

# **Among the Ten Thousand Things Study Guide**

**Among the Ten Thousand Things by Julia Pierpont**

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# Plot Summary

This study guide was created using the following version of this book: Pierpont, Julia. *Among the Ten Thousand Things*. Random House, 2016.

*Among the Ten Thousand Things* tells the story of the Shanley family dealing with the aftermath of learning about the father's affair. Jack's mistress sends a letter addressed to his wife Deborah along with a box of pages detailing the affair. Kay, Deb and Jack's 11-year-old daughter, Kay, opens the box and shows it to her brother Simon. The children are upset and confront their mother about the affair. While Deb knew about the affair, she and Jack have been trying to work through the difficulties in their marriage. The letter from the mistress upends any progress they have made.

Meanwhile, Jack is preparing for the opening of his art exhibit while trying to track down his mistress. When he finds that she has skipped town, he tries to locate her. At the opening, his exhibition goes awry when a spectator is wounded during a planned explosion. Stanley, the gallery owner, is reluctant to move forward with the exhibition, leaving Jack's exhibition to close after one night.

Deb reaches out to Gary, Jack's friend from college, who has a vacation house in Rhode Island. She takes Simon and Kay with her, leaving Jack behind. Deb reflects on how she began her relationship with Jack as his mistress and how she left her career as a ballerina when she got pregnant with Simon.

Kay has a history of writing *Seinfeld* fan fiction and as she tries to process the details of her father's affair, her *Seinfeld* episodes become sexual in nature. One of her classmate's mothers finds her pages and calls Deb. Deb tries to talk with Kay, but Kay is reluctant.

Simon begins sneaking out after he meets Teagan, a waitress in Rhode Island. He goes to her house, unaware that Kay is following him. Simon and Teagan have sex while Kay is waiting outside on the sidewalk. Kay decides she does not want to wait for her brother and starts home by herself. She injures her ankle and when Deb finds her, she demands to know what is going on. Kay tells her where Simon is and Deb decides to go and get Simon. At Teagan's house, Deb learns from Simon what transpired and she demands to speak to Teagan's mother. While doing so, Kay sneaks off and no one can find her.

Jack, excluded from the family trip, travels to Phoenix to look at a possible exhibition site. Thinking about his family, he decides to go and visit his mother in Houston. While in Houston, Jack is confronted by Charles, his mother's boyfriend, about how he should go back to his family. Jack decides to leave, but is not set on going to be with the family. When he gets the call from Deb that Kay is missing, he rushes to Rhode Island to help with the search.



Jack finds Kay and takes her back to the family and the police search is called off. The family tries to reconnect, but Deb ends up walking out on Jack while at a diner. They end up divorcing. When Kay and Simon are adults, they go back to their old apartment building to look around.



# Chapters 1-9

## Summary

The novel begins with Part One: New York, the End of May. Chapter 1 is a letter to Deborah from her husband's mistress. The letter accompanies a box of letters and other proof of the affair. She explains that she did not do anything to stop the affair and wonders if Deborah gets migraines like she does.

Chapter 2 introduces Kay, Deborah's 11-year-old daughter, and the things she learned living in the city, such as riding the subway and riding her bike. She was fearful learning and her friends applied a lot of peer pressure. Kay is on her way home and greets Angel, the doorman, who gives her the box addressed to Deborah. In the apartment, Kay decides to open the box and sees the letter from her father's mistress. She hears Deborah call for her, asking why she is late. When she sees Kay, she asks if something is wrong. Deborah wonders if Kay fell off her bike.

Chapter 3 introduces Simon, Deborah's 15-year-old son, who skipped the bus after school to get high. He hangs out with seniors, including Elena, who gets weed from her brother. Simon flirts with Elena and she kisses him and it does not go well. He runs into Kay at an ice cream shop. They both get ice cream and head back to the apartment. While Deborah makes a spaghetti dinner, Kay shows Simon the contents of the box.

