from



each other. Unlike a mirror, the pressure caused by the experience will eventually shatter Elf.

While trying to leave the hospital Yoli becomes lost in a tunnel. This is reminiscent of the biblical quote “though I shall walk through the valley of death I shall fear no evil.” Being lost in darkness can represent confusion, loss of safety, fear, and a seeking for the light. Yoli becomes physically lost because she is spiritually lost. Her search in the tunnels under the hospital for an exit echoes her spiritual search for a way to save her sister. Elf is lost in the darkness of despair and Yoli wants to bring her back into the light of love. Yoli finds her own way out of the tunnels. This suggests that the only one who can save Elf is Elf.

The book *Final Exit* that Elf has bought is important in a number of ways. The title suggests endings. If this path is taken Elf will be gone. Buying a suicide manual also suggests that Elf does not want to die alone. She makes no effort to hide her intentions to die and has the book sent to her home. *Final Exit* can be read as Elf’s invitation to Nic, asking him to help her die. At the same time, most people who actually kill themselves just do it; they do not discuss it first. By opening a dialogue, Elf is looking for reasons not to die even as she clings to her sorrows. The book can be read as a cry for help.

Elf introduces the idea that time is cyclical, and the events of the past repeat in the present. We are bound by our past. Elf’s father Jake and cousin Leni both killed themselves, and her empathy with their sorrow was bound to force her into their fate. Looking further back, the sisters had a grandparent killed in Russia when the family fled religious persecution. Overwhelming sorrow is like poison, dripping down through their family tree. This is the idea of manifest destiny, that life is pre-ordained by God or fate. Yoli also subscribes to this idea to some extent, but she believes it is mitigated by free will. History can be learned from; we are not doomed to repeat it.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Elf believe it is her duty to bear the sorrow of her ancestors?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Yoli refuse to help Elf die and are her reasons valid?

Discussion Question 3

What is the significance of Yoli’s exit from the hospital in Chapter 6?

Vocabulary

cyclical, terminal



Chapter 7

Summary

This chapter begins with Yoli dreaming Elf has gotten lost and she is searching for her. When she awakes Lottie regales her with a discussion Lottie had with her dead sister as they travel to the hospital to visit Elf. They meet up with Nic at the hospital and immediately have their minds relieved because Elf has started taking her medication. With this in mind, Yoli, Lottie, and Nic all renew their struggle to show Elf that her life is worth living. Yet, Yoli worries Elf is talking her way out of the hospital so that she can try to kill herself. She hopes to be reassured by the extensive home care that Elf will receive but Nic and Yoli soon discover that home care has been cut due to budget cuts. It isn't available even for those with money because the staff have all been let go.

During their visit to the hospital, Lottie tells Nic, Elf, and Yoli about her vacation. She had to be rescued from the ocean because she went swimming too far from shore; she also fell off a banana boat in Jamaica. She tells her audience that she just wanted to float away for awhile and she wasn't worried because she knew she would be rescued before she was endangered.

As she leaves the hospital, Yoli dreams of creating a community made up of only her friends and family where she can keep everyone she loves safe and happy. She goes back to Lottie's and takes a run on a treadmill in an attempt to escape her problems.

At the end of the chapter, Elf is released from the hospital. Hopeful that her sister will be okay, Yoli goes home to Toronto to relieve her son, Will, from babysitting duties in time for his exams at NYU. Before Yoli leaves for home, her mother wakes her in the middle of the night to deliver their hall organ to Julie's house.

Analysis

This chapter examines various forms of familial love, breaking it down into the love between sisters, parents, and significant others. Elf's family is rallying around her as she drifts farther away from them. Elf uses those bonds to get what she wants. She plays on her family's hope that she will get better to get released from the hospital. Elf is manipulating her family's love of her for her own selfish purposes. Yoli suspects this is what is happening but is afraid to speak up in case she is wrong and sets back Elf's recovery.

The dream of Elf being lost undercuts her miraculous recovery. It suggests that while she may still be physically present, Elf has already left. She is beyond Yoli's, and by extension Nic and Lottie's, reach no matter where they search. The dream foreshadows Elf's physical death later in the novel. It is also a comfort to her family as it suggests she could not be saved as, technically alive or not, she is already long gone from this world.



Escapism is a secondary theme of the novel. This is mainly expressed as travel to other places as discussed in early chapters but in this chapter becomes more literal. Lottie's stories of floating away are a form of escapism. By literally floating away, she is symbolically floating away from her troubles. During these adventures, Lottie explains she always feels sure of rescue and therefore able to relax. The surety of rescue allows Lottie to temporarily release all her worries and to cede control to someone else. While being swept away to sea is dangerous, it is also a problem with a clear solution. Lottie is looking for something that can be fixed, as she cannot fix her daughter Elf.

This is illustrated clearly in her midnight quest to deliver the hall organ to Julie. As soon as she finds a solution: a neighbor with a truck, she swings into action. This ends up not being the best solution since Julie and her family are asleep and Lottie and Yoli are forced to leave the organ in a shed, but it gives Lottie a sense of accomplishment. The consequences of delivering the organ suggest that the easy way is not always the best.

The cyclical nature of events comes up again as Yoli runs on a treadmill. The treadmill lets Yoli run away from her problems but gets her nowhere as she remains stuck in place. This suggests that for Yoli escaping her worries is not possible, even on a temporary basis. You can't run from ideas in your head.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Lotti need to escape worrying about Elf and is she successful?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Elf start taking her medication?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Yoli leave Winnipeg, and should she have left?

Vocabulary

cyclical, escapism, hall organ



Chapter 8

Summary

Back in Toronto, Yoli writes Elf letters. In these letters, she tells Elf about how her neighbors have been the local killing mourning doves for food. She also mentions the death of Joe Strummer, the lead singer of the Clash. When Elf doesn't write back she tries and mostly fails to reach her sister by phone. Yoli asks Lottie and learns that her sister just stands around and lets the phone ring. Yoli is, however, reassured about Elf's situation when she learns that her Aunt Tina is flying to Winnipeg to help Lottie look after Elf.

Yoli's ex-boyfriend Finbar comes around her house and tries to get back together. Yoli brushes him off though they stay friends. Yoli tries to go on with her life. One day on the way downtown Yoli takes note of how a man comes onto the bus swearing, stops because the driver tells him it is inappropriate and starts again as soon as he got off.

When she gets home, Yoli discovers a strange man in her kitchen. She learns that this is Nora's Swedish boyfriend Anders, who appears to have moved in while she was in Winnipeg. After discussing the situation with Nora, Yoli ends up allowing Anders to stay. The language barrier causes Anders to misunderstand how to use the basement washing machine. This results in a flood in Yoli's basement when Anders breaks the washing machine. Yoli becomes worried about her parenting abilities after this incident and calls her son Will to discuss the situation with Nora. Yoli is only able to talk to Will in whispers because he is always in the library studying for exams.

At breakfast each morning Yoli notices that the tree in her front yard is losing its limbs one by one. She believes one of the neighbors is slowly pruning it. This leads Yoli to contemplate how the continents are slowly moving apart. Loss seems inevitable. When she finally gets news of Elf, through Lottie, because Elf still refuses to answer either the phone or Yoli's letter she learns that Elf is listening to Gorecki's 3rd symphony, The Symphony of Sorrowful Songs. Lottie is hopeful that this is a sign of recovery since Elf has agreed to do her concert. Unfortunately shortly after that Lottie and Aunt Tina catch Elf in the midst of another suicide attempt. They find Elf with slit wrists, having swallowed bleach.

Analysis

Barriers to communication are presented in this chapter. Yoli comes home to find a strange teen in her kitchen who speaks only Swedish. She is forced to wait until her daughter returns to learn who Anders is and why he is in her house. Her calm acceptance and assumption that there is a reasonable explanation for the appearance of a strange man in her home shows how far from normal her life has shifted. She is proud that she is able to form a line of communication to Anders through mime. Like



Lottie in the previous chapter, Yoli is desperate for problems with answers. Anders can be communicated with and fed and someone will eventually explain who he is.

Elf's isolation is not so easily breached. She begs Yoli to write her letters and then doesn't answer them. She has a telephone but again refuses to answer. This is because Elf is purposely withdrawing from her family. She is escaping reality mentally before she does so physically. She asks for letters because they allow her a window into Yoli's life without the same onus on her to reciprocate that a telephone conversation requires. Letters are by their nature a one-sided conversation whereas talking on the phone requires two active participants. Taken further, Elf is becoming a passive consumer of life instead of an active participant.

Elf has become focused on The Symphony of Sorrowful Songs. It is meant to invoke the ties between mother and child. As Elf prepares to leave this life she is meditating on her bond with Lottie. This may be a way for Elf to externalize, and therefore purge, her earthly ties. Lottie visits her daily and tries to bind her to life. Giving that bond, an expression in music, which has also driven Elf's life, gives her a way to study it. The Symphony may also be a way for Elf to prepare Lottie for Elf's death. It is a signal from Elf to Lottie that Elf loves her and Elf's death is not Lottie's fault.

Death is also explored with the pruning of the tree in Yoli's yard. The tree is losing its branches one by one. Yoli feels she is slowly being exposed to the world as the tree is pruned. The tree comes to symbolize Elf and the branches her ties to the world. As Elf withdraws from the world, in preparation for her death, she slowly severs her ties until only her trunk or family are left. Yoli's feelings of exposure can then be read as her grief at Elf's withdraw and inevitable loss.

