

American Wife Study Guide

American Wife by Curtis Sittenfeld

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Plot Summary

NOTE: All citations in this Study Guide refer to the Kindle version of *American Wife: A Novel*, published Sept. 2, 2008.

As First Lady Alice Blackwell looks back over her life in Curtis Sittenfeld's *American Wife: A Novel*, she wonders if the choices she has made have jeopardized her husband's presidency. She married Charlie Blackwell despite their differing political views. During their lives together she had acquiesce to Charlie's political views, but the threat of a scandal because of her past makes her realize she has the right to voice her own opinion. The novel addresses a variety of themes including the challenges of a life lived in the public eye, the joy and escape that reading can provide, and the differences between the middle and upper classes.

Alice grew up in Riley, Wisconsin. Her family consisted of her mother, father and grandmother. Her grandmother, Emilie instilled in Alice her love of reading. One of Alice's favorite memories of her grandmother is when Emilie first met Andrew Imhof. Because of his long eyelashes, Emilie thought Andrew was a girl. As Alice and Andrew grew up, they each developed crushes on each other. Alice never knew how her crush would have turned out because Andrew was killed in a car wreck during their senior years in high school. Ironically, it was Alice who failed to stop at a stop sign, causing the fatal wreck. In an attempt to absolve herself to Andrew's older brother, Pete, Alice allowed Pete to have sex with her. She became pregnant with Pete's baby. It was Emilie who learned that Alice was pregnant and arranged for her to have an abortion. After Alice graduated from high school she decided to go to a large university to escape the memories of the car wreck.

In the second part of the novel Alice was working as a school librarian when she met and married Charlie Blackwell. Although the two had completely different political ideals and came from different socioeconomic classes, they still married. They believed they could rise above their differences in political views with Alice simply not telling anyone she was a Democrat while her husband ran for office as a Republican. She was relieved when he did not win the office for which he ran.

About ten years into their marriage, Charlie became an alcoholic. He worried obsessively about his legacy and became more and more inconsiderate of Alice. After a class reunion at Princeton Alice was fed up with Charlie when he admitted to using cocaine during the reunion. Alice suggested a trial separation. During the separation Charlie floundered, even getting a DUI before he was introduced to Reverend Randy. It was with this reverend's help that Charlie found religion. Because she could see the changes in her husband, Alice reconciled with Charlie. She indicates in her story that the following years were the happiest the family had. After that time Charlie was elected as governor of Wisconsin, and then as president of the United States.

The final part of this novel covers one single day in the life of Alice as the first lady. It is on this day that Gladys Wycomb, the doctor who performed Alice's abortion, threatened



to make information about the procedure public if Alice did not speak out against a pro-life candidate for the Supreme Court whom Charlie was backing. The threat turned out to be harmless because Gladys died that same day. Before she died, however, Alice visited Gladys as well as her longtime friend Dena who was dating Pete, the man who got Alice pregnant. These visits changed Alice's outlook on her role as the first lady and she decided to speak with an army colonel who had been camping around the White House in an attempt to talk to the president about ending the war. Alice told this man she agreed with his opinion that the war should end, an opinion that her husband did not share. Charlie is at first angry with Alice for the spontaneity of her decision but seems more at peace when he realizes his staff is working hard to cover the mistake. It is this decision on Alice's part that makes her wonder if she has jeopardized her husband's role as presidency.



Prologue and Part I: 1272 Amity Lane; pages 5-48

Summary

In the Prologue, First Lady Alice Blackwell, lies in her bed in the White House and wonders if she has made mistakes that have affected her husband's presidency. She dreams of the past and wonders if things she did then changed the path of her life. Most of all she wonders if she is living a life that is "in opposition to itself" (2).

In this opening section of this novel, Alice goes back in time to remember the day when she and her grandmother met Andrew Imhof and his mother in a grocery store, and her grandmother thought that Andrew was a girl because he was so pretty. Before they parted, Alice's grandmother told Andrew he was to report to her if Alice did not behave herself in school. When Andrew lifted his eyebrows at Alice, her grandmother told her that Andrew was flirting with her, an action that meant he liked her.

Alice was the only child in her four-person family that included her grandmother, Emilie; her father, Phillip; and her mother, Dorothy. Her father worked at a bank. One of his favorite sayings was a quote by Abraham Lincoln: "Whatever you are, be a good one" (8). Her mother was a homemaker. Her grandmother also did not hold a job but spent her days smoking cigarettes and reading. It was Alice's grandmother who introduced her to reading and helped her learn to love it. To Alice, her grandmother's room was a "passageway to adventure" (12). A favorite belonging of her grandmother's was a bust of Nefertiti, a gift given to Emilie by her friend Gladys Wycomb.

After a few years when Alice and Andrew were in the fourth grade, when it was Andrew's turn to decide who could line up for lunch first, Alice was named by him to be second in line. In sixth grade, Alice was horrified when her friend Dena flirted with Andrew when they saw him riding his bike after school. A few days later, Dena wrote Andrew a note asking him which girls he liked. He named Alice, but a few days later, he and Dena were dating. When they were sophomores in high school, Andrew broke up with Dena.

That Christmas, Alice was invited to go along with her grandmother on her trip to visit her friend Gladys Wycomb in Chicago. Alice's parents did not seem to want Alice to go but were finally convinced because they believed Alice and Emilie would be staying in a hotel, not at Gladys' apartment. Emilie told her granddaughter on the train that she intended to buy a sable stole while they were in the big city. Alice was not entirely surprised when Gladys bought the sable stole for Emilie. She was surprised and offended to accidentally walk in on her grandmother and Gladys in a sexual appearing embrace. After this Alice did not feel she shared the same closeness with her grandmother as she did in the past. Even though her grandmother tried to talk to Alice



about her coolness, Alice would not talk to her. Her grandmother told her that she had never done anything of which she was ashamed.

Back in Riley, Dena and Robert, Dena's new boyfriend, set Alice up with Larry Nagel for the junior-senior prom. During the prom, Dena tried to get Alice to go outside with them to drink alcohol but Alice refused to go out with them. After they left, Andrew asked Alice to dance. She accepted. Later, when Dena came back in she was accusatory when she asked if Alice had danced with Andrew. Although Alice had told Dena she believed Andrew had just felt sorry for her, she knew at one point he was inhaling in order to smell her hair.

Analysis

The timeline of the novel is set up in the prologue and first section of the first part of the novel. Alice Blackwell has become the First Lady of the United States and is looking back on her life and the steps that have brought her to the place that she is. The prologue is written in the present tense, set in 2007, when Alice is about 61. Part 1 of the novel goes back in time to 1954 when Alice was about eight years old. From this point on, the novel is written in past tense.

She sets up the purpose of her soul searching in the final paragraph of the Prologue: "Did I jeopardize my husband's presidency today? Did I do something I should have done years ago? Or perhaps I did both, and that's the problem — that I lead a life in opposition to itself" (2). Alice worries that her life is a one lived in opposition to itself. It is important for the reader to keep this idea in mind while reading the novel. Because Alice is looking back and reviewing her life as a president's wife, notice that the story is told from the first person point of view. It is important for Alice to tell her story and answer her own questions about her life in her own words.

Although the author indicates this novel is not technically historical fiction, it does have some basis in history. There are several real events the reader will recognize that will play into the plot of the novel later in the story line. These include the war in the Middle East and the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. Based on the time at which Alice asks herself if she is responsible for jeopardizing her husband's presidency, it can be assumed that Alice and her husband are supposed to represent Laura and George W. Bush.

Early on, the reader will notice that as Alice looks back on her life, she makes commentary about things that happened from her point as an adult. "A silence ensued during which I'm pretty sure Mrs. Imhof was deciding how to correct my grandmother" (5). As an adult, Alice realizes that the silence that followed her grandmother's statement that showed she believed Andrew was a girl was because Mrs. Imhof was trying to find a way to politely correct Emilie. This is shown by the use of the present tense of the verb in "I'm" as in I am pretty sure now, not I was pretty sure then.

There are two major themes or plot lines introduced in this first section of the novel. They are actually interconnected. It is in this section that Alice's grandmother introduces



her to books. It is also in this section that Alice really notices Andrew Imhof for the first time. She notices him because of her grandmother's love of books. They are in the grocery store looking for hearts of palms, a food that Emilie read about in a book when they run into Andrew and his mother.

Two symbols of importance are introduced in this section. The first is the sable stole that Gladys buys for Emilie. This extravagant purchase indicates that the relationship between the two might be more than just friendship. Another symbol is the Nefertiti bust. This bust is more important later on, but note that it was also a gift from Gladys to Emilie. It is also one of Alice's favorite things that she saw on a daily basis in her grandmother's room.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the beginnings of the relationship between Andrew and Alice. Why do you think Dena began dating Andrew after Andrew admitted he liked Alice?

Discussion Question 2

How does the prologue of the novel help the reader to define the purpose of the novel. Would the novel work at all without this Prologue? What other purposes does the prologue serve?

Discussion Question 3

Why is Alice so upset with her grandmother after she realizes that her grandmother and Gladys are having a homosexual relationship? How does this discovery change Alice's opinion of her grandmother?

Vocabulary

erroneously, conspirator, deferential, aberration, meticulous, purveyor, tantalizing, antipathy, negligible, nebulously, ostensibly, dubious, biannual, formidable, gabardine, perfunctory, lucrative, suffragette, concede, condescension, palindrome, lasciviously, retroactive



Part 1: 1272 Amity Lane; pages 48–90

Summary

In this section of the novel, Alice thought all through her trip to Michigan's Upper Peninsula with her mother and father that she should tell them that she knew her grandmother was having an affair with Gladys. Through the three days with her parents, Alice came to believe that they either already knew about Emilie's relationship or that they had chosen to pretend it was not happening. She had also come to the realization that it was not her story to tell.

Alice happened to see Andrew driving a Ford Thunderbird as she left the grocery store one day during the summer before her senior year of high school. Andrew honked the horn at her and she walked over to talk to him. He asked if she would be at the party at Fred's house the following weekend. They tried to have a conversation, but Andrew's older brother, Pete, kept injecting crude statements.

Although they were in the same grade at school Alice and Andrew had little chance to talk until one day when Alice met Andrew as he was headed for football practice and she was leaving the library. They flirted and Andrew admitted he had dated Dena because it meant he got to spend time with Alice. He touched the silver heart pendant that Alice's grandmother had given her and asked what it was. Alice believed the answer was so obvious that he had touched it only as an excuse to touch her.

Dena visited Alice that night to tell Alice if she tried to be Andrew's girlfriend she would never forgive her. Because Dena was angry with her, Alice wound up driving herself to Fred's party instead of riding with Dena. As she drove her parents' car, she wondered what the party would be like and if she should try to talk to Dena or not. At the intersection of De Soto Way and Farm Road 177 Alice's car collided with another one and she found herself lying on the gravel. When she raised her head she could see the hood of her parents' car had hit the driver's side door of the other car. A farmer and his wife were walking toward the cars. They had called an ambulance.

When Alice was able to sit up she saw that the car she had hit was a mint green Ford. The driver was not moving. Alice was hysterical when she realized it was Andrew's car she had hit. The farmer's wife indicated to Alice that the wreck was only a matter of time since the stop sign was in such a bad place. When Alice looked, she realized she was the one who was supposed to have stopped. Andrew died in the wreck because of a broken neck.

The adult Alice talks in the present tense about how she views that time in her life as an oyster shell holding a rancid oyster. She still wishes it had been her who was killed instead of Andrew, and believes she should never have forgiveness or feel peace again.



Back into her narrative of the story about the wreck, when Alice's parents arrived at back at home with her after she was released from the hospital (she had only minor injuries), they sent her to her room instead of letting her grandmother or Mrs. Felke, who was visiting, ask her what had happened. Back in the present, Alice admits that Jessica, her closest friend as an adult, is the only person whom she has ever told about the wreck besides family.

After the wreck, neither Alice nor her parents went to Andrew's funeral. When she did go back to school, few people approached her. One of the football players muttered something about how girls should not get driver's licenses when she walked past him. Her parents had been relieved that the Imhofs were not going to file charges against Alice or the family. Dena was the only person who spoke to her directly about the accident. She apologized for being angry with Alice and causing her to drive to the dance alone. She blamed herself for the accident. Alice tried to convince Dena that the wreck was not her fault.

Alice had not attended church since the accident. One day when the rest of her family was gone to church she drove to the Imhofs' house to leave an apology note for Andrew's parents. The note included the silver pendant that Andrew had liked. Pete was the only one at home. He invited Alice up to his room and had sex with her. On the way home Alice was surprised with herself because she had not resisted Pete at all. Even though she knew it was not right, Alice felt in some way like she was setting right a wrong by giving Pete what he wanted.

During lunch that same day, Alice's grandmother told a strange story about a circus actress who had her nose bit off by a tiger. She was no longer allowed to perform because her injury reminded others that there were dangers in the circus. In this story, however, the circus owner fell in love with the woman and married her despite her injury. It was after Mary Hafliger, a girl from the Spirit Club suggested to Alice that she quit the club that Alice realized the story was about her. She was the woman whose nose had been bit off. She reminded people how cruel life could be and made them sad.

After school the following Friday, Pete picked Alice up after school and took her back to his house. They had sex again. Alice went back to Pete on Sunday but he was hateful to her. He forced her to have oral sex with him and told her she was a whore. He said Andrew would never have had a girlfriend who was a whore.

Alice tried to find her way forward through life and make her parents think that she was healing. Even though she tried to act normally, she would often be nauseated when she woke. One morning her grandmother caught her throwing up in the bathroom and thought she was doing so to loose weight. The second time Emilie heard Alice throwing up, she knew that Alice was having morning sickness. Emilie was waiting in Alice's room for her granddaughter when she returned from the bathroom that morning and told her that she would make some calls so they could take care of the pregnancy. She suggested that Alice not tell her parents anything. Even though Alice asked her grandmother if she should have the baby and give it up for adoption, Emilie advised her against it because she did not believe that Alice was emotionally strong enough to deal



with a baby. When Alice apologized for disappointing her grandmother, Emilie explained to her that it was by making mistakes that one learned to be compassionate.

Emilie had Alice registered at the hospital as Alice Warren. Alice worried that she would be arrested for having a procedure that was at that time illegal, or that the doctor would use dirty instruments. Emilie reassured her by telling her that it was Gladys who would be performing the abortion. Before the procedure, Gladys gave Alice a diaphragm and taught her how to use it.

While Alice was still reeling from her grief, and struggling with the strange way people were treating her, President Kennedy was assassinated. Alice learned about his death from classmates who were crying. Although she had admired Kennedy, she found some emotional relief in his death because it took the attention from her own situation. She strangely felt absolved from her guilt concerning Andrew's death when she compared it to Kennedy's, a death in which she had played no role.

Analysis

A good deal happens in this section of the novel that is largely background for the rest of the story. First, Alice hits the car Andrew is driving and causes his death. Because she feels as if she is making up to Pete in some way for killing his little brother, she allows him to use her sexually. This sexual relationship causes Alice to get pregnant. Her grandmother arranges for her to have an abortion. Notice also the way the author includes historical events in the novel to give the reader a sense of time. In this section she includes the assassination of President Kennedy.

The reference to the death of President Kennedy helps the reader to orient himself to the time period in relation to the popular thought about abortion. In 1963, a doctor performing an abortion could be charged with a crime if he was caught. Even as a teen, Alice knows that abortion is against the law and worries that charges will be pressed. After the procedure is finished, she tells Gladys she hopes that Gladys will not get arrested. It is important to remember that Gladys tells Alice that she had already completed three abortions that week. This is important because it tells the reader that Gladys is willing to break the law in order to do what she thinks is right. When Alice tries to tell Gladys getting pregnant is not something she will have to worry about again, Gladys tells Alice she is concerned about her health not her morality. This tells the reader that Gladys is the type of person who can separate her morality and her personal life from her job. She is also a forward thinker and willing to make sacrifices, even break the law for what she believes is right. By remembering these personality traits, it will make it easier for the reader to understand Gladys' role later in the novel.

When Alice is trying to recover from Andrew's death, she attempts to take refuge in books, something she had always been able to do in the past. In this case, however, Alice finds she cannot completely immerse herself in her reading. "I tried to read novels, once my most reliable refuge, but even when I was immersed in sixteenth-century Scotland or contemporary Manhattan, I could always feel the dread of my own life at the



edge of the page” (83). Reading is a big part of her life, but this is the first time that it’s ability to carry her away from her problems disappoints Alice.

The silver heart pendant plays an important role in this section. It is a symbol of the love that Alice imagined Andrew had for her. When they had talked at school, he had lifted the pendant with his hand to ask what it was. Alice believed his intention was to use it as an excuse to touch her. After his death, Alice includes the pendant with a sympathy letter to Andrew’s parents believing it is more proper that they should have the pendant since Andrew had liked it. Later, Alice believes that because she misses the pendant that it was right for her to have given it away.