In Chapter 4, Kay and Simon show their mother the box. The children are surprised when Deborah does not look at all the contents of the box. She takes the box out of the room and the kids listen to her "private sounds" (23) growing in intensity in the next room. Deborah wants to protect her children. She goes over the graphic comments in the box. The smoke detector goes off, and Deborah runs for it. Simon asks if his parents will get divorced. Both kids declare their hate for their father. Deborah tries to comfort them. Later, Deborah calls her mother Ruth, explaining that the children know about the affair.

Chapter 5 introduces Jack in his studio. He thinks about the women he has had in the studio and how he has not changed his locks. He considers how the neighborhood has changed and the difficulties of being married, especially the questions his wife asked about his day. Jack goes home to the apartment and finds the box sitting on the bed. He makes small talk with Deb, ignoring the box. He asks if she is upset and Deb reads excerpts from pages in the box. He gets defensive, insisting that he ended the affair. Deb knows this. He thinks the mistress is crazier than he thought. He wants to burn the pages in the wastebasket, but lacking matches, he throws the pages out the window. He tries to reassure Deb, but she pushes him away. She explains that the children know and that they do not want to talk to him either. He goes out for a bit, but returns, asking if he should stay. He reassures Deb that he loves her. They sleep in separate rooms.



Chapter 6 gives background information about how Jack and Deb first met at a party while Jack was married. They began an affair and Deb got pregnant with Simon.

Chapter 7 finds Deb teaching a ballet class. She was a ballerina when she was younger. She keeps her distance from the dancers because she does not want to encourage them into thinking they have a shot in the ballet world. Sometimes the dancers ask about her friendship with Izzy, a professional dancer. She remembers trying to figure out how to tell Jack she was pregnant. In class, she reconciles her feelings of envy of Izzy and even the girls. After class, she gets a call from Gary, who was once Jack's college roommate. He invites her to come to his house in Rhode Island. She tells him life is too hectic and Gary remembers that Jack has an art opening coming up. He tells her he left a message for Jack.

In Chapter 8, Jack works at his studio, trying to work on his art exhibit. He considers working on different commissions and tries to distract himself from what has happened. He convinces himself that he did not do "anything so wrong" (59).

In Chapter 9, Simon finds a page from the box pinned to a bulletin board with a note about not throwing things in the laundry shoot. Another woman in the building tells him that piece of paper should not be posted. She makes small talk about Simon's classes ending for the summer. He takes the page with him and picks out the words he thinks the woman found objectionable. He folds the page up and hides it in his drawer.

## Analysis

As the novel opens, the reader is introduced to the perspective of the woman Jack had an affair with. She seems to have a need to connect with Deb. She wants to know if they both get migraines and whether or not Jack is to blame. But she also wants to make sure that Deb, not only knows about the affair, but knows all the explicit details. It is not enough to present allegations; she must provide proof. This letter and the accompanying box introduce the themes of infidelity and sex, as well as regrets. While the mistress' actions may seem cruel, or an attempt to cause a deeper divide in Jack and Deb's marriage, the mistress' quick disappearance suggests that she does not want anything more to do with Jack. Perhaps she regrets the affair and decides to send the letter and box as a way to hurt Jack, without considering who else it may hurt.

The box, of course, is opened by Kay and it is safe to assume that Kay regrets her decision. She is confused by the content of the box, introducing the theme of adolescence. At 11-years-old, Kay is curious, but not informed. Her world is small, consisting of hurtful peer pressure and teasing, as well as her Seinfeld fan fiction. Kay's fan fiction is a way to seek out the mundane and try to make sense of the adult world she is becoming aware of.

The box, however, gives Kay more insight into the adult world than she wants. She is not sure what to do with the box once she opens it and ends up showing it to Simon. They do not discuss giving the box to Jack, but give it to their mother. Deb does not



scold them for opening the box. Even though Deb is aware that Jack had an affair, the shock of the evidence is too much for her process.

The revelation of the affair brings up a lot of emotions that Kay and Simon, in particular, do not know how to process. Deb tries to comfort them, but their anger leads them to say that they hate their father. It is not an unexpected response, but it also gives insight into how the family functions as a unit. Both Kay and Simon are old enough to go places on their own and look after themselves, but at home, they wait for Deb to make them dinner. This is not altogether uncommon. The dinner is disrupted by the box and the Kay and Simon's feelings about their father, all the while, Jack is absent.