There are recurring mentions of water throughout the novel. The author points out that Toronto means place of standing water and Winnipeg means muddy water. There is a flood in Yoli's home which can symbolize new growth, rebirth, being swept away, loss or baptism. Yoli's flood likely foreshadows Elf's death. By using a flood the author suggests that Elf's death will initially be a destructive force in Yoli's life but that eventually she will rebuild. Some sort of new growth in Yoli's life is also foreshadowed; she will grow as a person because of this pain.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Yoli write Elf letters?

Discussion Question 2

Why does the author choose a tree as a symbol?



Discussion Question 3

Why is Elf withdrawing from the world?

Vocabulary

peripatetic, Haglund's deformity



Chapter 9

Summary

After learning of Elf's latest attempt to kill herself, Yoli once again enlists Will to watch Nora and returns to Winnipeg. At the hospital, Elf has lost her voice because of the bleach and is on a respirator. Looking at Elf, Yoli is reminded of Elf leaving for Europe and who Elf's departure motivated Lottie into going to university. Lottie became a social worker and eventually a therapist. Yoli uses a story her mother told the girls in an attempt to discuss the cycle of abuse with Elf. A woman their mother helped once brought her two bullets and told Lottie one was for her daughter and one was for herself as she saw this as the only way to escape an abusive relationship. Yoli's plan backfires as Elf sees this as a perfectly acceptable way to escape pain and as an expression of love to take the daughter as well. This remark reminds Yoli that Elf always won debates in the past by stacking the odds in her favor. Yoli remembers a political debate staged by Elf where the candidates were her family and the judges Elf's friends from school. Giving up on words, Julie and Yoli create a circle by holding Elf's hands in the hospital and offer their silent support. While this is going on, Elf suggests that she stayed alive so long to look after Yoli, but tells Yoli that she can't take it anymore and that Yoli is in Toronto anyway. Not knowing what else to do Yoli agrees to consider Switzerland. She calls Will to tell him Elf's condition and can't hear the message he wishes to pass on because he is whispering. Yoli then leaves the hospital. Back at Lottie's place, Yoli assures Lottie that she is not to blame for Elf's sorrows.

Lottie's worries remind Yoli of her father. Yoli remembers her her childhood with father Jake. When she was 7 or 8 he went to Ottawa to attend Lester B. Pearson's funeral. He ended up going to a New Year's Eve party with a fellow funeral attendee and said he had a great time. Yet on his return, he retreated to his room. Later, Jake took Yoli on a one week quest to sell educational placemats to roadside diners. They returned defeated, and Jake again retreated to his room. Yoli had a great time and told the family stories of their wild adventures. Jake did have successes as he went on to use a petition to force the town to fund a library. He set Elf up as the librarian. Yet he still killed himself. Later, his niece Leni followed in his footsteps and threw herself in the river.

Analysis

The idea of time being cyclical is explored further. The author examines how much we are doomed to repeat history. Elf's father Jake and her cousin Leni both killed themselves. It is implied that these deaths, especially her father's loss are a driving motivator in Elf's life. Jake's sorrow is one source of Elf's sorrow. Elf becomes a vessel of her father's trials and tribulations. Sorrow is an inheritable disease whose only cure is death.



When Julie and Yoli visit Elf they create a circle of silence. A circle of silence suggests a shared secret or a conspiracy. Elf has drained them of language with her repeated suicide attempts. There is literally nothing her family has not said to try and convince her to live. All Yoli's attempts have been deftly turned back on her as Elf uses them to reinforce her wish for death. The story in this chapter is an excellent example. Yoli intends to show Elf how no situation is hopeless and all sorrows can be left behind. Elf takes from the story instead what she wants to hear: death is an escape from pain and you can even take your loved ones with you if they are in similar agony. At this point, Yoli retreats. All Elf's family can now offer her is their love and support. Elf takes this as a tacit permission to die and perhaps it is. Yoli, with her newfound willingness to take Elf to Switzerland for euthanasia, appears to have given up on convincing her sister to live. This can be read as the bargaining stage on Yoli's part. She is telling Elf, don't kill yourself and I will take you to Switzerland to die sometime in the future if you still want to go. This is one of the stages of grief. The author will walk Yoli through all six stages of grief before the end of the novel.

Silence is examined further when Yoli calls Will and is unable to decipher his meaning because he is whispering. Without words, there are misunderstandings since silence doesn't mean the same thing to everyone. Silence does not really equal consent or approval of a situation, but perhaps exhaustion or resignation.

How family unites and divides us continues to be explored in this chapter. Elf lays a major guilt trip on Yoli. She suggests that pulling Yoli out of trouble was keeping her alive and knowing that Yoli cannot move back to Winnipeg Elf says that she can no longer go on. Yoli points out that if Elf wants to be the rescuer Yoli's life is still a mess since she is now a single parent. Elf ignores that since it doesn't fit the script Elf is enacting. Elf is scripting her life to cast herself in the role of victim and editing out anything that doesn't support that role. She sees Yoli as an easy mark for manipulation, and, as her sister, Elf knows which buttons to press to get what she wants. Nic and Lottie will fight to keep her alive until the bitter end, but Yoli will accede to her wishes if the request is framed in the right way. Family can cut the deepest because they know you best. Suicide is at its heart a selfish act and in spite of what she says, Elf doesn't really care if she hurts Yoli in an effort to get what she wants.

Discussion Question 1

Does Yoli intend to help Elf die?

Discussion Question 2

Why did Elf fail to kill herself?

Discussion Question 3

What is the significance of silence in Chapter 9?

Vocabulary

respirator, petition, cyclical, suicidal



Chapter 10

Summary

The chapter begins with a family discussion of Elf's situation. Yoli wonders if it is selfish to force someone who is suicidal to live. Yoli and Julie revisit the idea of assisted suicide. Julie tells Yoli not to help Elf kill herself. Yoli's only real argument is that Elf will kill herself with or without help. Later, while visiting the hospital, Yoli shouts at a family in the hospital parking lot after the father critiques her parking skills. As she enters the hospital she sees the mother in the elevator and apologizes. She is met with silence.

In the hospital, Elf tells Yoli she feels that her role in their family is to empathize with their father. Yoli tells Elf that her actions are hurting the people around her and she doesn't understand how Elf can act as she does and still say she loves her family. Elf has no answer and pushes Yoli away until Yoli promises not to speak of the good times in their past.

Elf's agent Claudio shows up at the hospital for a flying visit to check on Elf and promises there will be no problems canceling the tour. Claudio tells the sisters a story about watching a man drink beer by the side of a river. The man got up and went to the riverbank. Claudio was afraid he was going to jump, but he simply refilled his beer can with river water. Elf and Yoli use this story as the jumping off point for an argument about whether a glass is half full or half empty.

While watching over Elf Yoli remembers her dream of the night before. She dreamed that all her loved ones including Elf, Jake, and Leni gather to wave her goodbye. This she reminds her that the day before her father died she dreamed of him passing through concrete walls. Yoli goes on to play with several titles to her novel which, she continues to carry everywhere in a Safeway bag. Her top two are *A Lifetime of Resentment* and *A Devotion to Sorrow*.

As Yoli leaves the hospital, she confronts Elf's psychiatrist, who refuses to make an effort to communicate with Elf, saying that writing notes is juvenile. Yoli yells at him and he runs away. Nothing is resolved since Elf won't play by the hospital's rules and the hospital can't bend enough to play by hers. The chapter ends as Yoli imagines a level of care where doctors are devoted to their patients and spend their time looking for ways to make them better.

Analysis

This chapter sets up a dichotomy between Yoli's practical acceptance of the world and Elf's romantic vision. This is best presented in the metaphor of the man Claudio sees drinking river water. The man uses river water to simulate beer and draw out the experience of having a drink by the river. Elf thinks that there is no substitute for the real thing and that if you can't have it you may as well throw yourself in the river. It is a



matter of pride. Yoli believes in faking it until you make it. It is better to drink river water until you can once more afford beer than to give up. In other words, if you are sad, pretend to be happy until you really are happy, don't throw in the towel and die. Yoli thinks long term and Elf thinks short term. Elf is trapped in the now. She is overwhelmed by sadness now, so she believes that she always will be. Yoli is able to think of the future that Elf refuses to see and she understands that the only true constant is change.

Yet Yoli also has a deep understanding of Elf's feelings. Her book about sisters has come to represent Elf and Elf's life. As mentioned in earlier chapters, Yoli carries her novel around in a Safeway bag in a futile attempt to keep Elf safe. A grocery bag is a fragile object that is easily breakable. Carrying the manuscript around instead of storing it somewhere safe shows how afraid Yoli is to let Elf out of her sight lest Elf hurt herself. Yet, carrying something everywhere makes it more likely to be lost than storing it somewhere safe. This prefigures Yoli's eventual loss of Elf.

The titles of the manuscript reflect her feelings toward her sister. A Lifetime of Resentment and A Devotion to Sorrow suggest that Yoli has always looked up to and envied Elf. Yoli sees Elf's sorrow as a carefully cultivated creation. Yoli resents that Elf spends so much life working on being sorrowful when she has such a great life. Yoli believes that if Elf worked instead at being happy she could do great things, but Yoli is realistic enough to know that Elf will never part with her sorrow. The resentment of the first title is both Yoli's of her sister's devotion to sorrow and Elf's of Yoli's happiness.