Alice’s belief that she will feel better about herself if she is punished is an important aspect of this section. It is perhaps the reason that she has sex with Pete without resisting. She believes that by giving her virginity to Pete she is somehow atoning for what she has done. Despite the way some people treat Alice after the wreck, Alice is the person who is most hard on herself.

When Kennedy is killed and the emotional pressure is relieved from Alice, she believes that she is being given some sort of absolution from her role in Andrew’s death. She describes the period of her life between Andrew’s death and Kennedy’s assassination as being a sort of punishment while people avoided her and treated her strangely because she reminded them of the sorrow that life inevitably brings. Considering that Alice becomes the First Lady of the United States, she must feel uncomfortable because she once felt some comfort because of the assassination of a president.

Because she tells her story from her position as an adult, Alice is able to add information to let her reader know how her situations turned out. For instance, Alice’s grandmother suggests to Alice that she not tell her parents about her abortion. At that time Alice told her grandmother that: “‘I’ll never tell them,’ I said, which proved to be true” (88). The reader should remember that Alice not only mentions to her grandmother that she plans to never tell her parents about her procedure but also that she never did tell them.

There is also a certain amount of foreshadowing in this section. When Alice is talking to Andrew in the hallway of the school, there are a number of references that indicate even though Alice believes that Andrew is the man she is to marry, it will not happen that way. The author lets the reader know right away that Andrew and Alice will not marry. Another important issue to keep in mind while reading the rest of the novel is Alice’s loss of faith after the wreck that killed Andrew. She does not know how to reconcile the idea of a loving God with the guilt she feels from the wreck that was allowed to happen. Alice had also had a feeling that Andrew was her destiny, a destiny that disappeared with his death and left Alice wondering what she had done to deserve the punishment she was getting.



Discussion Question 1

Do you think Emilie's decision to help Alice get an abortion without telling anyone was the correct thing for her to do? Why or why not? Do you think Alice made the best decision by not telling her parents about the pregnancy?

Discussion Question 2

In what ways does Alice punish herself to avenge for Andrew's death? Why do you think it is during this point in her life that Alice turns away from religion?

Discussion Question 3

How do the interjections from Alice's adult self help to develop the story? What are you learning about Alice and her life?

Vocabulary

esplanade, dowdiness, xenophobic, ensconced, rancid, leniency, peripheral, ambivalent, calamity, animosity, culpability, inadvertently, accosted, decrepit, avert, complicit, queried, flaccid, retrospect, synchronicity, quandary, rancor, capitulation, provincialism, curettage, incoherent, surreal, absolution



Part II: 3859 Sproule Street; pages 93-151

Summary

In this section of the novel the timeline advances about ten years but the narration remains in the past tense. At this point in her life, Alice was working at Theodora Liess Elementary School as a librarian. She made a goal for herself that if she was not married by the time she was thirty, she would buy a house. Her plan was derailed when her father died of a heart attack two months before Alice's birthday. Because she spent many of her weekends driving home to be with her mother and grandmother, Alice did not begin her house search until more than one year later.

Alice noted that her relator, Nadine Patora, treated her better than she probably deserved. Alice wanted a place she loved, a house she found only after she had looked at more than 30 places. It was a bungalow on McKinley Street. With the help of Nadine, Alice put a bid in on the house. She got a call that night that she expected to be Nadine but it turned out to be Dena, telling Alice that Alice had to go with her to the barbecue the Hickens' family was hosting. Dena was planning on seducing Charlie Blackwell and wanted Alice there to support her. Even though Alice tried to persuade Dena she did not want to get caught up in the Blackwell family, which made its fortune through meat products, Dena begged her. Dena was divorced and owned a clothing and accessory store. She believed she deserved to be married to a powerful man. She told Alice that Charlie, like his father was running for political office. Alice shared with Dena that she had been set up with Charlie but had turned him down because she was already dating a man named Simon.

The day before the barbecue, Alice learned that after some negotiation, her offer on the house had been accepted. Before they went to the party, Alice drove Dena by the house to look at it. Alice and Dena were late to the barbecue but Charlie came even later. He had two six-packs of beer with him. The other women noticed Dena's interest in Charlie. They asked Alice if she had her eye on a special man but she admitted that she did not and tried to change the subject. She thought how she would rather be with her mother and grandmother, or working on the papier-mâché characters she was making for the library at school than at that party. Alice got a break when Kathleen Hicken's oldest daughter asked Alice to read to her.

Charlie entered the living room while Alice was reading. When she finished the book, Charlie applauded. He tried to flirt with her and picked at her about the date with him that she had refused earlier. Alice felt sick to her stomach because she knew Dena liked Charlie, yet he was flirting with her and trying to set up a date. She turned him down, trying to be polite, and returned to the party.



Later that night, Dena found Alice where she was playing charades and told her she was going to be sick. Alice accompanied her to the bathroom. Dena moaned about not being married and not having any children before she finally threw up in the toilet. After she was finished, Alice told Dena she would drive her home but Dena passed out on the couch. Kathleen told Alice to leave Dena there. Alice walked home, leaving the car keys for Dena when she woke up. As she was walking, Charlie followed her and offered her a ride. Alice declined because he was drunk. He walked her home instead. On the way he admitted to her that he was afraid of the dark but believed that she could take care of him. He told her he believed Dena was not good wife material for him but that Alice was. Alice told him she was a registered Democrat, a major point of discrepancy between the two since his family members were all Republicans.

Once they reached Alice's apartment Charlie suggested she invite him in for coffee. Once inside he asked for a beer. She was horrified when he walked into the room where she was working on her characters. He recognized some of the characters and they talked about books they had both read, and Alice described to him the ones he had not read. It was as she was talking to Charlie that Alice realized that Charlie was enchanted by her.

Alice interrupts her story by talking about Simon Törnkvist, the man she had dated previously. He was a Vietnam Vet who was missing his left hand and had a facial scar. They dated for eleven months and Alice had even taken him to Riley to meet her family. Simon believed Alice's father was naïve for calling Simon and men like him a "credit to this country" (121). Alice's mother seemed pleased with Simon but her grandmother warned her against marrying him. Emilie called Simon a "wet blanket" (122) and described him as being both dull and unkind. Her grandmother believed that Alice's infatuation with Simon was connected to Andrew's death. It was during a dinner she had cooked for Simon that Alice finally asked him if he ever saw them getting married. He told her he was not sure what he thought about marriage and that he definitely did not want children. Two weeks later, Simon told Alice he did not think they were compatible, Alice agreed.

The day after Charlie visited Alice's apartment, Alice went to see her mother and grandmother. Since Alice's mother was not at home, her grandmother took the opportunity to tell Alice she thought Dorothy, Alice's mother, had a boyfriend. Alice was surprised when Emilie said the man she suspected was Lars Enderstrasse, the man who had once delivered their mail. Alice informed her grandmother that she too, might have a budding romance but that the man in question was one whom Dena had wanted first. Emilie suggested to Alice that she see how the situation progressed.

Later that night, Alice tried to talk to her mother about her grandmother's suggestion that she was dating but her mother seemed offended. Changing the subject, Dorothy brought out a brooch that had belonged to her mother. She asked if Alice could sell it for her and explained she had gotten into some financial trouble. A young man had come by the house and asked her to invest \$20,000 in a project that he told her would bring up to 300% percent returns. There was no chance she would make any money off it because the man had not gotten enough investors. She claimed not to know who the



man was to whom she had given the money but when Alice pushed her she admitted it was Pete Imhof.

The next day Alice found out where Pete lived and paid a visit to him. When she arrived and knocked on the door, she was surprised when he answered. Her first words to him were accusatory but as they talked she realized Pete had not intended to scam her mother. She suggested he should pay her mother back and Pete pulled his ace card and reminded her how mistakes happened. His family had not expected a financial payout for Alice's mistake so she should not expect one from him for his mistake. Alice ducked into an alley to cry on her way home, but she believed that she deserved the treatment Pete had given her. She still thought she needed to be punished. She came up with a series of steps to fix the problems she was facing. Among those steps were not going through with the purchase of her house and making sure to not see Charlie again.

On her way back to Madison, Alice stopped at a pawnshop. The lady there offered her \$90 for her mother's brooch. Alice refused the offer. That same night Alice called Nadine and told her she could not go through with the purchase of the house. Nadine thought at first that Alice was kidding her. By the end of their conversation, Nadine told Alice she had never believed she was nuts. The next day, Charlie called to invite Alice to dinner. She told him she could not go so he convinced her instead to attend a speaking engagement he had in Waupun. Alice tried to sell her mother's brooch again, this time at a store for estate jewelry and antiques. There she was offered only \$75 dollars for the brooch.

As Alice listened to Charlie's speech that evening, she was surprised to learn that he lived in Houghton. She waited even after the speech was over and had pulled out Rabbit Redux, the book she was reading when a man who had been standing next to Charlie the whole time came up to her and introduced himself as Hank Ucker. Alice could tell he was feeling her out. In the parking lot, Charlie gave Hank his keys and then told Alice he needed a ride. She suggested she was not sure where she should take him since he said he lived in Houghton. He explained he had a rental there because he had to live in the same district in which he ran for office but that he did not live there. His house in Madison was in his brother's name.

Charlie suggested that they stop at a burger joint called Red's to eat. She learned that Hank Ucker was Charlie's strategist and campaign manager. Charlie tried to convince Alice that even though he had grown up going to a boarding school and attending Princeton for college, he was not an elitist. Charlie suggested when his finished his burger that they drive back to her apartment in Madison and have sex. Although Alice knew it would strain her relationship with Dena, she agreed.

Analysis

Part II introduces Alice in a new stage of her life. She is nearing 30 years old, has a bachelors and masters, and works in a school library but still is not married. Her life



changes drastically when her father dies of a heart attack. She feels her role has changed and that she is now in charge of looking after her mother and grandmother. The title of this part of the novel is the address of Alice's second floor apartment, 3859 Sproule Street in Madison. It is foreshadowed by the title of this part of the novel that Alice never buys and moves into the house on McKinley Street.

The older Alice continues to interject into this section of the novel. For instance when Alice attends Hank's speech in Waupun she notices how many people are there and points out that: "Something I was to learn quickly is that a turnout's success can always be judged proportionally" (142). This statement tells the reader that Alice and Charlie will get married. Of course, the reader already knew this from the Prologue but this quote works to remind the reader of this fact. It also works to remind the reader how politically involved and important Charlie will become.

One point of contention, perhaps one of the things that leads Alice to question if her life has been lived in opposition to itself, is the political differences between Alice and Charlie. Charlie and his family are Republicans while Alice is a registered Democrat. The author makes it apparent that Alice has put thought into her decision to be a Democrat when she tells Charlie: "'I'm not a Democrat because I haven't thought about the issues,' I said. 'I'm a Democrat because I have'" (147-148). She is not one who has taken her decision lightly, she has studied and made intelligent decisions about her political affiliations. Because they have differing party affiliations and because Charlie wants a future in politics, it appears they would be incompatible.

Alice and her friend Dena have opposite feelings about their status as single women. While Dena is distraught because she is single, Alice is not bothered by the fact she is in her early thirties and unmarried. "You know what, Dena, I'm all right with that" (111) Alice says of her singlehood while Dena is bemoaning the fact she is divorced with not children. Dena had thought she would be married and have three children by this point in her life. It is perhaps because of Andrew's death that Alice is not more disturbed because she has not gotten married yet. "During my senior year in high school, I'd stopped thinking of marriage as my birthright" (120). Alice has thought about marriage enough that she believes it would be better for her to remain single than for her to be married to a man whom she does not love. Just like she does not want to settle for a house that did not perfectly fit her desires, she does not want to settle with a husband who is not her ideal. "To remain alone did not seem to me a terrible fate, no worse than being falsely joined to another person" (121).

Despite Alice's laid-back attitude about not being married, many of the people who she knows are very concerned about her singlehood. She feels the married women judge her based on the fact that she is single. They seem to believe that she is not married because no one has asked her, not because she preferred to be single.

Just as it was once in high school, Dena and Alice's relationship is jeopardized because they are both attractive to the same boy. In high school it is Andrew who was the boy who threatens to destroy the relationship between Dena and Alice. Although she has a boyfriend and has not dated Andrew for years, Dena is willing to end her relationship



with Alice because Alice is seen talking to Andrew. Alice has previous experience with how nasty Dena can get over a man whom she likes. As an adult, Alice faces a crush on a man whom Dena is actively pursuing. Alice believes it is wrong of her to like Charlie because she knows how much it will hurt Dena.

To make matters worse for Alice, she has to face Pete Imhof again after he takes money from her mother in what Alice believes is a scam. Not only does she face Pete, Alice also is forced to face the guilt that she feels because of Andrew's death. When Alice tries to tell Pete how angry she is with him because he took money from her mother, he reminds her that her act of taking his brother — though an accident — was far worse than what he had done and his family had not threatened or pressed criminal charges against her family.

Of Alice's mother and grandmother, it is Alice's grandmother who sees her most clearly. She discourages Alice's relationship with Simon because she sees what the relationship is about. "It's very clear to me that this is about the Imhof boy," she said. "You want to trade a dead boy for an injured man, and if I thought it would work, I'd let you try. It isn't immoral. But it's unrealistic" (123) Emilie tells Alice. She realizes that Alice is devoting herself to this imperfect man not only because she is trying to punish herself but also because she sees in the act some way for her to make up for her past.

Racism is an underlying theme in this novel, mentioned only briefly, but strongly when it is mentioned. Charlie, for instance, indicates to Alice that he is a racist but Alice cuts him off before he can confirm what she suspects. Alice is talking about the school at which she teaches and Charlie volunteers that he knew a boy who attended that school. When Alice suggests the school has changed since that boy attended, the first thing that Charlie thinks of that has changed is desegregation. He indicates the school is no longer "lily-white" (109) and Alice hurries to change the subject to keep "Charlie from implying that Liess's non-lily-whiteness was a bad thing" (109).

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the "investment opportunity" that Pete sold to Dorothy. Do you think he took advantage of his relationship with the family in order to get Dorothy to sign up? Do you think he was right in approaching her at all? Discuss also the conversation between Alice and Pete. Does she handle the situation properly? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Compare and contrast Alice and Dena's opinions of singlehood. Why is Alice okay with being single while Dena is not?



Discussion Question 3

Discuss how the differences in Alice and Charlie's political affiliations might one day be a problem for them.

Vocabulary

dubious, reprieve, stoic, zaftig, convoluted, callous, incredulous, sartorial, constitutional, fluctuated, infringed, inordinately, surreptitiously, supine, petulant, compliance, harbinger, solvent, abysmal, surmount, dossier, contiguous, emboldened, succinctly, automaton, licentious, ponderous, tangible, obliterate, parodic, enmity, nepotism, enamored, parvenus, alacrity



Part II: 3859 Sproule Street; pages 151-202

Summary

Alice continues her story of the beginnings of the relationship between herself and Charlie during this second section of Part II. When they had sex for the first time he orgasmed quickly but she did not. He tried to manipulate her to reach orgasm but she would not allow him to do so. Although she believed he was not aware, Alice was already falling in love with Charlie.

Alice decided to tell Dena about her date with Charlie during a lunch. Dena was angry, as Alice suspected she would be. She refused to even stay and eat lunch. She accused Alice of being fake. When Alice went home for her next visit, her grandmother prompted her to tell them about her new boyfriend. Dorothy still would not admit she was dating Lars and Alice had decided there really was no relationship between the two. During her visit Alice also gave her mother an envelope of money that she said was from the sale of the brooch. In reality the money amounted to \$7,100, the amount Alice had saved toward the down payment on her house.

After a party with Charlie's friends, Charlie took Alice back to his apartment. Although his apartment was not fancy, Alice did notice it was clean. He insisted on making her enjoy the evening but she was still resistant. Despite her objections they both climaxed during their encounter. They began spending a good deal of time together but Alice would not allow Charlie to spend the night with her.

Alice began learning about what Charlie's life would be like if he did campaign for office. She thought it would be like he was playing a part in a play. She also wondered what might happen to their relationship if he did win the campaign. It is here that their differences in political beliefs come into play.

When Alice learned that Elvis had died she tried to use that tragedy as a way to repair her friendship with Dena. Because Alice was still seeing Charlie, Dena refused her attempt at peace. She told Alice to leave her alone.

Alice was shocked when she did see Charlie's apartment in Houghton. It was empty even of the necessities of living. She deemed it as depressing and fraudulent. She bribed him to let her make the place appear inhabited in exchange for spending the night together there. At the end of the evening Charlie told Alice that he would have to introduce her to his parents soon. His brother was getting suspicious because Charlie had turned down being introduced to a new girl, which was unusual. In preparation for meeting Charlie's parents, they decided to go visit Alice's mother and grandmother the following day.



Emilie met them at the door with the greeting “Oh, this’ll be good!” (177). Emilie was pleased not only because she was getting to meet Charlie but also because Lars happened to be visiting Dorothy that day. It was Lars who asked if Charlie was related to the Blackwells of Blackwell sausage. Emilie spoke up saying that Harold Blackwell had a chokehold on the state while he was governor. Alice was the one who told them that Harold Blackwell was Charlie’s father. Alice was frustrated by the political discussions that followed. When Dorothy went into the kitchen to warm the apple kuchen for Charlie Alice followed her. Dorothy apologized for surprising her with Lars’ presence and told her that no one would replace Alice’s father. Alice also learns that Emilie was no longer paying visits to Gladys.