Yoli's dreams are about separation. Her family waves her goodbye and her father passes through walls of concrete. Though in her dream Elf is with her family and it is Yoli who is leaving this is about Elf's death. It is relevant that Elf is happy and with her dead relatives as Yoli leaves. This can be read as a vision of the afterlife. Elf will only find happiness with her father, and since Jake is dead Elf must die as well. They are waving goodbye to Yoli because it is not yet her time to die and she must wake up and rejoin the living. Yoli's old dream about her father suggested something similar. Jake was bound by concrete walls in life. Only through death could he escape and find freedom. The dreams further suggest that Yoli is meant to be happy or at least at peace with the death of her father and sister.

Discussion Question 1

Where might Elf find happiness in life?

Discussion Question 2

How do the sisters' views of life differ?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Elf cultivate sorrow?

Vocabulary

seconal, assisted suicide, elegiac



Chapter 11

Summary

The river floods reminding the family of Leni's suicide. Leni killed herself by jumping into the river. Once more, Yoli researches assisted suicide. Yoli learns that in Canada assisted suicide is considered manslaughter and this includes procuring the drugs or explaining to someone how to kill themselves.

Aunt Tina is admitted to the hospital with chest pains and diagnosed with a heart condition. When Elf is told of Aunt Tina's heart attack she loses her voice. Elf's doctor continues to hide from Yoli. Yoli feels her family is tainted by suicide. She notes how much nicer and more informative the staff in the cardiac wing is to the family than the staff on the psych ward. While waiting for news about Aunt Tina's condition, Yoli and Lottie meet a family from East Village who are there for the heart surgery of an uncle. They have great faith in the system. Lottie and Yoli tell them about Tina and then, reluctantly about Elf.

On the way back from the hospital the car dies. It turns out to be a write off and Lottie has the mechanic donate the car to "youth at risk," a local charity. At the end of the chapter Nic and his father leave for 10 days in Spain, though Nic offers to cancel in light of Tina's heart attack. Lottie and Yoli urge him to go, as he needs a break to stay sane. Nic leaves and Lottie and Yoli use his car though he mentions the driver's side door doesn't open.

Analysis

The re-flooding of the river and the connection of floods to disaster suggests the nearness of death. Though the hospital assures Lottie and Yoli that Tina will be fine the flood suggests that Tina is in danger. The connection of Leni's death with water suggests the central importance of water to the story. Water is the giver of life, the bringer of plenty, but it can also destroy, toppling mountains and sweeping away homes. The steady drip of water throughout the novel suggests erosion. It evokes Elf's slow death and Tina's faster one. It suggests the washing away of foundations as a metaphor for the loss of loved ones.

The family from East Village inserts a normality to the scene in the hospital. They represent a typical Mennonite family that can be used as foil to Yoli's family. They are symbolic of the family's traditional past. They live within the system and it supports them. Elf, by attempting to kill herself, has pulled Yoli and her family outside of society. They have become social outcasts in their attempts to support her.

Escapism through travel is revisited as Nic leaves for Spain. Nic and his father have long planned to go to Spain and explore the family heritage. Choosing to do so while Elf is sick is a way to escape their problems and find joy. No one in Spain knows them, and



so they are free to forget for a time. That Nic is willing to explore his roots without his wife suggest that he is accepting her wish for distance.

Broken things reappear as a symbol with both Lottie's and Nic's cars. This is a consumer society; when an object is broken we throw it away. Lottie donates her car to a charity for parts. Yet the car can be seen as a metaphor for Elf. There is a suggestion that when a person is broken society throws them away. Certainly, Elf's doctors make no attempt to help her and her family doesn't know how to. Toews is chiding people for giving up too easily when something breaks. At the same time, she is foreshadowing Elf's fate.

Discussion Question 1

Why is the family treated differently on the cardiac floor compared to on the psych floor?

Discussion Question 2

How does Aunt Tina's hospitalization affect her family?

Discussion Question 3

Why does the author insert the family from East Village?

Vocabulary

evangelism, haranguing, cardiac, psych



Chapter 12

Summary

Nic's car dies at the beginning of the chapter. When Yoli looks for someone to fix it she hooks up with Jason, a car mechanic she knows from university. They end up going on a date out on the floodway. Yoli reminisces with Jason about their divorces. She and Jason also discuss the cultural need for shame as a way to fuel art and literature.

Yoli then visits Julie and they talk about taking Elf to Switzerland. Yoli realizes that Elf could go on her own, but thinks that her previous suicide attempts have failed because Elf is afraid to die alone. Yoli feels that without help Elf will continue her cycle of self-harm until she succeeds in killing herself. Yoli goes on to disparage the psych ward which has only one treatment method and ignores all those who failed to cooperate. She finds it a dehumanizing process that blames the victim. As a writer, Yoli believes in the importance of words, thinking that releasing a patient is better than discharging one. As the narrator, Yoli contemplates her dream about having to play a sonnet in a village protected by hay bales. During the dream, she didn't know how to play and was attacked by an increasingly hostile audience.

Back in the cardiac ward, Aunt Tina takes a turn for the worse and is told that she needs routine open heart surgery. After receiving this news Yoli goes to visit Elf. Elf tells Yoli she wants her wish to go to Switzerland to stay secret from the rest of the family. Elf knows that Nic would never let her go. Elf has been telling Nic that she will recover and that they will move to Paris. Yoli agrees to Elf's demands and leaves her room to go sneak real food into the hospital so that Lottie and Tina can eat. Elf still isn't interested in food. As Tina prepares for her surgery, Lottie reminds Tina that Loewens, Lottie and Tina's maiden name, are lions.

Analysis

Yoli is placed in a number of roles in this chapter. She is the divorcee, the mother, the daughter, the sister, and the writer. Each of these roles is an important part of who Yoli is and they are ways for those around her to define her. They also limit her. Each role is only a piece of Yoli and they are boxes into which she is expected by society to fit herself. By having so many roles, the writer points out that Yoli is not just one thing that can be defined and placed in a box. Instead, she is an individual who can fill all these roles and uses them to forge an entire person. It also suggests that Yoli has been trying to be all things to all people as she tries to hold her family together and move on with her life.

Water is raised again as Yoli and Jason go out to the floodway to talk about their shared past. The choice of a floodway for a conversation about the past suggests that the past is being washed away. By discussing their past, Jason and Yoli are purging themselves



of its poison. They share stories about their divorces. Talking about something is the first step to healing. This is why Elf's silence is so dangerous. Her refusal to talk is a refusal to heal. Elf doesn't want the past washed away by healing waters. She plans to wash herself away instead.

This circles back to Yoli's idea that society needs shame to function. Shame is a social construct. This means that which actions a person is embarrassed by is defined by the culture they live in. An example from the headlines is the bathroom issue. In North America, we have created a social construct in which we separate bathrooms by gender. In Europe, the social construct is less strict and does not segregate by gender. The social construct Yoli is upset about is that we shun and blame people who are suicidal. She compares this to Switzerland's view of suicide, where it is legal to euthanize people feeling overwhelming sorrow. Switzerland embraces its mentally ill. Yoli feels that this is the healthier viewpoint and that stigmatizing mental illness leads to harm.

Yoli's dream in this chapter is that she is about to play a song in a village surrounded by hay bales. Yoli is Elf in this dream. Yoli has placed Elf somewhere safe where she has a piano and an audience. The hay bales represent protection from life's sorrows. This is Yoli's imaginary cure for Elf, a place of safety with an engaged audience that will allow Elf to heal. Elf must be forced to play, like Yoli is in her dream. Elf finds life in music, so Yoli is trying to find a way to bring music back to Elf. Yet the fact that she doesn't know how to play in the dream is a hint that this method is doomed to failure. Elf's music has left her.

The problems with Aunt Tina mirror Elf's situation. Aunt Tina is slated to have routine open heart surgery. This seems like a contradiction in terms as this surgery is a complicated and dangerous procedure. It is also a metaphor for how Yoli and her family feel about Elf's loss. Elf is cutting herself out of their hearts and it is like open heart surgery. Perhaps, like Tina, they will not survive the loss. Lottie's reminder that Loewens are lions is a call for courage. Lions are symbols of bravery, courage, and danger. Lottie is telling Tina, and by extension Yoli, that they will get through this. Lottie doesn't believe in giving up. The mention of lions is a call to keep fighting.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Toews give Tina a heart condition?

Discussion Question 2

What is the importance of Lottie's maiden name, Loewen?

Discussion Question 3

Has Yoli given up on saving Elf's life?

Vocabulary

ludicrous, floodway, discharge



Chapter 13

Summary

As the chapter begins, Yoli tries to carry on with the minutia of life. She goes to her lawyer and drops off the papers that finalize her divorce. She continues to consider the issue of euthanasia. Yolie talks to Julie about contacting her old philosophy professor and euthanasia advocate Benito Zetina Moreos for advice. Yoli and Julie climb Garbage hill, an old landfill that is now a park, while they discuss Elf. At the top of the hill, Yoli recites her thankful list. Yoli remembers how Elf begged Yoli to help her die last time Yoli visited her. With Elf's condition in mind, Yoli talks herself into taking Elf to Switzerland, even though Julie advises against it.

After leaving Julie, Lottie and Yoli meet for lunch in Elf's hospital room. Yoli notices that Elf is writing the word "pain" over and over in her journal. Before Yoli can react to this sight, Elf is visited by a Mennonite Pastor who gives her the religious reasons not to kill herself. After he leaves, Yoli sings the duck song that Elf taught her as a child to Elf. Lottie follows with a song in Plautsdesch. The journal causes Yoli to speak to the nurses and ask for assurance that Elf is not going to be discharged in the near future. As the narrator, Yoli tells the reader she has dreamed of a petroglyph dog.

In preparation for Tina's heart surgery, Sheila and Frank, Tina's daughter and husband, arrive in Winnipeg from Vancouver to be with her. The chapter ends as Tina goes in for her surgery. It is expected to be a routine procedure.

Analysis

Yoli is moving into the acceptance stage of grieving. She has stopped trying to convince Elf to live and has now agreed to help her die. Yoli has accepted that Elf is not going to get better, that the dream of music healing Elf presented in the last chapter was a fantasy and the reality is that Elf is dying. The only options are to allow her to slowly continue killing herself or to help her. Toews is questioning the reasons for euthanasia and exploring when it is justified.

Yoli has not completely given up on Elf living, as she still begs the hospital to keep Elf. Yoli is hoping for some kind of cure to appear if enough time passes. The sad truth, Yoli is coming to realize, is that there is no cure. The larger question Toews is asking is, does anyone has the right to interfere? Is Elf insane and should others, therefore, interfere with her wishes and force her to take mood altering medication? Alternatively, Elf might be perfectly sane but perfectly finished with this world. In that case, does anyone have the right to keep her alive against her will? Yoli is beginning to see the hospital's attempt to treat Elf as a method of torture. Elf is getting no better and the hospital is simply continuing to try and force Elf to be part of their system. Yoli doesn't see a working treatment method and is beginning to believe there isn't one.



Yoli's dream in this chapter is a petroglyph dog. Dogs represent companionship, loyalty, and love. In petroglyphs, they stand for perfect love. Yoli is struggling to define love. Her dreams tell her that she needs to express perfect love. Awake she wonders how to do that. Yoli decides that loving her sister means acceding to her wishes. Yoli will help kill Elf out of love. She understands that what is legal is not always the same as what is right.

Yoli climbs Garbage hill to be close to God so he will hear her thankful list. Yoli is thankful for her family and their love. The name Garbage hill suggests things lost or thrown away. That Yoli goes here to express thanks for her family foreshadows to the imminent loss of Tina and Elf. Yet the fact that Garbage hill is a transformed dump that is now a park is a sign of hope. Good things can rise out of loss. The hill also foreshadows Yoli acceptance of Elf's death and her eventual life after that loss.

Elf repeatedly writes the word "pain" in her journal. Through repetition, Elf is reinforcing her sorrow. Elf is keeping up her commitment to die by dwelling on her emotional pain. The journal allows her to store her pains so that she can obsess over them at her leisure. When Yoli sees the journal she tries to help Elf by singing a silly song from their childhood. Elf shuts her out. Elf has resolved to allow no happy memories into her mind. This is a sign to her family that Elf is resolved to die and has no wish to be lured back into the land of the living.

Discussion Question 1

Why do Yoli and Lottie sing to Elf?

Discussion Question 2

Why is Yoli resolved to help Elf kill herself - or is she?

Discussion Question 3

Can Elf be saved from death?

Vocabulary

egregiously, petroglyph



Chapter 14

Summary

The chapter begins with Tina's death from complications that arose during her surgery. The family returns to Lottie's and discusses Tina's life. Lottie remembers Tina as a "spark plug" (Ch. 14, 12). At this point, Lottie switches from Starbucks to Black Pearl coffee because life has become serious. Lottie and Yoli pack up and prepare to accompany Frank and Sheila back to Vancouver for the funeral. They check with the hospital and are assured that Elf is not going anywhere until proper follow-up care can be arranged. Yoli feels like she's bursting at the unexpected loss of Aunt Tina. While travelling, she tells Lottie that she plans to take Elf to Toronto once Elf is out of the hospital. She now hopes that Elf will find happiness helping watch over Nora.

Once in Vancouver, Tina has a Mennonite church funeral. At the funeral, Yoli wonders how much grief one person can take. She notes that her grandmother lost 6 of her 16 children in childhood and now only has one left, Lottie. During the funeral, Tina's great grandson gets away from his mother and eats some of Tina's ashes before he is caught.

Analysis

Lottie switches from drinking Starbucks coffee to Black Pearl, which she likes more. This suggests that Lottie is now taking things more seriously. Elf's slow decline has a sense of unreality, but Tina's death was swift and unexpected. It reminds Lottie that life is short and needs to be lived not drifted through. By switching to a coffee that she actually likes, Lottie is asserting that her needs matter. Previously, she has put everything aside in her attempt to save her daughter. With Tina's death Lottie realizes that life is passing her by as she sits by Elf's bedside.

The child eating Tina's ashes is a sign that life goes on. Time is cyclical, as this book has reiterated again and again. The circle of life creates new life from death. Tina's death is a part of this cycle. The child reminds her mourners that their life does not end with Tina's death. Nor does Tina's life truly end with her death. She lives on in her children and grandchildren. As long as she is remembered she is not truly dead. This gives Yoli hope about Elf's situation as she grieves for Tina. Elf will not be lost because she, too, will be remembered. At the same time, Elf's sudden loss motivates Yoli to renew the fight for Elf's life. Elf is still alive and surely if she comes to Toronto and sees Nora she will be absorbed back into the living part of the lifecycle.

Discussion Question 1

Why does the author choose to kill Tina?



Discussion Question 2

How does Tina's death affect the situation with Elf?

Discussion Question 3

Why do Lottie and Yoli feel it is okay to leave Elf alone?

Vocabulary

freiwilligis, eulogy, catharsis, spark plug



Chapter 15 and 16

Summary

After Aunt Tina's funeral, Yoli returns to Toronto because Nora needs her. Her son Will has been taking care of Nora but has to return to New York for work. Will assures Yoli she is a good mother and sister. Yoli tries to find funding for the trip to Switzerland but is turned down by her bank. She realizes the only money available for the trip is Elf's money from Elf's joint account. Elf is still slowly dying in the hospital as she refuses treatment and food.

Back in Winnipeg, Elf is granted a day pass for her birthday. At roughly the same time in Toronto, Yoli and Nora go to play tennis. When they return home, Dan calls them with the bad news from Nic. Later the executive director of the hospital calls while they are packing. Yoli phones Will's father to get Will on a plane to Winnipeg when she can't get Will on the phone. Finally, Yoli gets her mother on the phone and sends her home to where Yoli has Lottie's friends gathered. Yoli and Nora get on a plane without even changing clothes.

Analysis

The lines between grief and happiness blur. Adults are meant to be in control, but Yoli feels like she has no clue. Everything is in limbo and Yoli survives day by day. She realizes that Elf's wish to go to Switzerland without Nic's knowledge is impossible as Elf's money is the only way to fund the trip. This suggests that lying to Nic is dangerous as it has trapped both Yoli and Elf. Elf needs to be open about her emotions and her wishes with her entire family. Though trite the truth may set her free.

Later we learn that this is a false hope as Elf is never willing to speak the truth. Toews never has anyone say that Elf is dead in chapter 16 even though the entire chapter is about dealing with her death. It makes one wonder when someone is dead. Is it when they physically die or once everyone who knows them hears of their death? Dying is as much a mental process as it is a physical one. Toews delays the explanation of Elf's death to keep her alive. This chapter is about miscommunication as calls go in circles. Everyone is lost.

Yoli and Nora playing Tennis is another form of escapism. They are both overwhelmed by Elf's situation and have to take a step back. Tennis is also a tribute to Elf as Elf's favorite game is Blind Tennis. Tennis is a way for Nora and Yoli to enjoy themselves while thinking of Elf at a happy time in her life.

Discussion Question 1

When does Elf die?



Discussion Question 2

What does Elf's death mean to her family?

Discussion Question 3

Does modern technology aid in communication when those in Winnipeg are trying to spread the news about Elf?

Vocabulary

executive, limbo, communication



Chapter 17

Summary

The family all gather at Nic and Elf's apartment. Yoli and Nora are still in their tennis clothes. Will retreats to the bathroom to cry in peace. Nic explains that after he and Elf had lunch she sent him to the library. When he came back with the books Elf was gone. He thought it was safe to leave her alone because she had asked for books. While they talk, Elf's birthday cake is delivered and the family eats it. Nic mentions that Elf wrote a book while she was in Italy last August about saying goodbye. The family continues to talk about Elf's life, her style and her habit of empathizing with losers. They learn that Elf stepped in front of a train just like her father. The chapter ends as Yoli's mother makes plans to move in with her.

Analysis

Books have always been important to Elf and she chooses some of her old favorites for Nic to get from the library. The library is a lending institution and requires material be returned within three weeks. Both of these things suggest a commitment to the future. Elf will stick around to read the books because she likes them and she is obligated to return them. These social contracts are the reasons Nic felt safe leaving Elf alone. He believed she would abide by society's unwritten rules and that by asking for books Elf was considering the future. The fact that Elf, instead, uses this as a chance to escape being guarded and kill herself suggests that she no longer felt bound by the rules of society. She no longer cared about future social obligations because she had no intention of having a future.

Elf's birthday cake is delivered to Nic's house after she is dead. Her family decides to eat it anyway. Eating her cake serves as a way to celebrate Elf's life. It is also a sign that life goes on. Whatever happens, if people want to live they have to eat. It echoes their actions after Jake's suicide where they used the money in his pockets to buy takeout.