In the car on the way home Charlie was angry about the way Alice’s grandmother had behaved. He told her that in order to be elected, he had to have the support of the person whom he was dating. He explained to her that loyalty was everything to the Blackwells. People were either supportive of the family or they were cut off. Alice suggested that she be allowed to support Charlie as a person without ever telling anyone that she did not support his political views.

Charlie considered her proposal and then told her that he thought she was the type of person of whom he would never get tired. Because she suspected Charlie was about to propose, Alice told him about the wreck in which Andrew was killed, her affair with Pete, and her abortion. That night after they have sex they tell each other they love each other for the first time. The next day, Alice’s grandmother called her to tell her that despite Charlie’s political affiliations, she liked him. She told Alice that Charlie was a keeper.

Even though it was said there were never tornadoes in Madison, Alice remembered tornado drills from her school years. Despite this belief there was a tornado watch one Sunday morning when Alice was cleaning her apartment and Charlie had gone to a church service and pancake breakfast. Alice was worried when she looked outside and noticed the birds had even stopped chirping. During a phone call to Charlie it began hailing. Alice told him she was going to the basement and that he should consider doing so as well. While she stood in the basement holding a flashlight she heard a pounding. It was Charlie pounding on the front door.

Charlie told Alice that he had an idea while he was driving to her apartment. He believed they should get married and live in the same place. Alice was struck by how dark and dank the surroundings were for such a happy proposal. She realized at the time that she had traded her friendship with Dena for her marriage. She was amazed, however, that she had married a man that she loved. It was a sign that she was being rewarded despite all that she had done wrong. They had been dating only six weeks when they got engaged.

Charlie and Alice decided they wanted to tell their families at the same time that they were engaged. Charlie suggested they marry in February, only five months away, and then moved it up to October. She became disturbed when she began to get this idea that Charlie knew he would lose the election but that he had further plans for himself in



a political career. Charlie got the feeling Alice was trying to talk him out of running. When Alice asked if she should leave, he said it might be a good idea.

Back at her apartment, Alice had forgiven Charlie but made herself wait a decent length of time before she called him. It was when she finally could keep herself from calling him no longer that she heard her door buzzer ring. It was Charlie. As they apologized to one another Alice made a choice to put her political convictions on the backburner and support Charlie.

Analysis

Although Alice loves Charlie, she recognizes right away that their relationship has aspects in which they are incompatible. While political differences might be just a cause for arguments in a normal marriage, political compatibility with one's significant other seems like it would be a requirement for a person planning to run for any sort of public office. "Our compatibility seemed so improbable that at first dating him struck me as some combination of amusing and mildly irresponsible" (167). As they get more serious, their political incompatibility becomes more of a strain on the relationship. Charlie points this out to Alice after her grandmother offends him by badmouthing his father during their initial meeting. "I have to go out there and convince voters that I deserve to be elected, but if I can't even convince the girl I'm dating, how ass-backward is that? (183)" Charlie asks Alice. When she tells him that she would vote for him, Charlie appears not to believe her.

It is when Charlie raises the possibility not only of running for congress in the upcoming election but of possibly also running in another election in the future that they butt heads, almost ending their relationship. Alice comes up with a solution that she believes at the time will work. "What if I support you not as a politician but as a person?" I continued. "What if we put our differences to one side, you don't try to convince me and I don't try to convince you, and we just appreciate being together? Am I crazy, or is that possible? I can assure you I'll never tell anyone if I disagree with you — that's no one's business but ours." She thinks that even holding public office it will be possible for her to separate what she believes from their relationship. If she has truly lived this way, it makes sense that she has wound up as the president's wife wondering if she has lived a life that is in opposition to itself.

In this section, Dena does not appear to be a very good friend because of the petty way that she acts when Alice tells her that she is dating Charlie. Dena acts as if Alice had set out to steal Charlie from her when in reality it was Dena who encouraged Alice to come to the party. Alice had not wanted to go at all and had even remembered being set up for a date before with one of the Blackwell brothers, a date she had refused because she already had a boyfriend at the time. When Alice tells Dena that she has gone out on a date with Charlie, Dena compares what is happening to the same thing that happened in high school. Alice is relieved that Dena does not call Andrew by name but she knows what Dena is talking about.



Meanwhile, notice that Alice believes that her engagement to Charlie is a symbol of forgiveness for what she did to Andrew. Even years later, Alice is still searching for proof that she has been forgiven for the accident. She seems to have the idea that the good things that happen to her count as signs of forgiveness while the bad things are acts of punishment.

There are several important symbols mentioned in this section. First is the tornado that becomes the reason Charlie and Alice get engaged. The imagery of the tornado will appear again later in the novel. Also an important symbol is the papier-mâché model of the Giving Tree that Alice made for the library in which she worked. Of the ten papier-mâché figures she had made, the Giving Tree was the only one that survived her final year as a school librarian. Alice tells her reader that even as a president's wife, she still has this figure. The gold brooch is also mentioned in this section when Alice gives her mother the money she says came from the sale of the piece of jewelry. Even though Alice thought the \$7,100 she had given her mother, the money she had saved as a down-payment on a house, was a good deal of money, her mother indicated she knew they had not gotten what the brooch was worth. Would she not have been surprised to learn that Alice was offered less than \$100?

Discussion Question 1

Why do you think Alice refuses to let Charlie bring her to climax during their first sexual encounter?

Discussion Question 2

Do you think that Alice is making the right decision by marrying Charlie despite the differences in their political beliefs? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss Charlie's reaction to Emilie's comment about his father. Do you think he was unjustifiably angry with her? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

unscrupulous, conciliatory, incredulity, subterfuge, familial, lenient, repository, cabriole, unfettered, decorum, assiduous, clairvoyant, cynical, fraudulent, languorous, postcoital, inaugural, verbiage, trousseau, debonair, decimated, eschewal, isthmus, ambience, eccentric, virile, churlish, rancor, obfuscation



Part II: 3859 Sproule Street; pages 202-258

Summary

This section of the novel focuses on Alice's visit to Halcyon, a vacation retreat owned by the Blackwells and several other families. As they drove to the retreat Charlie told Alice about a trick someone had played on another adult involving a pair of pink plastic flamingoes as a way of describing his family's love of practical jokes. They had even gone so far as to buy a real flamingo that wound up in the one bathtub belonging to the Blackwell family.

When they pulled up at the compound of houses, Charlie's brother Arthur came out and the two began wrestling. After their greeting, Alice's things were taken into the large house, called the Alamo, and Alice was shown around. She was surprised by the lack of fanciness in the house. Arthur seemed happy to tell Alice that for the 18 Blackwells who stayed at Halcyon, there was only one bathroom. That bathroom had bad plumbing so she was advised to "flush early and often" (209).

Before she and Charlie left the house to head to the lake to meet his mother, Alice asked him what she should call his mother. Her children called her Maj, short for her majesty. Priscilla Blackwell, who was on the porch, heard the conversation and said she would have to decide how much she liked Alice to know what she wanted Alice to call her.

After Charlie took Alice to the cabin in which she would be staying he questioned her about former boyfriends. She mentioned Simon, the Vietnam veteran, and asked if Charlie had been in the war. He said that he, along with two of his brothers, had flat feet so they had not had to serve in the military.

Alice arrived at the big house for drinks at six like she had been told. She was the first one there. She offered to help the middle-aged black woman who was bringing out food but the woman ignored her suggestion, asking her instead what she wanted to drink. Charlie greeted the woman, whom he called Miss Ruby, exuberantly but she remained grouchy. Some of the younger girls asked Alice to play cat's cradle with them and she left the adults on the porch to play. Charlie motioned for Alice to come back when his father began speaking. He proposed a toast to the family. Alice noticed how emotional he got during his toast. Next, Arthur climbed on a chair and read a poem he said that he had written for Alice. Alice was shocked by the poem not only because it was filthy but also because it had been plagiarized. At that moment, Alice realized that if she had visited Halcyon and the Blackwell family before she had agreed to marry Charlie, she probably would not have agreed to marry him because they were so different.



At the clubhouse, Maj made Alice and Charlie sit apart. Alice drank entirely too much wine. On her way back from a trip to the bathroom, Alice was looking at photos displayed outside the dining room at the clubhouse when Jadey introduced herself. She realized Alice's state and went for Charlie to take Alice to her cabin. Alice woke early the next morning with a terribly upset stomach. She was afraid she would wake someone when she went to the only bathroom. Even though she flushed "early and often" she learned later the plumbing had gotten clogged.

Later in the weekend, Jadey invited Alice to join her at the lake to wash their hair. Alice was uncomfortable while Jadey talked negatively about the Blackwell family and particularly her husband, Arthur. Jadey asked Alice how Maj was treating her and then advised her not to be afraid of her.

During the final cocktail hour of the weekend with the Blackwells, John picked on Alice, telling her that he suspected Charlie might ask her to marry him. Although they had agreed not to say anything, Alice informed the family that they were already engaged. The other family members congratulated Alice and Charlie while Maj only commented on what a clever girl Alice was.

School started for Alice as usual except she was not spending as much time working on her lesson plans as she usually did. She spent a good deal of time concentrating on her new life with Charlie. They married at the Blackwell family home on Oct. 8. The wedding was simple and short. Afterwards Alice suggested to her grandmother she could take her to visit Gladys Wycomb if she wanted. Emilie let Alice know that Gladys had moved on to a younger woman because Emilie had refused to come live with her.

Their first night together in a bed and breakfast, Alice was both frustrated and endeared to Charlie because he made her escort him to the bathroom because he was afraid of the dark. After Alice went back to bed she dreamed of Andrew. She woke knowing that a relationship with Andrew would have been natural, not like she suspected the one with Charlie was going to be. When she thought about Charlie, she realized their relationship was realistic, not the dreamy quality of her ideal relationship with Andrew. Charlie stirred beside her and told her that she had to forgive herself for killing Andrew. He was not quite awake. Even though Alice knew that she loved Charlie, she continued to have dreams about Andrew most of her life. She realized the dreams were an indication of how much she still missed Andrew.

Charlie lost the election. They bought a house in the suburb of Maronee and discovered they were expecting a child in the spring of that same year. Alice remembered that they were very happy their first several years together.

Analysis

This section of the novel serves to highlight the differences in lifestyles between Charlie and Alice up to this point. Alice comes from a middle class family while Charlie has always known wealth and privilege. The differences in their lifestyles become evident



when Alice visits Halcyon and meets Charlie's family for the first time. The experience is so eye opening for Alice that she admits to herself that had she not already been engaged to Charlie she might have given the engagement second thoughts if she had visited Halcyon first. "It occurred to me that if I had visited Halcyon before he and I had gotten engaged, there was a good chance we would not have done so" (226).

Alice quickly notes differences between the two families while Charlie is blind to many of the things she notices. Alice is first offended when Charlie talks about his family and the jokes they play on one another while on vacation. He describes the pink flamingoes as "lawn ornaments that are popular with white trash" (204). As Charlie gives this description Alice thinks of the way that her next-door neighbor got a pair of those flamingoes to decorate her lawn. In her mind, she is hearing Charlie call the people in her neighborhood white trash. She is also awed to learn that the Blackwells had enough money to buy a live flamingo for the purpose of a practical joke.

Another problem that Alice has with the Blackwells is their pride in their one bathroom to serve the entire complex of nearly 20 people. Even though Alice grew up in a home with only one bathroom, she notes that it was not something that the family took pride in like the Blackwells did. She believed they thought they were "roughing it" (214) at Halcyon but at the same time enjoying pleasures that few other people could afford. She thought of the way Simon, her former boyfriend, might characterize the Blackwell family. "He would, I imagined, find the Blackwells indulgent and vulgar and self-satisfied, and they in turn would find him dour and humorless — not that they would ever cross paths. So what did it mean that I could dwell in either camp without much difficulty?" (216-217). In her analysis of what Simon would have thought of the Blackwells, Alice comes face to face with the main question of the novel. She wonders how she was able to put up with Simon, but also feels relatively comfortable with the Blackwells. She wonders if this realization is a statement about her inability to stick with a set of values or beliefs.

Although Jadey is the person at Halcyon who is closest to Alice and her socio economic standing before she got married, Jadey also lived a life of relative advantage compared to Alice. Alice is at first surprised when Jadey invites her to go with her to wash her hair in the lake. It seems to be an uncivilized thing to do. As they are washing Jadey asks Alice if she remembers washing her hair in the lake at summer camp. "I laughed noncommittally, having never attended summer camp" (239).

While the facilities at Halcyon are out dated, so are the ideas, especially when it comes to the wait staff. All of the wait staff is black. The way the family interacts with these waiters and waitresses is similar to the way that an old Deep South family might have interacted with its slaves. While the family is allowed to wander around in swimsuits with no shoes, the lady who serves drinks during the cocktail hour is dressed in black with a white apron. Charlie credits the lady, Miss Ruby, with raising him, almost as if she were the family nanny, but also treats her in a very unsophisticated way as if he has no respect for her. When he greeted Miss Ruby, for instance, Charlie picked her up and twirled her around even though Miss Ruby clearly did not like that form of attention.



Even though Alice tries to treat Miss Ruby respectfully, Miss Ruby's reaction to her friendliness is very stilted. It is as if she sees herself as being a second-class citizen in the world of the white people. She does not respond to Alice's attempts to be friendly or help set up. In fact, Miss Ruby's act of offering Alice a glass of white wine almost appears as Miss Ruby's way of putting Alice in her place. Alice's only job was to drink white wine, a symbol of richness, and enjoy herself. She should not belittle herself to assisting or being friendly to the help.

Discussion Question 1

After Alice announces her engagement to Charlie at Halcyon, her future mother-in-law says to her: "What a clever girl you are" (244). What do you think Priscilla means by this statement?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the differences between Alice and Charlie. How do they become more obvious when Alice visits Halcyon? Compare her reaction to Charlie's family to Charlie's reaction to her family.

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the way black people are treated at Halcyon. How do they interact with the Blackwell family?

Vocabulary

pretentious, impotence, flatulence, spiel, interloping, incorrigibly, rhetorical, peripheral, loquacious, iteration, arbitrary, inveterate, incompetent, provincial, plagiarizer, perturbed, suffice, egregious, behemoth, punitive, nostalgia, emulated, abstained, ingratiate, gauche, capitulating, plausible, epochal, ribald, consummate, exculpation, pundits



Part III: 402 Maronee Drive; pages 261-316

Summary

In this first section of Part III, Alice waited for Charlie to come home. He was supposed to be home by 6:15 p.m. so they could go to the theater together but had not arrived by the time that Alice had to leave to get there on time. When she discovered he was not at his parents' house either, she invited Miss Ruby to go with her. Alice was surprised when Ruby accepted her offer. During their time together Alice learned more about Miss Ruby's granddaughter, Jessica. Jessica was smart, a leader in school and church, and got good grades but lived in the district where she was to go to Stevens for junior high school. Alice knew Stevens was the worst school in the area. Alice arranged for Miss Ruby and her family to come and have dinner with the Blackwells.

Although the first years of their marriage had been happy Alice had noticed Charlie was in a bad mood more and more often. He seemed concerned about his legacy, a worry that Alice had begun to find irritating. His mood was made even worse because the family's meat business was bringing in declining profits. While Charlie had been in favor of taking the company public, his brothers had voted him down. An upcoming reunion at Princeton was making his bad mood even worse since so many of his classmates had major accomplishments on their resumes while he felt he had done nothing. He was coming home from work later and later, and drinking more and more.

When Alice got home from the play, Charlie was angry. He asked if she had not wondered where he was or if something was wrong with him. Charlie informed her that the company was "royally fucked" (272). It was believed 11 people got food poisoning from Blackwell meat. They would have to do a major recall. He told Alice he was tired of the meat business. He had gone to business school and was not interested in controlling the quality of meat. Alice asked what he might do instead of working with Blackwell Meats and suggested he could be a high school baseball coach, a suggestion that offended him.

As Alice was waiting in the car line at Biddle, the private school that Ella attends, one of the mothers asked if it was okay if they did not get Blackwell meat for the end of school year party. Ella was in third grade and was more than a little spoiled because Alice and Charlie had been unable to get pregnant again after Ella was born.

During a walk with Jadey the two discussed Arthur's recent comment to Jadey that she needed to lose weight. Jadey had decided she would get her revenge not only by losing weight but also by having an affair. She was already refusing to have sex with him. Alice thought about Charlie's habit of buying Penthouse magazines. She was embarrassed by it but did not say anything because he was discreet and kept the magazines hidden. Since they were already talking about a subject that Alice



considered embarrassing, she asked Jadey if she thought that Charlie drank too much. She also voiced her concerns that Charlie did not play sports or take Ella to school like he did in the past. Jadey told Alice she would keep an eye on him.