Lottie decides to move in with Yoli and Nora. This decision suggests that Lottie is no longer comfortable living on her own. It also allows the women to share their grief. Living together, they can help each other deal with Elf's loss.

Elf died like her father: by jumping in front of a train. This action unites them in death as they were united in life. By choosing the same means of death as her father Elf uses her final act to show her family the source of her sorrow. In her mind her father caused her sorrows and only by uniting with him in death will she be free. It also allows her a way to overcome her fear of dying alone as she is dying with Jake even though he is already gone.



Discussion Question 1

Why does Elf jump in front of a train?

Discussion Question 2

Why does the family eat Elf's birthday cake?

Discussion Question 3

Why is Lottie moving in with Yoli?

Vocabulary

denouement



Chapter 18

Summary

Elf leaves her life insurance money to Yoli. Yoli decides to use the money to buy a house. She devotes her time to fixing the new house. Oddly enough, the house Yoli chooses is a tear down in a bad part of town near a polluted lake. Yoli uses the renovation project to try and deal with her anger at her sister and the hospital over Elf's death.

Analysis

The state of the house is a metaphor for Yoli's state of mind. Yoli feels that her life is falling apart and that everyone she loves dies on her. The system is a failure for not helping Elf or at least stopping her from killing herself. At the same time, Yoli doesn't really believe Elf could be stopped indefinitely from killing herself. She feels guilty for not taking Elf to Switzerland and forcing her to die alone. If Yoli can fix the house up she can heal herself. Suicide is a sin because of what it does to those left behind. It is a selfish vanity.

Yoli is in the anger stage of grief. She is angry at the hospital for breaking their word and letting Elf go and she is angry at Elf for not waiting.

Discussion Question 1

How might Yoli get past her anger?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Yoli buy a house in a poor neighbourhood?

Discussion Question 3

Why did the hospital let Elf go?

Vocabulary

pollution



Chapter 19

Summary

Lottie arrives in Toronto in the middle of a stormy night. Lottie is to live on the first floor and insists on taking the bars off the windows. Though Lottie's apartment is finished the house is still being renovated. Yoli writes AMPS on a section of the wall that is slated to be painted. Finally able to look after herself, Lottie gets cataract surgery. As she settles into her new home, Lottie travels the Queen West art and fashion district shopping and making friends. She integrates into the community, donates much of her furniture and clothing to local charities, and joins a local church group. This causes Yoli's house to become a community project. Lottie also becomes a rabid Blue Jays fan. As Yoli is swept up in her mother's wake, their neighbor Amy tells Yoli a story about a bird being released.

The three women are still grieving. Lottie dreams of frozen food. Yoli dreams she was talking to Elf in her kitchen. Elf told her that she was now on her own. Yoli also has a dream about a man butchering lambs. Nora dreams about the coldest summer. The family decides to place John Clare's "I am" on Elf's headstone, and that there will be musical notes, not words on Elf's headstone. Yoli continues to feel guilty for not taking Elf to Switzerland and feels that she forced Elf to die alone. Yoli remembers when Elf played Mary in the Church pageant and Yoli invented the role of Mary's sister. Still, life goes on and soon Yoli and her family are celebrating Christmas. They get a massive tree that almost destroys the piano before it is put up. Claudio and Nic come for Christmas. Claudio brings condolence letters from Elf's fans. He tells her family about her final performance and says that it was her best. Will and his new girlfriend Zoe visit.

Analysis

Lottie arrives during a thunderstorm. Storms can symbolize washing away of problems, rebirth, grief, and loss. Having Lottie arrive during a storm represents the loss Lottie, Yoli, and Nora feel at Elf's death. The storm shows that there is hope for the future. After the grief, there will still be life. Lottie is reborn during the storm and comes out of it in the acceptance stage of grief. She is now ready to move on with her life, remember the daughter she has lost, and cherish the one she still has. The storm also foreshadows Yoli's acceptance of Elf's death.

We see Yoli continue to work through her grief in this chapter as she writes AMPS on the wall of her home. By choosing to write AMPS on a section of the wall that she knows will be painted over Yoli is accepting that her sorrows will be covered over. Yoli knows it is time to move on with her life. The sorrow of Elf's loss will always be there, but it is time to paint it over with a life well lived. This is echoed by Lottie's cataract surgery. Cataracts affect a person's ability to see, causing the world to lose color and become blurry. By removing the cataracts Lottie is putting the world back into focus. Lottie's



cataracts can be read as a metaphor for grief. It is only by accepting Elf's loss and moving on with life that the world will once more be seen clearly.

Yoli's neighbor, Amy, tells Yoli a story about a trapped bird being released. This is a parallel for Elf's death. Like the bird, Elf was trapped. Only through dying was Elf able to fly free. In her heart, Yoli has already accepted this, or she would not have agreed to take Elf to Switzerland. The story of the bird serves to remind Yoli that death is what Elf wanted and that Elf is now happy. It lets Yoli begin to accept Elf's death.

Lottie's dream of frozen food is a survival dream. Frozen food is a fast and easy meal. It suggests that she is not as accepting of her daughter's death as she seems. Lottie is grieving in her own way and surviving day to day. Faking happiness until she feels it like Yoli suggested to Elf in an earlier chapter. Both Yoli and her mother are survivors. Yoli's dream of talking to her sister is a way of letting go. Yoli feels incredible guilt about trapping Elf in a life Elf could not endure simply because Elf felt that Yoli needed to be looked after. This dream, where Yoli is told she is on her own, is a way of processing Elf's loss and saying goodbye. This is further shown by Yoli's other dream about a butcher killing lambs. In this dream, Elf is the lamb. It represents Yoli's wish that she had taken her sister to Switzerland. The death of the lambs are swift and painless and that is the death she wanted for her sister. The butcher is Yoli and the Swiss doctor simultaneously and represents someone to hold Elf's hand as she died. This dream shows that Yoli feels incredibly guilty that Elf died alone. Nora's dream about the coldest summer represents her own grief at her Aunt Elf's loss. Cold is often equated with grief and loss.

Claudio's story of Elf's final performance is a way to explain her suicide. Before she died, Elf played a final practice session for her aborted tour. Claudio tells how she gave the performance her all and left everyone in tears. Elf was a woman who lived in and was consumed by music. Claudio is suggesting that the perfection of Elf's final performance completed the process and she was completely lost to the music. Her family shows their acceptance of this explanation by choosing to place the music for John Clare's "I am" on Elf's gravestone as a final epitaph. The music gives a reason for Elf's sorrow.

Discussion Question 1

How is Lottie dealing with Elf's death?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Yoli resent the manner of Elf's death?

Discussion Question 3

How is Yoli processing Elf's loss?

Vocabulary

lees, cataracts, condolence



Chapter 20

Summary

This final chapter opens with Lottie's heart attack. The family ends up having Christmas dinner in the emergency room on Christmas eve while they wait for news. Once they are able to visit Lottie, she tells Yoli that she dreamed of Amelia Earhart while she was out of it. Lottie heart attack leaves Yoli alone on Christmas day. She phones Julie who is also alone and they discuss the past year. Yoli tells Julie about a dream she has in which Julie slept with a bum who was once a cellist and wanted to take him home to care for him. This proved impossible, however, as the bum did not want to leave the street.

Later, Yoli writes a letter to Elf telling Elf that she wishes she could have taken Elf to Zurich, Switzerland. Yoli visits Lottie in the hospital and they discuss Yoli's calls to the hospital in Winnipeg to speak to Elf. Yoli promises to stop. Lottie is then released from the hospital and the family all goes to visit Will in New York. The book ends with Yoli dreaming that she and Elf are in Switzerland and have an appointment at the clinic the next day.

Analysis

Lottie dreams of Amelia Earhart when she is in the hospital. Amelia Earhart was a female pilot who went missing trying to cross the ocean. She represents flying free, facing the unknown and adventure. In this context, it suggests that Lottie is flying free of her feelings of grief and loss for Elf. That she is ready to embrace the adventures life still has to offer.

Having Christmas dinner in the hospital and then placing Yoli alone on Christmas day is a use of juxtaposition. Christmas is a time of joy, family, gift giving, good cheer, and general merriment. The author contrasts this traditional view of the holiday seasons with reminders of Elf and Tina's recent deaths, Lottie's heart attack, and isolation. This is an extreme of the cliché that it is possible to be alone even in a crowd. Toews is showing the reader how grief isolates and even physically harms those it affects.

Yet Toews is careful not to leave her readers there. She again uses dreams to let her characters process their emotions. Yoli dreams about Julie taking home and caring for a bum who was once a cellist. Julie is a stand-in for Yoli and the bum represents Elf. This dream is about what Yoli wanted to happen with Elf. Yoli dreams that she could take Elf in from the cold of Elf's sorrow, shelter her in Yoli's love and that it would fix everything. Yet even in her dreams, Yoli knows this is impossible as the bum turns Julie away just as Elf turned Yoli away. Elf wanted to linger in her sorrow. Yoli must accept that there was no way to reach Elf because Elf did not want to be reached.



Yoli's second dream not only ends the novel, but also Yoli's overwhelming guilt over her sister's death. Yoli dreams of taking her sister to Zurich to be euthanized. This dream represents Yoli's acceptance of Elf's wish to die. By imagining complying with Elf's final wishes Yoli is able to accept the manner of Elf's death.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Yoli dream of taking Elf to Zurich?

Discussion Question 2

What does the author accomplish through the use of dreams in Chapter 20?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Lottie have a heart attack?

Vocabulary

panoply, tinnitus



Characters

Yolanda (Yoli) von Reisen

Yoli acts as the novel's narrator. Yoli is Elf's younger sister. As a child, she lived with her family in the Mennonite community of East Village. Yoli always felt she stood in her sister's shadow and constantly emulated. She went as far as reading the philosophical tracts such as Adorno that her sister was enamored with, yet she never understood them the way Elf did. Like many young girls, she was fascinated by horses. Though not a gifted rider she held onto her passion for horses as she grew up.

Yoli is now a published author of the Rhonda series of Young Adult novels about cowgirls. These days she has finally tired of writing genre fiction, though she keeps up with the series for the money. She has secured a grant and is currently working on a more serious novel about sisters. The novel is semi-autobiographical and focuses heavily on Elf. Yoli sees life through the lens of a writer and is constantly analyzing the world around her.

Yoli has recently moved from Winnipeg to Toronto with her daughter Nora. Nora is a ballerina and needs to be in Toronto for her lessons. Yoli is currently in the middle of an amicable divorce from her husband Dan. Dan has fled to Borneo with his mistress and Yoli is left to look after their daughter Nora by herself. She has a son, Will, from a previous marriage. He is currently studying at NYU. Yoli relies on Will to look after his sister while she is in Winnipeg helping Elf.

Elfrieda (Elf) von Reisen

Elfrieda is the main character of the novel. Elf is a suicidal concert pianist. Music is the consuming force in Elf's life. As a child, her parents purchased a forbidden piano in the hopes of finding an outlet for her excess energy. She became enamored of the possibility of perfection that music offers. After high school, Elf left home to tour Europe and learn from a variety of the world's best concert pianists. She returned home from her tour in despair and spent a long time in bed.

She is described as green eyes and shiny black hair. She currently lives in Winnipeg with her husband Nic. She met Nic when he took piano lessons from her in an effort to get her attention. Nic plans to take Elf to Paris where she can play in concert halls and he can further his scientific research. Elf's family believes that as long as she can be encouraged to play she will find happiness.

Elf has spent her life consumed by sorrow. She feels overwhelming sorrow and feels that the only escape from her sorrow is death. Despite her families beliefs, she nurtures her sorrow with her piano playing, using her skills to reinforce and share her feelings of despair. Her previous suicide attempts have failed only because she is afraid to die alone. She has decided the best thing to do is be euthanized in Switzerland and spends



much of the novel trying to convince Yoli to take her there to die. Yet she is unable to tell her husband Nic that she sees only death in her future and continues to encourage his discussions about moving to Paris.

Lottie von Reisen

Lottie is Elf and Yoli's mother. She has always felt confined by the Mennonite community of East Village. In spite of the elders, she taught her daughters that women are equal to men and can succeed in this world. After Elf left for Europe, Lotti went to University and became a social worker. Lottie has a deep need to help others and is devastated that she cannot reach her daughter.

Nic

Nic is a medical scientist. He is Elf's husband. They fell in love when he took piano lessons from her after her return from Europe. He has great faith in the system and is sure that if only Elf would take her medication everything would be alright. However, he is at a loss as to how to force Elf to do anything. He is afraid of restricting her free will. Nic wants to respect his wife's wishes. Even when she orders a suicide manual he refuses to dispose of it, settling for hiding it until she is in a better frame of mind. He is sure that proper treatment, the love of her family, and her music will heal Elf.

Jacob (Jake) von Reisen

Jacob is Elf and Yoli's father. He was a scholarly man who felt confined by his faith. He killed himself seven years prior to the time of the novel by stepping in front of a train. Like Elf, he dealt constantly with the feeling of overwhelming sorrow. His sorrow is felt constantly by Elf. He often retreated to his room when he felt defeated by life. His behavior became a model for Elf.

Janice

Janice is a nurse at the hospital who answers Yoli's questions about Elf's care. She seems to be the only one willing to work around the system to see individuals. Yoli relies on her to watch over Elf.

Julie

Julie is a second cousin who grew up with Yoli in East Village. She is still Yoli's closest friend. She acts as a sounding board while Yoli tries to come to terms with Elf's demands to be euthanized. She tells Yoli not to do it. Euthanasia is illegal in Canada. More importantly, how can Yoli live with herself if she aids in the death of her sister? Julie and Yoli talk frequently about Elf's wish for assisted suicide.



Radek

Radek is a Czech violinist Julie introduced Yoli to. He is in love with Elf, but he and Yoli are sleeping together. He has never met Elf, nor does he know she is in the hospital. He tells Yoli that Elf's playing is a window into her private pain and hearing her play is voyeuristic.

Dan

Dan is Yoli's soon to be ex-husband. He is the father of Yoli's daughter Nora. He is currently in Borneo with his lover and so unable to watch Nora while Yoli looks after Elf. He does still care for Yoli and they have a rocky relationship as they finalize their divorce.

Finbar

Finbar is a Toronto lawyer. He is Yoli's boyfriend. He dumps her while she is in Winnipeg because her life is too complicated for him. Yoli asks him about assisted suicide but it is not until after Elf's death that he realizes how serious the situation was. Finbar also keeps an eye on Nora for Yoli while she is in Winnipeg.

Claudio

Claudio is Elf's agent, he handles all her concert bookings. He has represented Elf since meeting her outside of a concert hall when she was 17. He has always looked after her health. He tries to get Elf to play, believing it will heal her as it has in the past. He also takes care of canceling her tour once it is clear she will not be playing.

Judson

Judson is Julie's boyfriend. Yoli and Julie have begun meeting on her front porch because he is trying to get her to stop smoking. Meeting on the front porch allows Julie to throw her cigarette away whenever she sees anyone coming.

Tina

Tina is Yoli and Elf's aunt. She arrives in Winnipeg to help her sister Lottie look after Elf. She has already lost one of her own children to suicide. She and Lottie find Elf after her third suicide attempt and rush her to the hospital. Shortly after that Tina suffers a heart attack and lands in the hospital herself. It is her loss that brings her sister Lottie out of the stasis Elf's illness has put her into.



Leni

Leni is Aunt Tina's daughter who killed herself seven years ago. She and Yoli would be the same age if Leni had lived. Leni threw herself into the river.

Jason

Jason is a car mechanic who lives in Winnipeg. Yoli knows him from the University of Winnipeg where she lent him notes in exchange for pot. He comes back into her life when Nic's car breaks down. Jason is sad over a recent breakup and Yoli commiserates with him.

Sheila

Sheila is Yoli's cousin and Tina's daughter. She flies to Winnipeg to be with her mother during Tina's surgery. She ends up flying back to Vancouver with the family for Tina's funeral.

Frank

Frank is Tina's husband. In spite of crippling diabetes, he rushes to his wife's side when she is undergoing heart surgery. He puts his own pain aside to support his wife.

Will

Will is Yoli son from her first marriage. He currently lives in New York where he attends NYU and works construction jobs during the summer. When his Aunt Elf becomes ill he returns to Toronto to watch over his sister Nora while his mother is in Winnipeg.

Nora

Nora is Yoli's 14-year-old daughter. She is a ballerina and the reason Yoli moved to Toronto. She divides her time between dancing, school and her boyfriend Anders. She is worried sick about her Aunt Elf and tries not to be a burden to her mother while the family rallies to Elf's sickbed.

Anders

Anders is Nora's boyfriend. He is Swedish and knows little English. Like Nora, he is a dancer. He moves in with Yoli and Nora for a time though he appears to disappear after Elf's death.



Symbols and Symbolism

The von Reisen family house

The von Reison Family home symbolizes community, family, safety, roots, ties to the past and even a sense of self. At the beginning of the novel, Yoli and Elf lose their family home. By losing their home the sisters are set adrift in the world. They no longer have any ties to the past or any sense of security. They must now face the world alone.

Fire

The type of fire presented in the novel foreshadows great loss and destruction of the family standing around it. Uncontrolled fire symbolizes destruction, danger and even loss of life. It is only controlled that fire is a source of warmth and comfort. After the loss of their home, the von Reisen family goes camping and manages to explode a propane stove.

Glass Piano

The Glass Piano is a symbol of Elf's inner agony. Glass is fragile and must be treated with care lest it breaks. A piano is a symbol of music. It stands for escapism, emotions, joy, sadness, and community. Elf tells Yoli she has a glass piano inside her. In Elf's hands, it represents sorrow, grief, voyeurism. Elf uses her piano playing to share and reinforce her feelings of overwhelming sorrow. Her audiences become swept up into her sorrows and experience her inner agony. She has internalized a piano as a circular way to fuel her sorrow. That it is made of glass shows the fragility of internalizing sorrow and the danger of it destroying her.

Time

To Elf time symbolizes social order, community, and familial ties. Time is used both symbolically and as a minor theme by the author. Symbols are typically objects yet as Elf lies in her hospital room she objectifies time in order to dismiss it from her reality. Social order, community, and familial ties are all things that Elf seeks to leave behind so she can die without guilt.

Floods

A flood signifies the washing away of the old order, loss, renewal, death, rebirth, fertility, new life, and change. There are multiple floods in *All My Puny Sorrows*. Harking back to Noah and the biblical flood they all symbolize the same thing, from the first flood in Lottie's bathroom, to the flooded river in Winnipeg, to the floodway Yoli visits, to the



flood in Yoli's basement back in Toronto. Toews uses floods to foreshadow Elf's suicide and Tina's death. She uses the water as a symbol of grief and to show that life goes on even after a great loss.