That night after Alice finished putting Ella to bed she was surprised to see Hank Ucker sitting with Charlie in their den. After he left, Alice asked Charlie why Hank was there, if Charlie was thinking about running for public office again. Charlie changed the subject by telling Alice the food poisoning had been caused because the refrigerator the meat had been stored in was not working properly. Alice told him about inviting the Suttons for lunch on Memorial Day. Charlie was sarcastic in his answer reminding Alice about Ella's desire for a black Barbie doll, like the one Jessica, Miss Ruby's granddaughter, had. Alice shared her concerns with Charlie that Jessica would be attending Stevens and suggested she would do well at Biddle. Charlie did not acknowledge her suggestion.

Lars Enderstrasse, who had by that time married Alice's mother, called Alice to tell her that Emilie had fallen and was in the ICU at the Lutheran Hospital. Alice wanted to stay overnight with her grandmother but Charlie was uncooperative because of his fear of the dark but finally relented and agreed to take care of Ella. Although Alice and her mother worried that Emilie would not wake, she did regain consciousness. At first Alice thought her grandmother was having memory problems when she told Alice she had been fed spicy chicken but soon after that commented how devoted Dorothy and Phillip had been to each other. She prompted Alice to talk about her relationship with Charlie. After Alice unburdened her problems to her grandmother. Emilie suggests to Alice that she flirt with Charlie and flatter him. She reminds Alice that men take themselves too seriously.

At the Blackwell family dinner, Alice was immediately accosted by Priscilla. The woman pulled her to a private room and chided her for taking Miss Ruby to the play with her, calling the act "extremely inappropriate" (305). When Alice apologized she told Priscilla she hoped that she had not caused problems for Miss Ruby. She also indicated she was not sure why Priscilla was so angry.

After dinner and as they were finishing dessert, the members of the family began talking about marijuana use. They went around the table asking who had and had not tried the drug. Charlie suggested they get Leroy, Miss Ruby's older son who had trouble with the law, to get them some marijuana. It was Priscilla who made Charlie stop. Later in the evening Alice apologized to Miss Ruby, telling her she hoped she had not caused trouble for her.

At a Brewers baseball game that Alice attended with Charlie and Ella, Alice was surprised when Zeke Langenbacher sat with them during a good deal of the game and talked to Charlie. She was also surprised when she and Ella ran into Simon and his son. Alice told Charlie about the encounter and then asked what he and Zeke were talking about. Charlie claimed they had just been shooting the breeze. When they arrived home, Alice got a phone call from her mother telling her that Emilie had died.



Analysis

After nearly ten years of marriage Alice and Charlie are having troubles. Charlie is drinking too much and Alice believes he is overly concerned about what sort of legacy he will leave behind. He feels pressure to make something of himself because his grandfather started a successful meat business while his father was governor of Wisconsin. Charlie feels unfulfilled working in his grandfather's company.

There are continued differences between Alice and Charlie in terms of aspirations for their lives. Alice believes that because they have so much money that Charlie could do something with his life that he enjoyed. When she suggests he be a high school baseball coach, he is offended. "Alice, I went to Princeton. I went to Wharton. I ran for Congress" (275). He thinks just because of his educational background he has to do something better than coach at the high school level. Alice, meanwhile, yearns for her days in the school library.

There is also continued evidence that Alice is still punishing herself for the car wreck that killed Andrew. Or more correctly one might say that Alice still believes the universe is not finished punishing her for the car wreck. She is careful not to ask for anything that she thinks might be beyond what she is allowed. An example of this is seen in this section of the novel when Alice decides that "to push for a second child might be greedy, more than I deserved" (280).

The racist beliefs held by the Blackwells become even more apparent in this section of the novel. Particularly unsettling is Priscilla's confrontation with Alice for taking Ruby to the theater. "You had no business taking Ruby to the Marcus Center" (305) Priscilla told Alice blankly as if Miss Ruby were a possession that she had the right to dictate how it was used and where it was taken. Priscilla must have been strict in the rules she gave Miss Ruby as to her behavior when around the members of the Blackwell family. In the past Alice's attempts to be kind to Ruby were ignored. As she and Ruby leave the Blackwell house together, "I gestured to Miss Ruby to walk out in front of me, and almost imperceptibly, she shook her head; I walked out first, and she followed" (263).

Priscilla is not the only one in the family who appears to be racist. The comments Charlie makes when he learns that Alice has invited the Suttons for lunch on Memorial Day show that he believes the same way his mother believes, if not more staunchly so. "Wasn't that egalitarian of you?" (290), Charlie asks Alice. Accusing her of being egalitarian is the same as accusing her of believing that all people are equal, an idea the Charlie obviously does not believe. In fact, remember back in Part II when Alice and Charlie were having their first date together that Charlie had said to her: "But surely you don't deny that some people are quality and some aren't" (149). When Alice showed she was offended by his statement, Charlie had told her he was not sure what he meant by it. Apparently, he believes black people are among those who are not quality people.

Alice's life does change in a major way in this section when her grandmother gets sick and dies. Before Emilie's death, while she was still in the hospital, Dorothy had admitted to Alice that she was not ready to part with her mother yet. Alice seems to feel the same



way even though she tries to convince her mother that Emilie had a good, long life. The reader does not yet know the impact that the loss of Emilie will have on Alice since it is just at the end of the section that Alice learns that her grandmother is dead.

Charlie's self-absorbed personality becomes apparent during this section. He acts immaturely when Alice has to stay overnight with her grandmother at the hospital. He is more worried about his own fear of the dark than her grief and worry. Charlie also acts immaturely the night that Alice took Miss Ruby to the theater in his place. Although he had not told her and had not answered the phone at any location where she had tried to call him, Charlie seems to believe it is her fault that she does not know the meat company is in trouble because several people got sick after eating their meat.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you think Charlie acts so immaturely when Alice stays overnight at the hospital? Why do you think will he not come to support her?

Discussion Question 2

Compare and contrast Alice and Priscilla's attitudes about Miss Ruby.

Discussion Question 3

Discuss Alice's concern about Jessica. Why do you think she feels so worried about the girl and her future?

Vocabulary

opprobrium, existential, legacy, candid, rancor, malaise, rebuttal, obliterated, precipitous, faux, emanates, egalitarian, diffident, tepid, acrimony, consensual, ludicrous, provocative, despondent, oblique, banal, edification, benign, moratorium, atrocious, capitulate, bourgeois



Part III: 402 Maronee Drive; pages 317-377

Summary

This section of the novel begins with a description of Emilie's funeral. During the funeral Alice found little comfort in the scripture that was read and the prayers that were recited. She believed the eulogy did not impart any likeness to her grandmother at all. It was only when she spotted her father-in-law in the crowd that Alice felt touched. After the funeral Alice thought of the ways her life might have been different if she had not known her grandmother so closely. She doubted she would have come to love reading and also wondered if she would have married Charlie. The two had the similar qualities of mischief and humor that drew Alice to Charlie.

At the reception, Charlie surprised Alice by being in a hurry to leave. Charlie said he had a work meeting that had come up but Harold encouraged him to stay with Alice when Charlie asked if he could ride back with him. Charlie would give neither Alice nor his father any hints what his meeting was about. Later at the reception, Alice learned from Dena's mother that Dena was living back in Riley after her clothing store had closed. She was also dating Pete. After everyone had left, Alice got a call from Charlie urging her to come home quickly so he could meet with Zeke. Alice was irritated with him but left because she knew Lars would take care of her mother. When she arrived at home Charlie left as soon as she pulled up in her car. It was after one a.m. when Charlie arrived back at home. She could tell he was excited, and he finally told her that he and his friends were putting together a deal to buy the Brewers.

On Memorial Day weekend, Alice, Ella, Jadey and Winnie went to the Maronee Country Club pool together. Their car was parked by a valet. Towels were provided at the pool. Cash was not used but instead members signed for what they ate or drank and bills were sent in the mail. Jews and blacks were not allowed to be members and it was frowned upon for single women to be members. It was when Alice read in that atmosphere about a man who could not afford his medications, she was struck by how different her life and the lives of other people were. She had mentioned it to Jadey but when Jadey side-stepped the issue Alice wondered if she had broken country club decorum.

Alice thought about her conversation with Charlie and about his part in purchasing the Brewers. He was to put up about \$600,000 toward the purchase but had mostly been brought on board because of the credibility his name would bring to the deal. Alice was happy because she thought the purchase of the team might be the thing that would bring Charlie the peace for which he had been searching.

Charlie did not attend the lunch with the Suttons on Memorial Day. Instead he had arranged a meeting about the sale of the baseball team. Alice and Charlie argued about his absence. He suggested she reschedule the dinner but Alice reminded him that they



would be at Princeton the following weekend and could not reschedule. When the Suttons arrived Alice was surprised by how composed and mature Jessica was. She and Jessica discussed books and Alice learned that Jessica liked Agatha Christie and V.C. Andrews, which Alice thought was creepy. Charlie showed up just at the end of the lunch asking if he could crash the party. He made an entrance carrying his golf clubs and then eating pie out of the pie pan with his fingers.

When Alice criticized Charlie for showing up with his golf clubs and obviously drunk, her told her she was being a killjoy. She reminded him that since her grandmother had just died she did not feel much like celebrating his good fortune. Instead of understanding, Charlie snapped back at her that Emilie's death was to be expected because she was so old.

Later during a walk with Jadey, Jadey admitted that she thought Alice and Charlie had the perfect relationship. Alice began to cry and told Jadey she was thinking about leaving Charlie. Jadey was concerned but Alice comforted them both by telling her that the coming trip to Princeton might help their relationship. Charlie's mood was particularly dark on Tuesday when the deal with the Brewers did not go through.

The next day, Alice called Nancy Dwyer at Biddle to see if there was a place for Jessica and if financial aid could be arranged. Nancy though space could be made for Jessica but there was no more financial aid left.

To make matters worse for Alice and Charlie during the end of the year party at their house Megan Thayer poked around their bedroom and found Charlie's Penthouse magazines. Alice was deeply embarrassed. When Charlie called to tell Alice the deal had gone through, she refused to go out and celebrate with him. He laughed when she told him about Megan finding his magazines and described Carolyn's reaction to Alice's apology. Charlie surprised Alice by calling her a bitch when she continued to refuse to celebrate with him. He said he would find someone who would go out with him.

Late that night, Alice got a phone call from Shannon telling her that Charlie had called and asked to pick her up. She had assumed he wanted to talk about Ella but instead Charlie had taken her to a bar. She had not drunk anything but he had drunk quite a bit before taking her home. It was shortly after Shannon's call that Charlie arrived at home. He played with Ella and made a sarcastic comment aimed at Alice when he said he was happy that someone was happy he had bought the Brewers.

Alice told Charlie that night that she thought they should pay for Jessica to attend Biddle. Charlie changed the subject, teasing Alice because he did not believe she would be able to guess who he had seen that night. Alice told him that Shannon had called her and pointed out how inappropriate Charlie's behavior had been. When he smirked at her she understood he had taken Shannon out as a way to get back at her for the time she spent with Miss Ruby. Alice tried to make him see that he could have hurt someone driving drunk but he came back with the idea that she was not the person who should be criticizing his driving abilities, an obvious dig at the wreck that killed Andrew. Alice began to scream and throw magazines at him. She spent the night in the guest room.



Alice and Ella still went with Charlie to his reunion at Princeton. He was proud that he was able to tell people he was part of a group that had just bought the Brewers. Ella quickly made friends and Alice was surprised that she was able to relax. She even danced with Charlie after dinner. About eleven, Alice took Ella to bed. Charlie asked her to come back to the party but Alice refused preferring not to leave her alone. On their way to the dorm in which they were staying Ella told her mother that she loved Princeton.

Analysis

As Alice and Charlie's relationship deteriorates, the author seems to hit a variety of climaxes, each a little higher than the next. In this section, for instance, there is a climax when Charlie acts so callously about the death of Alice's grandmother. A decrease in stress comes when Charlie goes through a brief period when he is jubilant because he and his friends are buying the baseball team. The emotions climax again when Charlie makes a comment about Alice's driving abilities, clearly referring to the wreck that killed Andrew. At the Princeton reunion, however, Alice again begins to relax and enjoy herself, especially since Charlie seems happy.

It is developed in this section of the novel that it is perhaps Harold Blackwell, Alice's father-in-law, to whom she feels most close of all of her in-laws. He is the only one who attends her grandmother's funeral and his attendance touches her because she knows that he had to make a special trip to be there. He additionally takes time to speak to her personally after the funeral and shares his sympathy, an offering that appears to be heartfelt. "I thought how there was nothing else in the world as endearing to me as Harold Blackwell's sentimental streak" (321) Alice explains about her feelings when he talked to her after the funeral.

The author takes the opportunity that Emilie's funeral gives him to remind the reader that Alice has still not regained the faith that she lost after the wreck that killed Andrew. It is significant in this section because the author describes how Alice does not take much comfort in the hymns and prayers at her grandmother's funeral. Alice's lack of faith will become even more important in the remainder of this section of the novel.

Alice credits her grandmother with her love of reading and in this section begins to try to share that love of reading with Jessica, Miss Ruby's granddaughter. After her grandmother's funeral, Alice thinks about how she might not enjoy reading as she did if her grandmother had not encouraged it when she was growing up. When she talks to Jessica about books she learns that the girl reads mostly romance novels, Agatha Christie and V.C. Andrews. Alice is surprised by the lack of opportunities Jessica has compared to Ella. While Ella will spend the summer with swim lessons, art camp and family vacations, Jessica will be babysitting her little brother.

The idea that people like the Blackwells should not associate socially with people like the Suttens is continued in this section. Charlie manages to miss lunch with Miss Ruby and her family but comes home just in time to embarrass Alice. After they leave he



makes comments about their way of life that are apparently intended to insinuate to Alice how different they are. In a more immature attempt to get his point across, Charlie takes Shannon, Ella's teenaged babysitter, to a bar with him, a move that is clearly inappropriate. When Alice confronts him about what happened, he claims it was no worse than her taking Miss Ruby to the theater with her. His comparison is not only staggeringly racist it also shows signs of being ill thought out since an adult man having an affair with an underaged girl is illegal while there is nothing unlawful about a white woman and a black woman going to see a play together.

When Alice learns during her grandmother's funeral that Pete and Dena are dating she immediately thinks of the repercussions that this relationship might have for her. She wonders if Dena has told Pete that Alice got pregnant by him and that she had an abortion. She wonders if Pete will be angry and try to cause problems for her. Alice is also concerned for her former friend. The only encounters she has had with Pete he has been cruel and hateful. She wonders why friendly, happy Dena was attracted to Pete at all.

The Maronee County Club is introduced as a way to illustrate not only the wealth and privilege but also the narrow-mindedness of the culture in which Alice lives. At the country club everything is provided for members. Cars are parked by valet, towels are provided. Foods and drinks are available by signing a form to have them put on a bill. Alice is distressed when she tries to talk to Jadey about the ease of their lives as compared to a man she reads about in a magazine who cannot even afford the medicines he needs to keep him alive. Jadey's flippant reaction makes Alice wonder if "It was inappropriate to introduce poverty and woe while sunning yourself pool-side; you either ought to be elsewhere, doing something about it, or you ought to sun yourself in the spirit that sunning requires" (333). When Alice tries to schedule a club meeting at the country club for a group of people some of whom are not members, she is chastised for presumptions. Not only do people have to be members of the club to use the facilities, blacks and Jews are not allowed to be members at all.

During his telling of Alice's story, Sittenfeld does use some notable literary devices in his descriptions. For instance, when Jadey and Alice go for their walk, they talk about the troubles in their marriage. Though it is not raining at the time, the author reminds the reader of the prior storms: "We both were quiet — the storm clouds were long gone" (349). Although Sittenfeld does not use the stormy afternoon to mirror the feelings of Alice and Janey he does remind the reader of the presence of the storm clouds, bringing a somber tone to the description even though the sun is shining.

At Princeton Alice uses a simile to compare Princeton students to typical college students. She says Princeton students are "as representative of a larger type as a thoroughbred racehorse or a Stradivarius violin" (371). She is pointing out that she knows that her daughter is getting a warped look at college life by having her first college experience at that Ivy League school. Another simile, used during Emilie's funeral helps Alice to describe the pain of her grief. "A constricting band of sadness, like a belt that was too tight, was ever-present" (317).



Discussion Question 1

How was Alice's life improved by her relationship with her grandmother? Do you think Alice and Charlie would have gotten married if not for Alice's grandmother? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

What is your opinion of Charlie's behavior during the time of Emilie's funeral? Why do you think he is so flippant about it and about Alice's grief?

Discussion Question 3

Why is Alice concerned that Pete and Dana are dating? What might their relationship mean for her?