Thunderstorm the night of Lottie's arrival

The storm that marks Lottie's arrival in Toronto symbolizes rebirth, a washing away of sorrow and new life. This is a similar symbol to the repeated floods that echo through the novel. The storm is a symbol of Lottie's acceptance of Elf's death as well as foreshadowing Yoli's acceptance. The storm shows that even in grief there is still life.

Tree in Yoli's yard

The tree in Yoli's yard becomes symbolic of Elf. Just as the tree is losing its limbs and withdrawing into its trunk Elf is cutting her ties to society. She is no longer doing her concert. She not only no longer speaks to fans, she doesn't answer the phone, and while she reads Yoli's letters, she doesn't write back. The only way to communicate with Elf now is in person. Like the tree, she has been stripped to her trunk. It is implied that the next step is to cut down the tree now that it is dying. A person cannot live in solitude.

Lions

Lions are symbols of courage and bravery. When in the hospital Lottie reminds Tina that they are Loewens, or lions. Lottie is telling Tina that they can get through this. They are a courageous people who can face anything.

Pictograph dog

The pictograph dog is symbolic of perfect love. Yoli dreams of a pictograph dog. Dogs in general, are symbolic of loyalty, family, non-judgement, and love. In pictographs, they represent perfect love. The dog is a sign to Yoli that she must act as her heart tells her. Yoli loves Elf and her actions must reflect that love.

Food

Food symbolizes community, nourishment, health, family, safety and happiness. This is a recurring symbol throughout the novel. Elf is starving herself to death. Elf is rejecting those things because they tie her to life.



Settings

Hospital

The action centers around Elf's hospital room. The characters are there in their minds even when they are physically elsewhere. The significance of the hospital underlines by the author's choice to place those scenes alone in the present tense. This is a family in crisis. Elf is mentally ill and her family has rallied around her sickbed in an attempt to save her from herself. Centering the action around the hospital builds an underlying sense of urgency and dread into the story. Though Elf has been saved, she is still ill and as she continues to be held at the hospital it becomes clearer how little help there is available for her.

Toronto

The secondary setting for the novel is Toronto where Yoli lives. Early in the novel, Toronto is constantly in the background of the novel as Yoli checks on her children and ensures they haven't destroyed the house in her absence. The action in Toronto centers around the family home. Later in the novel Yoli buys a house and the whole community becomes involved in restoring it. Toronto is placed in the novel as the site of family. It is where roots are laid and community ties are created.

Vancouver

Vancouver is a side note in the novel and the site of Tina's funeral. It is significant that Tina's family all fly back from Winnipeg to Vancouver to ensure that she gets the church funeral she would have wished. Tina's funeral is a homecoming and a moment that shows life goes on even in grief. Vancouver becomes a site of rebirth.

New York

Near the end of the novel Yoli, Lottie and Nora travel to New York to visit Yoli's son Will. One night on the back to Will's place they get lost. This experience allows Yoli an epiphany during which she realizes that retracing your steps in the dark is the meaning of life. Thus, Toews uses New York as another site of rebirth similar to Vancouver.

Switzerland

Though Elf and Yoli never make it to Switzerland it is a recurring ideal throughout the novel. Switzerland is a symbol of hope for Elf. Going there will let her die in peace surrounded by those she loves. In Switzerland Elf can find a painless release from her

sorrow. To Yoli, Switzerland is a symbol of both hope and destruction. In Switzerland Elf can find the dignified death she wants and the release she craves.

Yoli's house

Yoli lives in Toronto. Near the end of the novel, she buys her own home with the money Elf leaves her. She chooses to buy an old wreck of a house in Queens. Yoli spends the last chapters of the novel restoring her new home. This transformation of house to home lets Yoli heal from Elf's death.

Winnipeg

The bulk of the novel is set in Winnipeg. The main characters bounce between the hospital, Lottie's home, Nic and Elf's home, and Julie's house. While in Winnipeg, Yoli stays in Lottie's guest room. The action really centers around Elf's hospital room. Aunt Tina becomes unexpectedly ill and dies while in Winnipeg to care for Elf. Winnipeg is where Elf tries and finally succeeds in killing herself. Winnipeg becomes marked as a place of loss.



Themes and Motifs

Euthanasia

Throughout *All my Puny Sorrows* Toews examines whether it is morally right to euthanize those who are suicidal. As the novel progresses, Elf slowly dies of despair. Elf tries to “treat” herself with repeated suicide attempts and she eventually succeeds in killing herself. Throughout the novel, Elf begs her sister Yoli to help her die by taking her to Switzerland. Yoli repeatedly debates with herself and her best friend Julie the morality, ethics, and legalities of euthanasia. Yoli begins the novel staunchly opposed to the issue. She thinks holding this idea in Elf’s mind is giving Elf a reason to cling to her despair. If there were not a relatively easy way for Elf to kill herself and die surrounded by her family she would fight harder to live. Yoli starts out seeing euthanasia as enabling Elf’s illness.

Yet like any good writer, she cannot help doing her research. She discovers the practice is illegal in Canada and carries a term of manslaughter (please note that the laws have changed since the writing of this book, though euthanasia in Elf’s case would still be illegal under the new laws). Yoli learns that Seconal, a drug used to carry out death sentences, is available in pet stores in Mexico and that Switzerland allows legal euthanasia for people who are overwhelmed by sorrow. Therefore, Elf is not the only one to see death as the only cure for depression.

The idea that this is an accepted practice in Switzerland, a place known for its acceptance of the mentally ill, makes Yoli re-examine her beliefs. She understands that it is impossible to judge another’s pain. She also observes Elf’s repeated attempts at suicide and can see that while Elf would prefer the peaceful passing of assisted suicide she is not above taking a more direct route. This suggests to Yoli that euthanasia is not enabling her sister’s illness by offering her an easy solution to her problems. What it offers instead is a way to align Elf’s need to die with her fear of dying alone.

Yet Toews does not have Elf and Yoli travel to Switzerland. Instead, Elf throws herself in front of a train. By writing a book about euthanasia that does not use the practice Toews is able to look at both sides of the question. Euthanasia is not a magic bullet. It is still a solution that offers only death. Yoli is overcome by guilt for not taking Elf to a Swiss clinic and the book ends with a peaceful vision of such a trip. In the dream, Elf is happy and at peace. Yet surely there was some less drastic way to bring happiness to Elf? Toews offers no answers the euthanasia debate she merely presents more facets to the question.

The book appears to act as a type of catharsis for Toews, who admits that she wrote it as a response to her sister’s suicide. The novel may represent her wish for what should have happened with her sister’s death. An answer to the euthanasia question is not presented because there is no simple answer and to provide one, even in a work of fiction, lessens the importance of the debate. Toews is admitting that she doesn’t have



the answers, but that as the current system is broken, the first step to fixing it is asking the questions.

Elf's Family

The novel examines the importance of familial bonds as Toews examines how love binds us to life. Family is symbolic of community, kinship ties, love, belonging, trust, support, and roots. As Elf lies dying in a Winnipeg hospital, her family rallies around her in an attempt to save her life. Elf's husband Nic, mother Lottie and sister Yoli represent her core family group. Her more extended family also comes together to support her. This includes her cousin Julie, her niece Nora, nephew Will, Aunt Tina and even her agent Claudio. These two groups surround Elf with their love and support in an attempt to drag her back into the world of the living. Lottie becomes Elf's primary caregiver, returning to the mother daughter relationship of Elf's childhood. Lottie tries to ensure that Elf eats, talks to people, plays the piano and makes no further attempts on her life.

Elf, though she professes to love her family, uses their love to manipulate them. When Elf wants out of the hospital the first time she begins taking her medication and eating. She uses her family's hopes for her recovery against them so that they will spring her from the hospital where she is too closely guard for her to attempt to take her own life. Back at home she gives her goodbyes and makes another suicide attempts.

She uses sentiment to get out of the hospital the last time as well, as she secures a pass for a familial celebration of her birthday. By showing interest in such things she fools people into believing that she is thinking of the future and wishes to live. She gets Nic to leave her alone once she is out of the hospital by requesting he retrieve a list of her favorite books from the library. He mistakenly takes this as a sign she is taking an interest in life again and is finally on the mend. Elf betrays her husband's trust and uses his hope to get him away so she can kill herself.

Family is a tie that can be cut only in death. Your family is the communal group you are born in. A good family, like Elf's, will love and support you no matter what happens in your life. You need only ask and they will do all in their power to aid you. Elf loves her family as much as they love her. Toews is trying to discover how that love can exist and yet not be enough to hold Elf to life. When is love not enough? Toews has no real answer as to why Elf killed herself. Elf had a loving and supporting family, was healthy and wealthy. Sometimes things just happen and those left behind have to deal with it as best they can. Toews finds comfort in this idea.

Time as cyclical

Time is a cyclical beast that repeats the same patterns over and over. We are all part of the cycle of life and will be part of it long after our physical deaths. Toews plays with the human construct of time through *All my Puny Sorrows*. Elf believes that her sorrow is inherited from her father. She sees sorrow as a genetic trait like blue eyes or brown hair.



Time, to Elf, is an enemy that forces her to live long after she has finished with life. It is an inexorable force that controls her no matter how she struggles against it.