Vocabulary

resonance, solace, peripheral, feigned, pediment, perturbed, evocative, insularity, culpability, reciprocate, largesse, berating, contrite, hyperbole, devolved, philanderer, cordial, prudent, serendipitous, arrhythmically, inebriated



Part III: 402 Maronee Drive; pages 377-430

Summary

After the parade Alice was talking with another teacher when Charlie pulled her away to dance. During the dance he not only grabbed her by the rear end but also squeezed her breast while still in public. They were interrupted by one of Charlie's former classmates and Alice walked away while she had the opportunity. Holly Goshen, the wife of one of Charlie's classmates, told Alice she was glad her husband was not the only one still doing cocaine. Alice was shocked and verified that it was Charlie who had done cocaine with her husband.

Alice ran into Joe Thayer and almost cried when he asked her if she was all right. He offered to walk with her and they headed toward the library. When Alice was finally able to talk she asked Joe if he had ever used cocaine. She admitted to Joe she was thinking about leaving Charlie. Joe reminded Alice of the way they had met at Halcyon and told her that he had always nursed a crush for her. He suggested that the two of them might get together Alice made him stop by kissing him. When they were done, Alice told him she had to find Ella and then apologized before leaving.

Charlie got back to their dorm earlier than Alice expected. Alice did not confront him and did not refuse when he asked for sex. She had already decided that when they got home she would take Ella and go to Riley. Before leaving, however, Alice stopped at a bookstore and bought a bag full of books for Jessica. When she dropped them off at Jessica's house, the young girl was shocked and grateful.

Alice told Charlie her plans that night. He was angry but she explained to him that she could not be responsible for his irresponsible behavior any longer. She told him that she planned to take Ella to her mother's like it was a vacation for them. For that reason she would not have to tell Ella about the separation. Charlie was surprised to learn how unhappy Alice was and was angry that she did not give him more warning. Near the end of their conversation, she realized that Charlie was frightened by the idea of being without her.

Ella was bored in Riley. Charlie called late the first night they were there. He asked her to come home and told her he was losing his mind. He had stayed at the Ramada Inn the night before. She told him she could not come back because she was sure nothing would have changed. He asked when she had turned against him. He begged her to come back to him and when she would not do so he cursed her before hanging up on her.

Charlie did not call the next day but the following day Priscilla called and told Alice to go back to Charlie. She blamed Alice for Charlie being an alcoholic and told her she knew



he drank when they got married. She indicated to Alice that Alice had married down when she married Charlie and that she had been expecting this phone call for years. Priscilla was especially appalled because Charlie had just gotten the best job offer yet. He was finally making something of himself instead of running Blackwell meat into the ground. Alice was surprised by the way her mother-in-law talked about Charlie. She was shocked by the low opinion that Charlie's family had of him.

Alice later called Jadey and asked if everyone in Charlie's family really thought he was dimwitted. Jadey admitted that Arthur and John were often frustrated with Charlie because he often left work without telling anyone where he was going and would not be there for meetings. Alice also learned from Jadey that Charlie was not staying with them any longer.

Later that day Ella was outside playing with her Barbie while Alice and Lars put together a jigsaw puzzle. When Alice checked on her daughter she was wearing a tiara and matching earrings that she had not been wearing earlier. Ella told Alice the lady from the house across the street, Dena's, had given them to her. Alice wondered if the gift had been a peace offering or a pointed remark that Ella was a princess.

Alice and Ella were about to leave the house to meet Charlie for a picnic, a meal Alice had arranged, when Arthur called her to say that Charlie had been arrested for DUI the night before and could not meet them.

When Alice next talked to Jadey she learned that Charlie had a new friend named Reverend Randy. Charlie called the following evening. He told Alice that Jessica was enrolled for the coming school year at Biddle and that they were paying for her schooling. Alice thanked Charlie and commented on how good he sounded. He told her he had been running. Before he hung up he promised to call Ella the next day.

Before she went to bed, Ella asked Alice about Andrew. She had seen his picture in the yearbook. Alice told her about Andrew and how he died. Later that night Alice wondered how her life might have been different if she and Andrew had gotten married. She thought of ways it might be better as well as ways it might be worse.

Yvonne called Alice to thank her for Jessica's books and to tell her that Miss Ruby had been spending the night with Charlie at Harold and Priscilla's house. Alice assured her that everyone would sleep in their own beds that night. At the Blackwells' house she instructed Miss Ruby to go home and take a week off. She found Charlie in his office at the ballpark. She told him she thought it was time for her and Ella to come home. He apologized to her and told her that the Holy Spirit had been working through her to bring him to his senses. He explained that it was Miss Ruby who introduced him to Reverend Randy. Alice doubted Charlie's sincerity but thought perhaps he had learned his lesson.

Alice speaks from her older point of view telling how Charlie's critics have described the short split between she and Charlie. People have accused Alice of being responsible for Charlie's run for presidency and the awful job he has done because she encouraged



him to get off alcohol. Another problem that Alice finds with this story is that she never dreamed that Charlie would run for president.

Going back to her story, Alice relates how Jadey had told her that Arthur had been very disturbed when Alice left Charlie. He had come home from work and begged Jadey to never leave him. She recalls she and Charlie were happier than ever for the next five or so years. In 1993 Charlie ran for governor. Charlie's new turn toward religion seemed to help in his candidacy. Reverend Randy became a fixture in the life of the Blackwells. One night Charlie called him to the house because he wanted whiskey but did not want to give in to his desire.

It was much later in her life that Alice learned that it was Miss Ruby who contacted Reverend Randy to help Charlie. She had looked him up in the phone book. She did not call her own minister because she was afraid that Charlie would not talk to a black man.

Analysis

It is when Alice splits from Charlie that she first has any idea what a low opinion his family members had about him. Remember that she learned from Joe that the extended family had been surprised to learn that Alice had agreed to marry Charlie but Alice had always thought that Charlie was respected in his family. When she first hears Priscilla talk about how undependable Charlie is, Alice thinks to herself that "It was unclear to me if this had been the most illuminating conversation of my life, the most insulting, both, or neither" (403). She is so shocked she is unsure how to respond to her mother-in-law. A call to Jadey lets Alice know that Charlie could not even be depended upon to arrive for his meetings on time and that he often simply could not be found when it was time for work.

While Alice ran from religion when her life fell apart, Charlie finds his healing in religion. It is Reverend Randy who helps Charlie quit drinking and get his life back in order. This turning to religion comes after Charlie has hit his lowest point. He has been arrested and charged with a DUI. Notice that it is not Charlie - or even Alice - who contacts Reverend Randy for Charlie. It is Miss Ruby. Though the reader might have doubted Miss Ruby's allegiance to and love for Charlie up to this point in the novel, her devotion to him is demonstrated by her actions. She stays with him at his mother's house because she knows he cannot sleep alone. She even tracks down a minister who can help Charlie. Note that even Miss Ruby is aware of Charlie's racist tendencies. Alice later learns from Miss Ruby that she did not call her own minister to talk to Charlie because she believes he would not listen to a black man.

Just as her grandmother introduced Alice to the world of books, Alice wants to introduce Jessica to this same world. She tries to select books carefully that she knows will have an impact on Jessica's life. "I'd planned to buy three books for Jessica Sutton, but as I stood in the young-adult section ... I decided five would be acceptable, and soon I was holding more than a dozen" (386). Because Alice loves books so much she is unable to



pare down her selection for Jessica to just a few. She finally manages to slim her selection down to twelve books.

The importance of books comes again when Alice finds herself staying in her grandmother's old room at her parents' house. Many of her grandmother's books are still there and Alice remembers having read them. "All those worlds, all the versions of myself I had been when I'd read these very copies, and all the versions of herself she had been" (392) are Alice's thoughts as she looks at the books. She describes the way each book a person reads adds a bit of depth to his character. A reader always learns and grows with each new book he reads. It was this growth and depth through reading that Alice shared with her grandmother.

In one section in which the older Alice interjects her feelings about her life she discusses the way that she and Charlie both have been affected by public opinion. Because the time period in which Charlie stops drinking is significant since it opened up the path for him to later run for presidency, there are a variety of stories that circulate about how Alice handled the situation. Some believe that she gave him an ultimatum. Some believe had she not given Charlie the ultimatum and allowed him to keep drinking, the country would be in a better state without him as president.

The time that Ella spends with her mother, Dorothy and Lars highlights some of the differences between Ella's life of privilege and the childhood of the typical middle class child. Ella is bored in Riley because there are not as many activities for her as there would be in Maronee. Even worse than being bored, however, Ella does not understand the way life works in the typical suburbs. Because she has lived all of her life at the country club signing for the drinks and food she got, Ella believes this is the way of the world. She is shocked and scared when the boy at a food truck accuses her of trying to steal. In reality, Ella is just acting as she always has. She asks to sign for the food she selects, but the boy will not let her - he does not know what she is talking about. Ella thinks she has made an effort to pay but the boy sees it as stealing.

An important symbol introduced in this section of the novel is the purple tiara and earrings that Alice comes outside to see her daughter wearing. She suspects the jewelry is a gift from Dena but is not sure if it is a peace offering or a sarcastic remark about Ella being a princess. Because she is afraid what the response might be, Alice chooses not to go and talk to Dena that day, a decision that she will later regret.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the books that Alice bought for Jessica. Do you think she made good choices? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Do you think the tiara Alice found Ella wearing was a peace offering or another stab at Alice and her marriage to Charlie? Give reasons to support your answer.



Discussion Question 3

Discuss the surprise that Alice feels when she learns how little respect Charlie's family has for him. Did you suspect this was the case all along? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

pinnacle, terminology, acquiesced, rancor, cajole, genially, introspection, irate, reticence, banal, disincentive, respite, sequestered, incapacitated, nuanced, beleaguered, acrimony, despondent, anteroom, defamatory, egregious, aphrodisiac, petulant, sophomoric, ostentatious



Part IV: 1600 Pennsylvania Ave.; pages 431-482

Summary

Alice describes Charlie's morning routine in Washington. Morning newspapers are delivered to their bedroom. This morning he tells her will only let her read the papers if she does not tell him about a man whom he calls Mr. Sympathy. The man is an army Colonel who is camping out near the White House grounds in an attempt to talk to the president. He wants the troops in the Middle East to be brought home because his son was killed in combat there. Alice agrees with the Colonel even though both Charlie and Hank tell her that he is not who he appears to be. Also of interest in the news are the moves of Ingrid Sanchez, the woman whom Charlie has nominated to the Supreme Court. Of interest is Sanchez's stance on abortion. It is suspected she is pro-life.

Alice loops back in time and describes how Charlie won the presidential election by the narrowest margin ever. The Supreme Court was called upon to make the final decision since Charlie got more electoral votes while his opponent got more popular votes. Charlie had intended to be bipartisan in his presidency until the terrorist attacks in 2001. Although Charlie had promised the war would be swift, it was continuing to drag on.

What Charlie was first elected president Alice had thought they would ride out the presidency just like one might ride out a tornado. While she had not wanted to call undue attention to herself, Charlie enjoyed asserting himself. This made it more difficult to ride out the presidency quickly. As the first couple, they have a cat, snowflake, who is supposed to make them more popular even though Alice hates cats. The school at which Alice once worked has been renamed in her honor.

As Alice is having her picture taken with attendees of a breast cancer summit she sees Hank. She is concerned because his presence usually means something is wrong. In the car, he first asks her if she knows a woman named Norene Davis. Hank tells Alice that Norene is accusing Alice of having an abortion in 1963. Alice had expected her abortion to be brought up when Charlie ran for governor and had expected it would be Dena who would tell about the abortion, in an attempt to get revenge. Hank goes on to tell Alice that Norene wants Alice to speak out against Sanchez in exchange for her silence. He says Norene is a problem that can be solved.

Based on his response to her, Alice knows that Hank suspects she has had an abortion. He warns her that the public will think differently about a first lady who is pro-choice and one who has had an abortion. Alice tells him it was probably Dena who told about her abortion. She asks that if investigators do question Dena, that they not hurt her or threaten her.



In the next section, Alice talks about the way people, even those who were once friends, respond to a person once he becomes famous. While she and Charlie had wanted to pay attention to them during the campaign, they were at a point where they just wished people would leave them alone. In this line of thinking, Ella calls her mother to request that her father talk to the Colonel. Ella admits to her mother that she does not agree with the Colonel that the troops should be pulled out but that Charlie's refusal to talk to the man made him look "heartless" (457). Alice worries how Ella will react if she finds out that her mother had an abortion.

Jessica comes to Alice telling her that Hank has an update. He tells her he believes the rumor originated with Gladys Wycomb. Gladys is 104, being taken care of by Norene. Hank tells Alice that the abortion was a violation of the Hippocratic Oath that Gladys had taken but since she was so old, she did not really care. As Jessica and Hank discuss what they can do to defuse the situation Alice tells them that she wants to see Gladys in person. She learns that Hank has already scheduled the trip.

Alice goes on to discuss the way that famous people are criticized. She describes the way the unbridled criticisms of people can be devastating. She divides criticism into two categories. She believes there is neutral, or unintentional, criticism and intentional criticism. Along with the criticism, Alice often discovers information about herself that is completely wrong. In fact, a poll of Americans indicated that Alice was a Christian who never held a job outside the house.

When Alice meets Gladys at her apartment, Alice recognizes right away that Gladys does not plan to treat her like she is famous. Gladys tells her that Charlie should be tried for war crimes. While she thinks he was "born a fool" (468) she kept waiting for proof that Alice was trying to speak to him with the "voice of reason" (468). Gladys tells Alice that if Roe vs. Wade is overturned the poor people will be going to whomever they can find who will perform abortions while rich people will still be able to go to doctors and get what they want. In her time she had seen cases of sepsis and infection as well as death from botched abortions. As Gladys continues to talk about her strong feelings about abortion remaining legal, Alice realizes there is no way of coming to any sort of agreement with her. Alice thinks quickly about what it will mean to her if Gladys tells about her abortion. Ella and her mother would find out. Gladys tells Alice she has the power to change to world but does not care. Just as she is walking out the door, Gladys tells Alice that her grandmother would be disappointed in her.

Near the end of this first half of Part IV Alice recalls a time when they visited with Harold and Petal, old friends of theirs. Before they left, Harold asked Charlie to help his company get a contract with the state. Alice and Charlie wondered later if that was the only reason that they had come to visit. She also thinks of her relief when President Kennedy was assassinated and the way it took the pressure off her back at the time of Andrew's death. She believes it would be justice if her own husband were to be killed the same way.



Analysis

In this section of the novel the tense returns to the present tense. Alice is describing this one day in her life as she lives it. As she says “Today will, no doubt, be a day of drama and obligations, but it will be a day like any other; all our days now are days of drama and obligations” (443). It seems that the author intends through this section to portray the average day in the life of a president and first lady.

The legality of abortion is once again brought to the forefront as Gladys threatens to make information about Alice’s abortion public. Gladys makes the point to Alice that even if abortions are made illegal, women will still get them, they just will not be as safe. She plays on Alice’s emotions and the fact that Alice once came to her for an abortion to try to get her to take a stand on the issue. In her lifetime, Gladys has had to try to treat women and girls who got abortions illegally and wound up with disease and infection. Gladys wants the women who find themselves in a position where they feel they have to get an abortion, like Alice once was, to be able to get one that will be safe.

While talking with Alice, Gladys voices a viewpoint that many others seem to share, that Alice is intelligent while Charlie is lacking in intelligence. She believes that Alice should use her intelligence to try to make Charlie see the issues about which he is not thinking clearly. “She subscribes to the belief, widespread among Democrats and shared by some Republicans, that he’s a moron, an evil moron, and to a certain extent, that lets him off the hook. But I — I should know better” (471).

Alice is caught in the middle because long ago she and Charlie agreed to disagree on matters of politics. Although she can see Gladys’ point of view, she does not want to risk her own marriage and lifestyle by speaking out in opposition to her husband. She has promised him that even though she does not necessarily believe the same way he does, she will help him present a united front in public.

Alice also discusses the way that she and Charlie are viewed both by the public and by the media. She describes how difficult it is to live a life in the public eye where few people, even friends, are honest. This is one reason that Alice is able to leave her appointment with Gladys and still have respect for the woman. “Dr. Wycomb’s comments are insulting and irritating, they are patronizing, but there also is something pure and true in her anger, like a winter wind. It’s almost refreshing, almost a relief, to be berated face-to-face” (469-470). In so many cases Alice and Charlie feel as if people are nice to their faces but then cut them down behind their backs. They are visited by friends whose visit includes a request for Charlie to help them get a meeting with a state board. After the friends have left Charlie and Alice feel as if they have just been used.

Discussion Question 1

Do you think that Alice should be more vocal in asserting her opinions about her political views into Charlie’s presidency? How much influence should the first lady have over the president? Explain your answer.



Discussion Question 2

Do you think Gladys is justified in making the information about Alice's abortion public? Do you think she is just trying to bully Alice or is she making a legitimate point?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the author's change in point of view. How does this affect the feel of the novel? In what other ways is this section different from the rest of the book?

Vocabulary

loquacious, fastidious, terse, capitulating, forfeiture, conflate, emeritus, omnipresence, antiquated, levitate, brevity, minions, credible, sordidness, tenuous, accosted, equilibrium, mundane, atypical, ubiquity, paramour, malign, oblique, ostensibly, acumen, vehement



Part IV: 1600 Pennsylvania Ave.; pages 482-553

Summary

In this final section of the novel, on trip from seeing Gladys, Alice decides she wants to go and see Dena. She has been regretting for years that she did not ever thank Dena for the gift of the tiara, a token Alice is sure was probably a peace offering. Although Jessica is probably Alice's closest friend, she admits that Dena was the person who was in her life as a friend the longest. Alice's schedule is rearranged so she can make the trip to Riley and still be back in Washington in time for the teacher appreciation banquet. On the way to Dena's apartment Alice listens to a segment on NPR about the Colonel. He insists he will continue to camp around the White House until he has a chance to talk to the president.

Alice remembers a fund-raising banquet in which she happened to sit next to a mentally handicapped man who wanted to talk about Drew Berrymore and play tic-tac-toe. Alice humored him and enjoyed her evening more than many fund-raisers she had attended. When Charlie's party later received a large donation from the handicapped man's father, Alice wondered if it was believed her kindness to the handicapped man was just a show in order to get a donation.

When she arrives at Dena's apartment, Alice is surprised how old her friend looks. Dena, like Gladys, treats Alice like a normal person, not the First Lady. They both agree they wish they had not had their fight all those years ago. After chatting for a while, Alice asks to talk to Pete as well. When they are together she warns them that a news story is about to be released about her abortion. Dena tells her that Pete knows the baby was his. They tell her how the media has hounded them for comments about Alice but Alice realizes by the way they talk that they never gave the reporters any information.

Dena does pass along a message for Charlie, that Dena thinks he should talk to the Colonel. She leaves Pete and Alice alone for a minute to get her camera. While she is gone Pete tells Alice that Andrew always had a big crush on her. He added it was probably for the best that he did not know she was pregnant because he probably would have wanted to do what was right and marry her. He suggested they say that Andrew was the father but Alice knows this would not have been the case. Before Dena comes back into the room Pete admits to her that he did vote for Charlie even though Dena thinks he did not. Before Alice leaves, Pete gives her a white envelope.

Alice comments on the friends of hers who have talked to reporters about her and the strange things they have said. Simon published a book about her that she had to stop reading when she realized he had even made comments about their sex life. The woman who owned a bookstore that Alice had once loved had written an editorial about Alice indicating that she needed to speak up and do something as First Lady. Alice feels



she has settled on devoting her time to worthy but noncontroversial causes. She thinks about what she might have done with her life if she had remained single and considers that she might have been happier because she would have done less, but would not have had the capability to do more.

On the way back from Riley, Alice is talking on the phone with Ella but is interrupted by an urgent phone call from Hank. Hank tells her that Gladys is dead. Because she is dead, Alice does not have to worry about the story of her abortion being brought to light. After the phone call, Alice goes on another journey into the past, wondering where Charlie's presidency went wrong and if she was responsible for it.

When her plane lands in Washington, Alice tells Jessica she needs to go see the Colonel. Jessica believes it is a great idea. Because there is such a crowd, Alice's car cannot get close enough to where the colonel is. She requests that he come to the car. Before she starts talking, Alice makes it clear that she is not speaking on her husband's behalf. As her own agent, she wants to let him know how sorry she is for his loss. He tells her the death of his son was made worse by the fact that he died for a cause that was not worth his death. She agrees with him that it is time to end the war bring the soldiers home.

As soon as the Colonel got out of Alice's car she got a phone call from Charlie telling her that Hank thought her move was brilliant and that he wished he had thought of it himself. Charlie is angry, though, when she tells him that she told the Colonel she was in favor of bringing home the troops. She remembers how she had once believed she could support Charlie while not supporting his political views. She had promised she would never let anyone know if she did not support him. She realizes she has broken this promise.

Alice and Charlie sit next to each other during the teacher appreciation gala but there are not pleasantries exchanged. Afterward Jessica fills Alice in on Hank's plan for damage control. Before they part for the night Jessica hugs Alice and tells her that she did the right thing. Alice reads a book as she waits for Charlie to return. When she stands from her reading, she remembers the envelope that Pete gave her. She knows it is the letter that she wrote to Andrew's parents. It still contains the heart-shaped pendant. She wonders if Pete's act of giving "me back my heart" (544) was why she was able to talk to the Colonel.

In their bedroom Charlie berates Alice for not telling him what she planned on doing. Even though her words have been minimized by White House staff, Alice knows that she said them. Charlie turns on the television to an interview of the Colonel. He is returning to Georgia satisfied that he got a chance to talk to Alice. He believes she will share his words with the president but knows it is the president's decision if he wants to act or not.

Alice tries to talk seriously to Charlie about her feelings about the war. She is worried about the number of young men killed and maimed because of the war. She explains that because she has stood by while he has made decisions that makes her responsible



for those decisions as well. He assures her that under each president there have been hard decisions to make but that those decisions were made in the name of democracy.

As Alice thinks about what Charlie has said she thinks about herself having lived in a cottage protected from life while those around her sought relief from their suffering. Sometimes Alice gave it and sometimes she did not. She realizes she married Charlie because it never matter how little she did, he had done less.

Alice dreams of Andrew again. This time in the dream they find one another and kiss. When she wakes, she knows she loves Charlie just as she might have loved Andrew. She questions again who is most wrong in their relationship: she, Charlie or the American people who gave them power. She admits she did not vote for Charlie for president. She knows there are secrets she has to keep to herself.

Analysis

Alice continues to bare her heart to her reader as she discusses the secrets she feels she has to keep as first lady. One of the first, and most damaging of her secrets, is that she did not vote for her husband as president. While the public is being critical of Alice for not reigning in her husband, she voted against him in the election. In what possible way could she had reigned him in more than not voting for him? She blames the American people for electing him to office in the first place.

As first lady Alice also feels like she has to keep her true feelings about issues a secret. For instance, even though she spoke out in favor of the troops being brought home from the Middle East, she knows that the White House staff is busy covering up and twisting what she said. She is held to a very strict standard and the people of the White House will not let her do too much damage to her husband's presidency without reigning her in. She fights against a much more powerful force than some people imagine.

Luckily for Alice, the abortion scare becomes a non-issue when Gladys dies. The situation prompts Alice to speak out on an issue that has been bothering her, that of the veteran camping near the White House in an attempt to talk to Charlie. Public opinion comes into play in almost every aspect of Alice's decision to visit with the Colonel. Some believe Charlie should speak to the man. One of these people in particular is Ella. She does not agree the troops should be pulled out of the Middle East but thinks her father looks "heartless" (457) because he will not speak to him. Charlie's White House supporters, however, believe that Charlie should not humor the man by speaking with him. They believe he is working with lobbyists. Notice that when Alice does talk to the Colonel, she is careful to tell him that she is not visiting him in the stead of her husband and she does not speak on behalf of him. She shares her own views with him. Her actions get mixed reviews. Ella is happy her mother spoke with the Colonel but displeased about what she had to say. Jessica believes Alice did the right thing. Charlie and Hank are happy with her until they learn what she told the Colonel.



It is in this section of the novel that Alice finally makes things right with Dena. She realizes that even though her friend got angry with her for dating Charlie, she has not done anything to seek revenge against Alice. This new knowledge is especially humbling for Alice since she had first thought that it was Dena who might have been responsible for leaking the information about the abortion. When they talk to her about the reporters who have called their house and hounded them for comments about the first lady that they have said nothing about their pasts with Alice.

Two important symbols are mentioned again in this section of the novel. The first one mentioned is the tiara and earrings that Alice found Ella wearing one day when she and her daughter were staying with Alice's parents in Riley. Dena confirms that the jewelry was a gift from her and that she had intended it as a peace offering. Another important symbol that surfaces again in this section is the silver heart pendant that Alice put with the sympathy note that she wrote to Andrew's parents. Because it was Pete to whom Alice gave the letter and Pete who returns it, the reader must wonder if his parents ever saw the letter. When Alice does open the envelope that Pete gave her she is overjoyed to have the pendant back and tries to think of some way she can wear it without drawing attention to it.

Reading and the importance of reading in Alice's life is mentioned in a pair of places in this final section. "The book I left here yesterday, *Stop-Time* by Frank Conroy, has been waiting for me for twenty-four hours — all night last night and all day today, while I hopped from Arlington to Chicago to Riley. I enter it, and it welcomes me back" (543). Even for the first lady, reading is an outlet that can help her to find solace from her problems. She is quickly immersed in her book and gets some relief from her stress.

As a good deal of the criticism against Charlie focuses on the war, Alice struggles to decide how she feels about it. As she has matured she realizes she often does not see the whole picture for things until she has seen them through to the end. She compares this to reading a novel. "I have imagined that I'll know what I think of this war when Charlie is long out of office, but that I don't know now — it is a novel I haven't reached the end of" (519). Just as the author of a novel can inject a twist or turn at the last minute, Alice knows that the war can also have a surprising twist that might change the way she feels about it. She decides it is best to wait until it is over to speak her opinion.

The ending of the novel carries the story full circle. Alice lays in bed contemplating if she has hurt her husband's candidacy in the Prologue. She leaves the reader at this same point in time but the reader knows much more about the depth of Alice's concerns. She believes she has hurt her husband not in the most obvious of ways, for instance her abortion when she was a teen, but has instead hurt his campaign by marrying him and believing they could keep politics out of their relationship.



Discussion Question 1

Can you imagine living life under the pressure that Alice and her husband do? With the idea of this in mind, do you think Alice did the right thing by talking to the Colonel? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

What is the significance of Pete giving Alice back the silver heart pendant that she believed Andrew had liked?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss Pete's statement that he would have married Alice had he known she was pregnant. How might Alice's life have been different if she had been married to Pete?

Vocabulary

moniker, reciprocate, peripheral, veracity, vestigial, facetiously, belligerent, rhetoric, agnosticism, untenable, hubris, sabotaged, rhytidectomy, assiduously, triptych, imploded, antipathy, cumulative, brevity, staid, altruistic, repugnant, ostentatious, lament, maudlin, concede, terse, precipitous, pundits, paragon, reverie, anecdote



Characters

Alice “Lindy” Lindgren Blackwell

Alice Blackwell is the main character and narrator of this novel. She is the daughter of Dorothy and Phillip Lindgren and granddaughter of Emilie Lindgren. She is an only child who grew up with her parents and grandmother all living in the same house. Alice seems to be closer to her grandmother than either of her parents. It is her grandmother who instills in Alice her love of reading.

When she is a senior in high school, Alice has a car wreck in which a boy in her class, one on whom she has a crush, is killed. The wreck is Alice's fault. She lives her life in an attempt to make up for this terrible accident. She believes that the good things that happen to her are a sign that she has been forgiven while the bad things are punishment for what she has done.

Shortly after the wreck, Alice has a brief affair with Pete Imhof, the brother of the boy who was killed. Alice does not love him but believes that by giving him sex she is making up for having killed his brother, Andrew. Alice gets pregnant by Pete. When Alice's grandmother finds out that Alice is pregnant she arranges for her granddaughter to have an abortion even though abortions are illegal at that time. Alice's grandmother has a friend, a doctor, who agrees to do the procedure.

Alice meets Charlie Blackwell when she is in her thirties. She is working as a librarian at an elementary school and has plans to buy her own home. Although she is unwilling at first because a friend of hers wants to date Charlie, Charlie woos her and she agrees to marry him. After she begins to get to know Charlie's family, Alice is shocked by the affluence of their lifestyle. She knows there are differences between her and Charlie — in particular they support different political parties — but believe they can make their marriage work.

Years later when Alice becomes first lady she tries to support Charlie as a person without speaking out about their differences in political views. It is after a scare in which the doctor who performed Alice's abortion threatened to go public with that information that Alice realizes she has a right to voice her opinion.

Pete Imhof

Pete Imhof is Andrew's older brother. He is home when Alice visits the Imhof home to leave a sympathy note and heart-shaped pendant she believes Andrew had liked for his parents. Pete invites Alice inside the house and has sex with her. A week later they have sex again when he picks her up at school. She goes to his house a few days later and he forces her to perform oral sex on him. She is humiliated and cries. Afterward, he calls her a whore and tells her that Andrew would not have had a whore as a girlfriend.



Alice gets pregnant by Pete but never tells Pete about the baby. Her grandmother convinces her to have an abortion. Later, Pete tells Alice that if he had known about the baby, he would have done the right thing and married her though he does not know if that would have been best for either of them.

Pete also is the young man who persuades Alice's mother to money into an investment scheme that he claims was guaranteed to pay big returns. Dorothy never gets any money out of the deal because Pete does not get enough investors to make the deal go through. When Alice tells him he should repay her mother the money he took from her Pete silences her by reminding her that his family has never expected payment in return for her mistake. She should now be willing to give him leniency.

Miss Ruby Sutton

Miss Ruby Sutton is the black woman who serves the Blackwell family as a maid both at Halcyon and at their main home in Madison. Charlie credits Miss Ruby with taking care of him since he was a baby. Though she seems grumpy and condoning around him, the reader discovers when Alice leaves Charlie that it is true that Miss Ruby would do anything for him.

She stays with Charlie at his parents' house so that he does not have to sleep alone. It is also Miss Ruby who contacts Reverend Randy in an attempt to help Charlie get his life back on the right path.

Miss Ruby is the character around whom much of the racial contention focuses. While the Blackwells, Priscilla especially, seem to think that Miss Ruby should be treated as if she is of a lesser class, Alice refuses to treat Miss Ruby like a second class citizen. For this reason Alice is berated by Priscilla for taking Miss Ruby to the theater with her.

Miss Ruby is the grandmother of Jessica, the girl who grows up to be Alice's personal assistant during her time as first lady.

Dena Janaszewski Cimino

Dena is Alice's lifelong friend. They attend grade school and high school together. Even though Alice thinks that Andrew has a crush on her junior high and high school, he dates Dena for several years. Even long after they have broken up, Dena is still jealous when Alice is seen flirting with Andrew. This is the reason Alice drove herself to Fred's party instead of riding with Dena like usual.

Later in their lives it is Dena who begs Alice to go to the party where she hopes to seduce Charlie. Instead of being interested in Dena, however, Charlie sets his sights on Alice. When Alice tells Dena that she and Charlie are dating, Dena ends their friendship. Though Alice tries once to contact Dena, Dena still refuses to make peace with her.



It is not until Alice and Dena are in their sixties that they finally began to repair their friendship. Alice initiates the meeting because she learns that it was not Dena who was blackmailing her, threatening to make the abortion that Alice had public.

Dr. Gladys Wycomb

Dr. Gladys Wycomb is the friend of Emilie from college. Emilie visits Gladys at Gladys' home in Chicago and takes Alice on one of her trips. It is during this trip that Alice walks in on her grandmother and Gladys in a sexual embrace.

When Emilie discovers that Alice is pregnant it is Gladys to whom she takes Alice to have an abortion. Later, because Emilie will not agree to leave her family and move to Chicago with Gladys, Gladys breaks off their relationship.

Many years later, when Alice is first lady, Gladys threatens to make the information about Alice's abortion public if Alice will not speak out against Charlie's nomination for the Supreme Court. Alice talks to Gladys face-to-face and realizes that Gladys believes strongly not only that abortion should remain legal but that Alice should have the guts to speak out against her husband. Gladys dies before she has the chance to tell anyone about the abortion.

Andrew Christopher Imhof

Andrew Christopher Imhof is a boy who is in Alice's class through much of grade school and high school. Andrew has a crush on Alice though he never asks her out on a date. He does ask her to dance with him at the junior-senior prom, a dance to which they both arrive with different dates.

Driving to a party at Fred Zurbrugg's house Alice fails to stop at a stop sign and hits the car Andrew is driving in the driver's side door. Andrew dies because his neck is broken in the crash.

Through the rest of her life, Alice is haunted by dreams that feature Andrew. They are always young and in high school. It is not until a dream she has when she was about 61 years old that her dream versions of herself and Andrew finally find each other and kiss.

Simon Tornkvist

Simon is a man whom Alice dates for nearly a year before she meets Charlie. Simon is a Vietnam veteran who has lost a hand in service. Alice and Simon break up because Alice wants to get married and have children while Simon does not want children.

At a baseball game Alice and Ella happen to run into Simon and his son. Alice is surprised to see that he has gotten married and has children. She is even more



surprised when he writes a book about their relationship that includes discussion about their sex life.

Although Alice does not recognize it, Emilie believes that Alice dates Simon as an effort to try and make up for Andrew's death by taking care of a handicapped man. Emilie warns Alice against marrying Simon because he is both unfriendly and unkind.

Emilie Lindgren

Emilie Lindgren is Alice's grandmother. She has an impact on Alice because she shares with Alice her love of reading with her granddaughter. Emilie is also the one who recognizes that Alice is pregnant. She arranges for Alice to have an abortion and tells Alice that she should not tell her parents.

When Alice first brings Charlie to meet her parents, Emilie offends Charlie because she makes a derogatory comment about the time that Charlie's father spent as governor of the state.

Later, despite their differences, Emilie encourages Alice to stick with Charlie. While Emilie is still in the hospital after her brain bleed she advises Alice that men think too seriously about themselves and need to be petted.