Toews extends the idea of life after death as Dan is the one to deliver the news of Elf's death to Yoli. Dan was the only one Nic could get ahold of since Nora and Yoli had turned their phones off to play tennis. In this way, Elf survives for a time after death while her loved ones and fans are told of her death. Some believe that as long as a single person still believes that you are alive, you are no matter your actual state, rather like Schrodinger's cat.

Toews reinforces the cyclical nature of time when Tina's grandchild eats some of her ashes. Life goes on and one generation feeds the next. Ashes to ashes and dust to dust. Loved ones live on in the memories of those they leave behind. No one dies as long as they are remembered. Tina left behind a loving family and so is not truly dead.

It is an oft repeated truism that those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it. Toews takes it a step further and suggests that history is a series of cycles as humans repeat the same mistakes as those who went before. Perhaps we can learn only from our own mistakes and thus must endlessly repeat history's blunders. Yet if everything comes around then surely people return as well. Perhaps it is not merely memories that live on and affect those left behind as Toews reiterates throughout her novel but as the Buddhists believe souls that echo and return. Though if that were the case we would then be in the rather depressing place of constantly repeating our own mistakes so it is unlikely that Toews means to extend her ideas this far.

Grief, loss, sorrow

As the novel walks its narrator, Yoli, through the five stages of grief, the author pulls from her own personal experience with grief from a sibling's suicide to show the affect it has on the survivors. The other characters make their own journeys through the stages of grief as the novel progresses, but the plot is driven by Yoli's journey. Yoli's grief is driven primarily by her sister Elf. Elf, herself, is overwhelmed by sorrow. This sorrow is killing her and causing untold grief for her loved ones. Elf believes that her sorrow is inherited from her father. Lottie worries that not only Elf but Yoli were damaged by their father's suicide.

Throughout the novel, Toews examines the stages of grief. Various characters walk through them at their own pace. Lottie seems the most accepting of Elf's choice to die. Elf, oddly enough, believes that Yoli will be the most accepting of her wish to die and approaches Yoli when she wants help to die. It is this plea for help more than anything else that effects Yoli's grieving process, as she is overwhelmed with guilt for failing to take Elf to Switzerland. Yoli is worried that her actions forced Elf to die alone.

Yet is not everyone, in the end, alone in death? Toews herself is using the writing of this novel as part of her own grieving process for her dead sister. The novel explores the many faces of grief. With the death of Aunt Tina Toews asks the question whether it is



better to lose someone when you are expecting them to die, as in Elf's case, or when it is a surprise, as is the case with Tina. Like many of the questions she raises she has no answer. Each death hurts in its own way.

Escapism through Travel

The author shows that, try as they may, people can't escape grief, and ignoring another person's grief won't make it go away. Throughout the novel people try to run from the problem that they cannot solve. Nic goes to Spain with his father; Lottie takes off to the Caribbean; and Yoli travels back to Toronto. Each of these people is trying to run away from reality. They can't find a way to help Elf and so they escape the reality of her slow death for a time by leaving. Exotic destinations are typically used as markers for those who wish to have no responsibilities, to live a life free of cares, and to leave their troubles behind. Nic, Lottie, and Yoli all know that they cannot truly escape, but they dream of returning from away to find Elf magically cured. Since they can find no way to cure Elf they are left with prayer and hope.

Elf is seeking a more permanent form of escape. Her troubles so overwhelm her that she wants to run from them forever. she is unwilling to face the inevitable return that vacation escape force. Plus it is impossible to run from your own mind because wherever you go there you are. The only true escape from such a problem is death. Despair cannot follow you into the grave to plague you in the afterlife. No one can catch you and force you to return. The problem is that this is a permanent solution to a temporary problem. Surely Elf will not feel overwhelming sorrow forever. Though Toews raises the idea that perhaps she will and dying is a logical solution to an otherwise unsolvable problem.

Styles

Point of View

The novel has a single first person narrator - Yoli. Using the first person creates a personal connection between the reader and the narrator as the reader becomes the “I” in the novel. This makes it a useful perspective for an emotional work as it increases reader’s empathy. Yet, first person narration is incredibly limiting. The reader only knows what Yoli thinks, feels and sees. We have no insight into Elf’s thoughts except as they are filtered through Yoli’s observations. The author may have chosen this viewpoint rather than tell the story from Elf’s point of view or from a variety of viewpoints as a way to reflect her own experiences. The author, after all, notes that this novel was inspired by the suicide of the author’s sister. She may wish to place the reader in a position similar to the one she was placed in, in real life. That said this work is fiction and should not be read autobiographically.

Language and Meaning

The author has chosen to avoid technical terms in her writing. Elf is hospitalized in the psych ward and must have some sort of diagnoses such as manic depressive or bipolar but Toews steers away from such labels. Instead, she uses Elf’s own words. Elf is suffering from “overwhelming sorrow,” a surfeit of emotion not a disease. Toews is, with such language, aiming at a general audience. She is also using language to show the person behind the label. Suicide is one of those things where it is very hard to know how to deal with it appropriately. Toews is asking what is crazy and how do we know? By avoiding labelling Elf she is able to explore the possibility that individual rights should be extended to those we now label as mentally ill (a term not found in Toews novel).

Structure

The novel consists of 20 chapters. With the exception of Chapters 15, 16 and 17 each of this chapter is about 20 pages long. The excluded chapters range from three to six pages in length. These are the chapters that deal with Elf’s death. By making them much shorter than the rest of the chapters Toews causes them to stand out. She is saying that there is little that can be said about death. Elf’s death occurs outside the novel as our narrator is in Winnipeg at the time.

It is not death itself that Toews is interested in but the time before and after death. How do we deal with the loss of a loved one? She structures her novel to lead her narrator, Yoli, through the five stages of grief. By the times Elf actually dies Yoli is up to Bargaining. This is not a straight progression, likely because grief is not a straightforward process. Using broad strokes Yoli goes through Denial, Bargaining, and Anger before Elf dies, and Anger, Grief, and, as the novel ends, Acceptance.



Quotes

Piano both her lover and her mortal enemy.”
-- Yoli as narrator (chapter 2)

Importance: Yoli is describing Elf's passion for music. Music drives Elf and is simultaneously destroying her.

She wanted to die and I wanted her to live and we were enemies who loved each other.
-- Yoli as narrator (chapter 3)

Importance: Yoli is attempting to reach Elf and create in her a will to live. Yoli understands that having a family surrounding her who loves her and wants her to live is destroying Elf. Elf wants her family to bless her on her journey into death.

She's barely holding the pieces in place before it shatters.”
-- Yoli as narrator (chapter 4)

Importance: Yoli is talking about the glass piano that Elf believes is inside her. Elf is incredibly fragile and will shatter at any sudden movement. When she shatters she will die.

Everyone in the whole world was fighting with somebody to stay.”
-- Yoli as narrator (chapter 5)

Importance: Yoli is equating her struggle to stop Elf from killing herself with the larger human struggle against death. Everyone has loved ones and no one ever wants to lose someone they love.

When she feels she can't play anymore her life is over.”
-- Claudio (chapter 6)

Importance: Elf's life is centered around music. If music is lost to her she will have no reason to go on.

Every little thing gonna be all right and that always struck me as an important qualifier.”
-- Yoli as narrator (chapter 7)

Importance: Yoli is pointing out that we can control the small things in life but that the larger things are less sure. Peas or corn for supper is within our control. Saving someone from overwhelming sorrow, on the other hand, is out of our control.

Now the branches are coming away one by one and revealing me to my neighbours slowly like a puzzle taking shape.”
-- Yoli as narrator (chapter 8)



Importance: Yoli is back in Toronto and is discussing how the pruning of the tree in her front yard is slowly revealing her to the world. She is thinking how this slow denuding of branching is similar to what Elf is doing to her life.

She couldn't stand it, the appearance of happiness, the forced enthusiasm, and everything a performance."

-- Yoli as narrator (chapter 9)

Importance: While Yoli is able to fake it til she makes it Elf abhors such fakery. She thinks it is better to have nothing than to pretend. Pretence destroys her.

So you're saying you have pride and I don't and that a person with a deep character, integrity, all that, would absolutely throw himself in before he resorted to drinking river water?"

-- Yoli (chapter 10)

Importance: Elf sees is as a matter of pride that you always be true to yourself. Even if that self is self-destructive and deeply unhappy, it is better to revel in that emotion than to make a pretense of happiness if you don't feel it. Yoli can't understand this attitude and would rather see life's glass as half full.

Does a heart attack come from clogged arteries and fat around the waist and a two-pack-a-day habit and trans fat, not memories of pain and horror and unbearable sorrow?"

-- Yoli (chapter 11)

Importance: Yoli is interested in the source of pain. Is pain caused by emotional sorrow or body chemistry? More likely it is a combination of science and feeling.

In ten years time shame will be all the rage, talking about it, dissecting it and banishing it."

-- Yoli (chapter 12)

Importance: Yoli has just met neighbors from East Village in the cardiac wing of the hospital. She meditates on how ashamed her family was to admit that Elf is also in the hospital but in the psych ward. There is something shameful about mental illness.

How many times must I beg hospitals not to let my people go?"

-- Yoli as narrator (chapter 13)

Importance: Yoli is afraid that if Elf leaves the hospital that she will succeed in killing herself. Toews creates a nice inversion of the biblical quote here.

We had to go back and retrace our steps in the dark which I suppose is the meaning of life."

-- Yoli as narrator (chapter 20)

Importance: Yoli is visiting New York. Life is cyclical and to find your way home you must walk through darkness.