Megan Thayer

Megan Thayer is the daughter of Joe and Carolyn Thayer, one of the families with a compound at Halcyon. Megan becomes strange after her parents divorce. Alice asks Ella to be nice to Megan.

During the school's year-end party at the Blackwell house, instead of playing with the other children, Megan goes upstairs and pokes around in Alice and Charlie's bedroom. Alice finds her with Charlie's copies of Penthouse magazine, which were supposed to be locked up, spread around her. Alice is angry because she feels like she has to apologize to Megan's parents that the girl has seen the magazines. The incident causes an argument between Charlie and Alice.

Charlie Van Wyck Blackwell

Charlie Blackwell is the grandson of the founder of Blackwell Meats. He is the son of Priscilla and Harold Blackwell, former governor of Wisconsin. Even though Alice does not know it at the time, Charlie's family does not have a high opinion of him. He is a heavy drinker and does not work even though he has a job at the family meat company.

Alice is attracted to Charlie because of his sense of humor and mischievous nature even though the two have different political affiliations. Throughout their relationship and Charlie's ascent in politics eventually to the President of the United States, Alice finds



herself burying her own views and opinions in order to keep from appearing to be opposed to his views.

Priscilla “Maj” Blackwell

Priscilla is the wife of Harold Blackwell and the mother of Charlie and his three brothers. Her children call her “Maj” short for her majesty. Priscilla is not offended by this title. Instead, she seems to think it is her due.

Priscilla is very racist and criticizes Alice for trying to be friends with Miss Ruby, the black lady who works as the housekeeper for Priscilla.

Alice is also confused by Priscilla’s attitude toward her. She thinks at first that her mother-in-law does not like her but later learns that Priscilla calls Alice one of her favorite people.

Colonel Edgar Franklin

Colonel Edgar Franklin is a Vietnam veteran who served in the military for 30 years. His only son, Nate, was killed by a roadside bomb in war in the Middle East. He is camping out near the White House with the intention of staying until he is allowed to talk to the president about removing American troops from the Middle East.

President Blackwell never speaks to Franklin in the course of this novel but Alice decides to do so after her meetings with Gladys Wycomb and Dena. Franklin tells Alice about his son and even though it goes against her husband’s belief, Alice agrees with Franklin that the troops should be taken out of the Middle East.

Jessica Sutton

Jessica is the granddaughter of Miss Ruby. Alice takes an interest in the girl because she recognizes how intelligent she is and how much potential she shows. She encourages the girl to read by buying a bag full of books for her. Alice additionally campaigns to have Jessica go to Biddle, the private school that Ella attends. In an attempt to get Alice to forgive him for his drinking and DUI Charlie agrees to pay for Jessica’s tuition to the school.

Jessica grows up to be Alice’s chief of staff. Alice considers Jessica to be her best friend.



Harold Blackwell

Harold Blackwell is Charlie's father and Priscilla Blackwell's husband. He served as the governor of Wisconsin for a term. During his time in office Harold offended many people with his comments about protestors of the Vietnam War.

After Alice marries Charlie she sees a different side of Harold Blackwell. She sees that he is a sentimental person who really cares for his family. It is this part of him that she loves the most.

Joe Thayer

Joe Thayer is the ex-husband of Carolyn and father of Megan. He is the son of one of the Halcyon families. He works as a lawyer. At the Princeton Reunions Joe talks to Alice after she learns that Charlie has taken cocaine. Joe is interested in marrying Alice if she and Charlie break up. Alice kisses him on the lips but means it as a consolidation prize. He interprets it as her desire for him and later confronts her, asking if she is going to leave Charlie for him or not.

Arthur Blackwell

Arthur Blackwell is Charlie's older brother. He is married to Jadey, Alice's best friend among the Blackwells. Arthur is the brother who recites the raunchy poem that he claims to have written himself about Alice the first day of a family weekend at Halcyon, the first day that Alice meets many of the members of the family. Alice also recognizes the poem and knows that it has been plagiarized.

Shannon

Shannon is the girl who babysits Ella for Alice and Charlie. One night she calls Alice to let her know that Charlie picked her up and took her to a bar. Nothing happened between the two of them but Shannon thinks Alice should know. Later, Alice learns Charlie's "date" with Shannon is meant as payback for Alice taking Miss Ruby to the theater with her.

Hank Ucker

Hank Ucker is the man who works as Charlie's campaign manager during his race for Congress and his race for the presidency. Hank appears to be Charlie's chief of staff during his presidency. He is the one who works with Alice to quell the story that Alice had an abortion and later arranges damage control after Alice talks to the Colonel.



Randall “Reverend Randy” Kniss

Reverend Randy is the preacher who convinces Charlie to stop drinking and turn his life over to the Lord. Charlie meets Reverend Randy during the time that he and Alice are separated. Miss Ruby introduces the two in hopes that Randy can help Charlie change his life.

Nadine Patora

Nadine Patora is the real estate agent who tries to help Alice find her dream home. Nadine accuses Alice of being crazy when Alice backs out on the deal to buy her house even after the offer she made is accepted.

Lars Enderstraisse

Lars is the man who once delivered mail to Alice’s family. After her father’s death, Alice’s mother begins dating Lars. They eventually marry.

Dorothy Lindgren

Dorothy Lindgren is Alice’s mother. It is because Dorothy is tricked into participating in an investment scam that Alice has to forgo buying the house for which she has saved money for so long.

Phillip Lindgren

Phillip Lindgren is Alice’s father. He instills in her the idea that whatever she does she should do the best she can and that she should clean up the messes she makes.

Zeke Langenbacher

Zeke Langenbacher is the man who lets Charlie in on the deal to buy the Brewers’ baseball team.

Ella Blackwell

Ella Blackwell is the daughter of Alice and Charlie. She is an adult by the time that Charlie serves as president but still helps her mother out with some of her duties.



Nathaniel “Nate” Franklin

Nate Franklin was the only son of Colonel Edgar Franklin. He was killed by a roadside bomb in the war in the Middle East.

Snowflake

Snowflake is the First Cat, a Russian Blue. Alice does not like the cat. She has not liked cats since she was scratched by one when she was a child. She agrees to get the cat only because people think she and Charlie will be more likable if they have a pet.

Norene Davis

Norene Davis is the home health worker whom Gladys Wycomb convinces to contact the White House with the threat that unless Judge Ingrid Sanchez is kept off the Supreme Court, Wycomb will make public the fact that Alice had an abortion.

Jane Davenport “Jadey” Aigner Blackwell

Jadey is Arthur Blackwell’s wife. She and Alice become close friends beginning with their original meeting at Halcyon when Jadey discovers that Alice has gotten drunk during dinner.



Symbols and Symbolism

A Sable Stole

This sable stole, appearing in Part I, symbolizes the kind of relationship that Emilie and Gladys have. Emilie tells Alice on the way to Chicago that she wants to buy a sable stole and has had the store save one for her. When they arrive at the store Alice is not surprised when Gladys buys the stole for her grandmother. Alice later learns that her grandmother and Gladys are having a homosexual relationship.

Silver Heart Pendant

This silver heart pendant is representative of Alice's love for Andrew. It appears in Parts I and IV of the novel. Alice received the pendant from her grandmother as a gift. While she is talking to Andrew in the school hallway he touches the heart, asks what it was and comments that it is pretty. Alice believes Andrew touched the heart just so he could touch her skin.

After Andrew dies, Alice includes the pendant in a letter she gives to Andrew's parents. Years later when Alice visits Dena and made amends with her, Pete, Andrew's brother, gives Alice the letter and pendant back. Alice feels at that time as if Pete has "given me back my heart" (544).

A Mint Green Ford Thunderbird

This mint green Ford Thunderbird is a symbol of Andrew. When Alice sees that it is a mint green car that she has hit, her first thought that it is Andrew in the car.

The Giving Tree

The Giving Tree is symbolic of the life Alice has before she marries Charlie. The Giving Tree is Alice's favorite book. When she makes papier-mâché figures for the library, Alice makes a tree to represent the Giving Tree. It is the only figure that she keeps with her for the remainder of her life. She displays it with a bust of Nefertiti in the sitting room of her bedroom at the White House.

A Gold Brooch

This gold brooch symbolizes Dorothy's naivety. It is her mother's brooch. She believes it is valuable and gives it to Alice to sell so she can recoup some of the money that she gave Pete for his investment scheme. When Alice takes it to a pawnshop she is offered \$95 for it. The owner of an antique shop offered her even less.



Alice's Volvo

Alice's white Volvo is a symbol of her privilege as the wife of a rich, white man. She feels especially conspicuous in this car when she visits Miss Ruby and Jessica at their home in a predominately black neighborhood.

A Tiara and Matching Earrings

When Alice first sees her daughter wearing this tiara and matching earrings she thinks the gifts, which she believes are from Dena, might carry one of two messages: it might be a sarcastic message from Dena that Ella is a princess, or it might be a peace offering. When Alice finally speaks with Dena years later, she learns that Dena had intended the gifts as a peace offering.

Nefertiti Bust

This bust of Nefertiti is a symbol of Alice's grandmother and the impact that she has had in her granddaughter's life. The bust is originally a gift from Gladys to Emilie. Emilie leaves it to Alice when she dies. This bust is one of the things that Alice keeps in the sitting room of her bedroom at the White House.

Tornado

Alice compares the way she and Charlie would ride out his presidency to the way one would ride out a tornado watch. She remembers the way that Charlie defied a tornado and come to her when she was afraid years ago when they were dating. Alice believes they will be able to defy the tornados his presidency will send their way as well.

A Baseball Cap

This term "baseball cap" is symbolic of the off-the-record trips that Charlie or Alice make during the presidency.



Settings

Riley, Wisconsin

Riley, Wisconsin is where Alice grows up and attends grade school and high school. She returns to Riley multiple times as an adult to check on her mother and grandmother.

Chicago

Emilie travels to Chicago when she visits her friend Gladys. One Christmas she takes Alice along with her. It is during this trip that Alice learns that her grandmother and Gladys have a lesbian relationship. Emilie later takes Alice to Chicago to get an abortion when Alice gets pregnant by Pete.

The Intersection of De Soto Way and Farm Road 177

It is at the intersection of De Soto Way and Farm Road 177 that Alice drives into Andrew's car, killing him.

Madison, Wisconsin

Alice moves to Madison, Wisconsin when she takes a job as a school librarian. It is while living in Madison that she meets Charlie.

Halcyon

Halcyon is the name of the complex of vacation houses owned by the Blackwells and other rich families. Alice stays with the Blackwells at this complex the Labor Day weekend just after they get engaged. She is disturbed by the differences in the way they live their lives and treat their family members as compared to the way she was raised.

Maronee Country Club

While sunning at the Maronee Country Club, Alice reads an article about a man unable to afford his medications for hepatitis and cirrhosis medications. She feels shameful because she has so much while some people have so little. The people with whom she associates, however, do not believe in helping others the way that she does. Later, when Charlie is campaigning for the presidency, he has to cancel his membership to the country club because it does not allow blacks to be members.



Themes and Motifs

Pressure of Public Opinion

Alice describes to her readers her discomfort with public opinion not only before her husband becomes president but also the way these opinions are magnified when one is in a powerful position. Situations in which Alice feared the public was judging her before she and Charlie were married are contrasted with the weight of public opinion they feel in the White House so that the reader can understand how much stress the public can put on a political figure.

Before she and Charlie are married, Alice worries about the typical things that might draw unwanted attention to them. She does not want Charlie to spend the night with her before they are married even though they are sleeping together. Because of her old-fashioned views one of Alice's boyfriends called her a prude. Charlie, however, humors her oddity.

Something that becomes an issue for Charlie and Alice after they are married are the Penthouse magazines that Charlie reads. Alice is mortified that the magazines are in her house at all even though Charlie keeps them locked up where even Ella cannot get to them. When a child at a party snoops in Alice and Charlie's bedroom and finds the magazines, Alice is distraught because she will have to tell the mother what happened. Her worst fears are realized when the mother is angry with her. When Alice tries to tell Charlie about the experience he believes it is funny. Even though Alice thinks the magazines are a big deal, Charlie tells her that in his family all of the males looked at the magazines. She should not be embarrassed if his brothers find out about them because they are the ones who introduced him to them.

Once Charlie becomes president both he and Alice must deal much more closely with the public and its opinion. Alice is hurt and mystified when people she does not even know make untrue and unfair statements about her and her husband. One of the particular aspects of their lives that the public seems obsessed with talking about is Charlie's decision to stop drinking. In public opinion it is believed that Alice gave Charlie an ultimatum. He either had to quit drinking or she would leave him. Alice points out how untrue this statement is. She is astounded that some people even draw the conclusion that if she had not insisted he stop drinking he would not have become the president, in effect blaming her for getting him elected.

Mixed Beliefs about Abortion

Sittenfeld uses this novel as a way to discuss the mixed views of abortion. He draws his reader's attention to the way the issue is not as cut and dried as some might like to think. Alice has an abortion after she gets pregnant accidentally as a teenager. Years later, she is married to a man who is a Republican. His party believes in a pro-life



stance. When the doctor who performed Alice's abortion threatens to make her abortion public knowledge, Alice must face her own past and decide how she wants to proceed on the issue.

During Charlie's presidency, one of the issues is legality of abortion. Some pro-choice believers want the famous *Row vs. Wade* suit to be overturned and abortion to be illegal. Since Alice has had an abortion many years ago it stands to reason that the powers at the White House will not want that knowledge getting out. It is a tidbit of information that can very negatively affect both Charlie and Alice. Charlie would be criticized because he supports a non-abortion stance yet his wife had an abortion. Alice does voice her own opinions about abortion when she is interviewed by saying that she does believe abortion should be legal. She does not expound on the topic. By arguing in favor of abortion, Alice would be supporting a policy opposite her husband's, something she has promised not to do.

Gladys Wycomb, meanwhile, sees abortion not as a moral issue but instead a health issue. The reader should remember this is what she tells Alice when the teenaged Alice is brought to her for the abortion. Alice tries to share with Gladys her moral standards but Gladys says that she is treating a medical problem, not a problem of morality. When Alice visits Gladys again as First Lady, Gladys again stresses the medical side of the problem. As a doctor she has been faced with treating women who have gotten diseases and infection from having illegal abortions. She also knows of people who had died from botched procedures. As she tells Alice, "Every doctor knows outlawing abortion doesn't make it less common, it just makes it less safe" (469).

If anyone has a vested interest in abortion being legal, it should be Alice. She gets pregnant by a man whom she allows to take advantage of her while she is emotionally unstable as a teenager processing a traumatic event. She is lucky because her grandmother knows a doctor willing to perform an abortion even though the procedure is illegal at the time.

It has only been with age that Alice learns how much different her life might have been if she had gone ahead with having the baby. First, she knows that Charlie probably would not have married her if she had already had a child when they met. She later learns from Pete that if he had known she was pregnant, he would have attempted to do the honorable thing and married her. One can only imagine what Alice's life might have been like if she had married Pete.

Importance of Reading

The author portrays a high value of reading and what the healthy escape from reality is can provide people through Alice and her grandmother's love for literature.

Alice's grandmother imparts to her a great love of reading. It is evident through Alice's attitude toward her grandmother's books, her desire to get Jessica Sutton good reading material, and the way Alice describes things in her life in terms of books and novels that



Alice loves reading as well. At her grandmother's funeral Alice realizes that if it had not been for her grandmother, she might not ever have known and been able to enjoy the break from reality that reading provides.

Alice's love of reading is obvious through her desire to help her students love reading as well. It is because she wants what they are reading to come to life that she makes the characters to represent some of the more popular children's books. Even Charlie, who came from a family that does not seem to value reading, recognizes most of the characters that Alice has made to illustrate the books she will read for the library.

Alice credits her grandmother, who had once read as much as a novel a day, with her great love of reading. She remembers that her grandmother's room had shelves filled with books. Alice had believed this room was the introduction to her adulthood as she read through the titles that her grandmother owned. After her grandmother dies, Alice looks at these books again. She remembers the things that she and her grandmother learned and experienced through those books.

Because she learned so much from books Alice hopes to pass this learning along. When she learns how much Jessica Sutton likes to read but discovers that Jessica has been spending her time reading romance novels and horror books, Alice sets her up with a bag full of classic books. It is perhaps Alice's interest in Jessica that opens her mind to some of the same things that Alice learned from her grandmother.

In fact, it is a book that first draws Alice's attention to Andrew. Her grandmother had read a book that mentioned hearts of palms. Alice decides she wants to try eating hearts of palms, which she learns can be found in the canned food aisle. She and Alice are looking for this particular food when Andrew and his mother walk up and begin talking to them.

Notice also the way Alice describes things in terms of books. For instance, when she and her friends consider their age she compares them to "characters in a fairy tale, narcissistic hags grasping at our lost youth" (502). Later, when she discusses her lack of an opinion of the ongoing war she indicates that she has not yet made up her mind because she is not sure how that "novel" (519) will end.

Finally, Alice learns from her grandmother that reading can help a person escape from reality. There is only one time that Alice notes that she cannot get lost in reading. This point in time comes soon after Andrew's death. No matter how hard she tries to immerse herself, the pain of what has happened comes back to her at the end of each page.

Constancy of Racism

Although this novel is set in a time period long past desegregation, there is still a distinct tilt toward racism, especially among the Blackwell family. Racism did not figure much into Alice's life as a girl because there were few black people who lived in Riley. When Alice begins spending time with the Blackwells Alice becomes more and more aware of



how the Blackwells view blacks as being second-class citizens. The author perhaps includes this theme as a way to point out that with all the privilege and wealth the Blackwells enjoy, they are still very poor when it comes to morality and the proper way to treat people.

It is when Alice is preparing to go with her grandmother to spend time with Gladys Wycomb that she first learns about racial issues. “I guess you wouldn’t remember ... but there was something that happened on the second visit, a discussion about Negroes — should they have rights, and that sort of thing. Dr. Wycomb was very keen on the subject, as if she wanted us to disagree with her, and we just thought, for heaven’s sakes, there aren’t any Negroes in Riley” (21). This quote from Alice’s mother gives the reader an idea how little Alice’s parents think about racism. Just because there are no black people in Riley they believe they do not need to be concerned with the rights of these people.

Alice is next confronted with racism when she visits Halcyon for the first time. All of the wait staff there is black. Particularly telling is Alice’s interactions with Miss Ruby that first day. Alice tries to help Miss Ruby set up, but Miss Ruby ignores her offers to help. Her attitude and actions indicate to Alice that while Miss Ruby is seen by the Blackwells just as someone to fix their drinks, she sees Alice as just another person whom she must wait upon. It is surprising a little later in their relationship when Alice asks Miss Ruby to go along with her to see a play, and Miss Ruby accepts. Afterward, Priscilla lets Alice know that asking Miss Ruby to go to the play was out of line. She treats Miss Ruby as a possession, not a person.

Although Charlie kids his mother because of her racism, he is a racist himself. He seems to appreciate all that Miss Ruby has done for him but when it comes to spending casual time with her family, he balks. When he finally does show up he acts in a way that is condescending and rude. Even Jessica, who is only 12 at the time, notices Charlie’s strange behavior toward them.

Unfortunately, racism is not an issue limited to the Blackwells. Politics use relationships between whites and blacks as a way to stir up controversy for candidates they believe are unsuitable. For instance, it had been made into a scandal that “Olson, who was a white Democrat, had had a brief and childless first marriage to a black man in the late sixties” (288).

Rich versus Middle Class

As Alice and Charlie date and prepare for marriage, their courtship illustrates some very significant differences between the rich and the middle class. Alice is shocked by the way the Blackwells conduct themselves at Halcyon. She is also struck by the way they spend money with no thought. Another look at the clash between the rich and the middle class comes when Ella visits Alice’s parents in Riley. These differences between the rich and the middle class illustrate the challenges that Alice and Charlie face in their relationship.



On the way to Halcyon, Alice is shocked when Charlie tells her about how a family member bought a flamingo in order to play a practical joke on another family member. Alice is stunned by the idea of this purchase especially when she sees that the family's vacation home is so run down and simple. The family is proud of their one bathroom with the bad plumbing even though they have enough money to update the bathroom and the plumbing.

Alice notes that there are many things that Charlie takes for granted because he has been raised in a rich family. He does not want for money. He also does not realize that some people have to work hard for what they have. They are not able to spend their summers at their vacation home. Alice sees the same privilege in her own daughter when she considers Ella's summer plans, which include swimming lessons and summer camps, as opposed to Jessica's, which includes babysitting her little brother.

When Ella visits Alice's parents in Riley it is apparent that she did not grow up in a middle class neighborhood. When she tries to get an ice cream cone from the vendor at Pine Lake, the boy accuses her of trying to steal because she wants to sign for the cone instead of paying cash. Back at home, Ella and her parents are members of a country club. They do not have to carry cash. They sign a slip and the items they buy are billed to them at the end of the month. Ella has been in that world so long that she does not realize that is not the way the real world works.

Styles

Point of View

This story is told from the first person point of view of Alice Blackwell. The intent of the book is to describe how Alice's life has changed through the years. The best way to do this is to let Alice tell her story in her own words. Had this story been told in any other point of view it would not have had the emphasis on Alice's shock at being thrown into a world for which she is totally unprepared.

Language and Meaning

Within this novel, there is a good deal of talk about literature and reading related topics. In one part of the novel Alice compares herself and her friends to characters in a book. In another she compares her life and the parts of her life as a novel that she has not yet finished reading.

There is some discussion in the book that deals with the talk of politico. For instance, Alice describes the way that she and her family members were given code names when they first began living in the White House. The Secret Services uses these names to refer to the members of the family.

Structure

The structure of the novel is set up as a frame story, with the story of Alice's life framed inside the scope of one day of her life as the First Lady. This day is introduced in the Prologue as Alice lays in her bed at the White House. It is the end of the day that is described in Part IV of the novel. Both the Prologue and Part IV of the novel are told in the present tense. Parts I, II and III are told in the past tense although there are parts in these sections in which Alice speaks directly to the reader in the present tense. In these sections Alice expounds on some part of her earlier life that she has learned from as an older woman.

Each Part of the novel has its own exposition, rising action, climax and falling action. For Part I it is the story of Andrew's death and Alice's abortion. In Part II the action rises as Charlie and Alice date and are married. Part III has perhaps the most severe climax as Charlie and Alice's marriage teeters on the edge of destruction. There is a climax in Part IV but it kind of fades out when Gladys dies and Alice is no longer in danger of having the secret of her abortion exposed. The denouement comes as Alice and Charlie make up after their fight about Alice's decision to talk to the Colonel.



Quotes

Or perhaps I did both, and that's the problem — that I lead a life in opposition to itself.
-- Narrator (Prologue)

Importance: Alice's question to herself as she looks back on her life is one that is central to the novel. She examines her life to look for signs of the beginnings of the duplicity with which she suspects she has lived her life.

Yet this was the place, smelling of cigarette smoke and Shalimar perfume, that seemed to me a passageway to adventure, the lobby of adulthood. In my grandmother's lair, I sensed the experiences and passions of all the people whose lives were depicted in the novels she read.

-- Narrator (Part 1)

Importance: Alice describes the room in which her grandmother inhabited at Alice's childhood home. She thought of the room as being a fanciful place, one inspired by the books Emilie had read. Notice the smells that Alice connects with her grandmother, cigarettes and Shalimar perfume. Significant also is the author's use of the word "lair" to describe the bedroom instead of a more generic term. The use of this word gives the reader the idea that Alice's grandmother was a person who could not quite be contained, but one who used her books and room as a way to create her own place of seclusion.

Later, I remembered thinking that I knew then Andrew would become my boyfriend, but that it wasn't as if I were realizing it for the first time. Hadn't I always known, for my whole life?

-- Narrator (Part 1)

Importance: Alice had believed when she first began to get to know Andrew that he would be a special part of her life. For this reason it was especially disturbing to her when he died in the traffic wreck that she caused. Dreams of what her life might have been like had Andrew lived and they had been married haunt Alice for all of her life.

For my own grandmother, the grandmother living in my house, who used the same bar of soap in the bathroom that I did, whose jewelry and high heels I'd dressed up in as a little girl — for her to be in a homosexual relationship didn't make sense. She'd been married, she'd had a child!"

-- Narrator (Part 1)

Importance: Alice is shocked when she sees her grandmother and Gladys in a homosexual embrace. For a while she is angry with her grandmother but soon realizes that even though her grandmother has beliefs that differ from hers, these beliefs do not make her grandmother a bad person.



My ambulance left before the other one, and though I did not yet understand everything, I knew that it was very bad, that it was far worse than I'd realized even in the seconds following the collision: The other driver was Andrew, and the accident was my fault."

-- Narrator (Part 1)

Importance: As she tells her story, Alice stresses to the reader how serious the accident in which she was involved really was. Not only was Andrew killed in the wreck, Alice was responsible for the crash because she failed to stop at a stop sign.

Forty minutes before, I'd been a virgin with a condolence note, and then Pete Imhof had been inserting his penis into me from behind and I'd resisted not at all?"

-- Narrator (Part 1: 2013-2014)

Importance: Alice is surprised not only how quickly her life changed but also how little resistance she showed when Pete took her virginity. She does not realize it at the time but she is probably still in shock from the circumstances of Andrew's death. She is trying to make up to Pete for taking away his younger brother by allowing him to take what he wanted from her.

I was Mimi Étoile, I realized suddenly, I was the girl whose nose had been bitten off by a tiger, and now I reminded cheerful people of life's sorrow."

-- Narrator (Part 1: 2013-2014)

Importance: Alice's grandmother tells the story of Mimi Étoile a circus performer who had to stop performing after she was injured by a circus animal. Just like Mimi Étoile reminded people of the dangers of animals, Alice believed she reminded people of the sorrow of life. She sensed her grandmother had told her this story because she hoped Alice would understand why people were avoiding her.

And yet with his death, I felt a grim relief. I wasn't happy; certainly not. But something had occurred that was so dreadful, it eclipsed the dreadful of what I had caused."

-- Narrator (Part 1)

Importance: When President Kennedy is assassinated Alice is secretly happy because it takes the focus off Andrew's death. When Charlie is later elected president, Alice is haunted by the memory of being pleased by Kennedy's death.

A week after a rally at UW in which a young woman named Donna Ann Keske, a sophomore from Racine, was paralyzed from the chest down when police used force to break up the demonstration, Governor Blackwell appeared on Face the Nation and called Vietnam protestors 'unwashed and uneducated,' thereby demonstrating a tin ear that would have been unfortunate under normal circumstances but was downright callous during a time of such tumult.

-- Narrator (Part II)

Importance: This quote, and the ideas represented in it, demonstrates why many people do not like Harold Blackwell, Charlie's father.



But it was a rare married woman who was able to believe that a single woman had any choice in the matter of her own singleness.”

-- Narrator (Part II)

Importance: Alice notices that married women seem to think that if a woman is single, it is simply because no man has yet proposed to her. They do not seem to even consider the idea that a woman would want to be single.

No, I wasn't completely certain about him, and yes, this would strain my friendship with Dena. But the responsibility and caution that I'd tried to employ for so long — since the accident, though in some ways even before that — hadn't served me well, especially lately.”

-- Narrator (Part II)

Importance: Although Alice suspects that her budding relationship with Charlie might damage her friendship with Dena, she goes ahead with it because she is tired of being responsible and not feeling like she is being rewarded.

I should hope not,' my grandmother said cheerfully. 'What a chokehold that man had on this state!'"

-- Emilie (Part II)

Importance: It is this statement made by Alice's grandmother during her first meeting with Charlie that offends Charlie and sets the tone for their relationship. Charlie explains to Alice later how deeply the members of his family are hurt when another member is degraded. Charlie has been taught to discount and ignore these people.

The focus isn't on getting elected, not yet. It's about putting my name out there, letting people know I'm an adult. I'm a serious person with serious ideas about the state of Wisconsin.”

-- Charlie (Part II)

Importance: Charlie tries to explain to Alice why he is campaigning even though he does not believe he has a chance of winning the office for which he is campaigning. Alice believes the amount of money that Charlie's supporters will be spending on the campaign is disgraceful, especially since he does not believe that he will be elected.

If Charlie Blackwell was really a spoiled lightweight, Alice Lindgren would not have been marrying him; we both needed to believe it. But again, as I said: This is the conclusion I pretended not to have drawn.”

-- Narrator (Part II)

Importance: From her point of view as a 61-year-old woman, Alice remembers that she pretended not to believe that by marrying Alice, Charlie was trying to prove himself to his family. With the passage of time Alice realizes that was probably really the case.



She was the reason I was a reader, and being a reader was what had made me most myself; it had given me the gifts of curiosity and sympathy, an awareness of the world as an odd and vibrant and contradictory place, and it had made me unafraid of its oddness and vibrancy and contradictions.

-- Narrator (Part III)

Importance: In this quote Alice credits her grandmother with her love of reading, an aspect of her personality that Alice believes is most central to who she really is.

It was inappropriate to introduce poverty and woe while sunning yourself pool-side; you either ought to be elsewhere, doing something about it, or you ought to sun yourself in the spirit that sunning requires.

-- Narrator (Part III)

Importance: When Jadey side steps Alice's attempt to talk about the less fortunate while they are at the county club pool, Alice gets the feeling that she has broken country club etiquette.

My head was spinning: Did all the Blackwells think Charlie was incompetent and foolish? Did everyone?"

-- Narrator (Part III)

Importance: When Priscilla calls to tell Alice she needs to go home to Charlie, Alice is surprised what bad opinions the members of Charlie's family hold about him.

Was it a casual unanalyzed kindness to amuse a little girl, a playful peace offering, or was it the opposite, a mocking criticism with a pointed subtext: Your daughter is a princess."

-- Narrator (Part III)

Importance: Alice suspects that the tiara and earrings she finds her daughter wearing are a gift from Dena but does not go talk to Dena because she is not sure what message Dena is trying to send.

Alice, Mama would do anything for Charlie, he's had her wrapped around his little finger since way back, but she's too old for this. She needs to sleep in her own bed."

-- Yvonne (Part III)

Importance: In this quote, the author indicates how much Miss Ruby really does love Charlie despite her grouchy façade.

Instead, she's threatening to go public unless you speak out against Ingrid Sanchez as a Supreme Court nominee."

-- Hank (Part IV)

Importance: Hank, a member of Charlie's staff, tells Alice that if she does not speak out



against Charlie's nominee for the Supreme Court, Gladys will announce that she performed an abortion for Alice when Alice was a teenager.

I'm not sure who Norene Davis is, but the person behind this is a former friend of mine named Dena Janaszewski.

-- Alice (Part IV)

Importance: When Alice learns there has been a threat to make the fact she had an abortion public knowledge, she immediately thinks that Dena is behind the threat.

Every doctor knows outlawing abortion doesn't make it less common, it just makes it less safe. Before '73, I had patients who found me after botched procedures. They'd show up with cases of sepsis and bacteremia that would give you nightmares, and these were the lucky ones — the others died before they could get help."

-- Gladys (Part IV)

Importance: In order to make an impression on Alice, Gladys tells Alice that women will continue to have abortions even if they are made illegal. Because she lived and worked during a time period when abortions were illegal, Gladys knows the repercussions of making abortion illegal.

A few weeks later, Leon Tasket made a donation of eight hundred thousand dollars to the RNC, but rather than feeling triumphant about this development, I was a little sad — it was as if my delight in Mr. Tasket's son had, like so much else in politics, merely been for show."

-- Narrator (Part IV)

Importance: Alice enjoyed the time that she spent with Dale Tasket at a fund raising dinner. Because of a donation that Dale's father gave to the Republicans, Alice was left feeling as if her kindness to the mentally retarded man had been only a way to get a donation, not a sincere act of kindness.

"If I had remained a single woman, a teacher, I have the idea that I might have begun, at the age of forty or so, to take in foster children, and not necessarily white ones; I'd compost, and perhaps by now I'd have purchased a Prius, though I still don't think I'd have affixed an antiwar bumper sticker to it. In whatever way such things are measured, I probably would have done less, but I wouldn't have had to face the reality that I could have done far more."

-- Narrator (Part IV)

Importance: Alice considers what her life might have been like if she had not married Charlie but had instead remained single.

Nevertheless, I feel a growing suspicion that Charlie continues to fight this war for much the same reason I couldn't bring myself to reenter the ladies' room at the Maronee Country Club, and he even has my compassion, except for this — that night at the club, when I needed to urinate and hadn't, the only one who suffered for my foolishness was



me.”

-- Narrator (Part IV)

Importance: As Alice looks back at her life she tries to find things in her own life that help her to understand why her husband has acted the way he has. She remembers this time when she opened the wrong door in a ladies room and was too embarrassed to reveal her mistake. She thinks this may be the same reason that Charlie refuses to pull the troops out of the Middle East. Though she understands the reason behind his thinking, she faults him because so many people are being hurt by his refusal to admit his mistake.

Perhaps, though I didn't yet know I had it, this is what nudged me to go talk to Edgar Franklin — that Pete Imhof had given me back my heart.”

-- Narrator (Part IV)

Importance: This sentence is very symbolic in nature as Alice suspects that it is because Pete has given her back the silver heart pendant Andrew had once touched that she is inspired to go and talk to Colonel Franklin. Pete not only gives Alice her physical heart pendant but also the innocent love that she feels she lost when she lost Andrew.

I married a man to whom I would compare favorably because if I have done little, he has done less, or perhaps more; if I have caused harm accidentally and indirectly, he has done so with qualmless intent and total confidence.”

-- Narrator (Part IV)

Importance: While some fault Charlie for doing little for the people and actually causing harm, Alice realizes that she has been no better than he has because she has not done what she could have done with her life. The difference that she sees is that Charlie has intentionally caused harm while Alice believes the harm she did was not intentional.