When the reader is first introduced to Jack, he is alone in his studio. He is isolated from the family, preparing the reader for what might happen when he arrives home. Before knowing what his mistress has done, Jack is reflecting on the women that he has had in his studio: sexual encounters, models, and the like. He is thinking about what annoys him about marriage. If Jack is annoyed by Deb asking him about how his day went, is it possible that he will care about Deb receiving the box?

When Jack arrives at the apartment, he notes that the box exists, but does not ask about it or acknowledge it in any other way. Jack proceeds with business as usual until Deb reads from one of the pages. Realizing what the box represents, Jack is angered because Deb already knows about the affair. He believes that this is old news and does not think Deb should react as she does.

Jack makes an effort to reassure Deb that the affair is over, but he also marginalized his mistress by suggesting that she is crazy. Jack is detached from the responsibility of his role in the affair. He believes that Deb is overreacting and the mistress is crazy. He believes he should be able to tell Deb the affair is over and that he loves his wife and all should be right with the marriage.

The couple spends the night in separate rooms and then the reader learns that Deb and Jack began their relationship while Jack was married to his first wife. It is possible that Jack does not feel that Deb should be upset that he had an affair because she was once his mistress as well. Just as it is possible that he felt he could tell Deb about the affair because that was how they began their relationship. It is clear that Jack does not want anything to do with the mistress; it does appear that the affair is in the past. But if the introduction of Jack in his studio reflecting on the women who had been there is any indication, Jack is not likely to remain faithful.

The theme of regrets is further explored in the reveal of Deb's past. When she met Jack, she was a ballet dancer, but now spends her time teaching dance. She gave up her career to have a child with Jack. Deb maintains a distance from the dancers in her class because she does not want to get too close to someone who is only going to have their dreams crushed. Perhaps Deb does not want to relive the reality of her own dreams falling away.



## Discussion Question 1

What does Kay's decision to open the box reveal about her character?

## Discussion Question 2

What does Jack's reaction to Deb reading from the box reveal about their marriage?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Deb keep her distance from the dancers in her class?

## Vocabulary

settlement, photosynthesis, fencing, bulbous, embers, tolerance, immunity, granules, bodega, novelty, nuisance, paranoid, geriatric, burgeoning, deceit, gist, lurched, defiant, vulnerable, tourniquet, actionable, intermittently, conspired, crude, wrought, barrage, condensation, pincer, impeded, porous, arabesque, synergy, ramshackle, symmetry, consensus, disembodied, braised, depleted, reverberated, forums, prerogative, peddler, buoy





# Chapters 10-21

## Summary

Chapter 10 opens with Kay working on her Seinfeld fan fiction during school. She thinks about learning about her father's affair and her mother telling her it does not mean anything. Deb's explanation about adults meeting each other and starting relationships does not set well with Kay. She believes her mother should have told her "it doesn't mean everything" (66). She realizes how much life is not like television.

Chapter 11 opens with Jack trying to reach the mistress to no avail. He goes to her apartment to check on her. He convinces Arabella, the landlady, to let him into the apartment. Arabella thinks Jack is there to pick up the woman's belongings because she moved out. He wonders if the woman is a danger to herself and suggests Arabella contact the police. She counters with the fact that the police will want to talk to the "married boyfriend" (72). Arabella realizes the woman skipped out on her rent and Jack offers her the cash he has on his person - \$137.

Chapter 12 opens with Jack in his studio, getting ready for his exhibit. At the gallery, he begins to mix the concoction for the explosives. He remembers telling Deb he never wanted children and reflects on affairs happening during pregnancies. Except when Deb was pregnant he felt that he "loved her best" (74).

In Chapter 13, Deb is at her mother's, Ruth. She has a cold sore and thinks about how a dancer has "an unusual patience for pain" (77). Deb tells her mother her worries about how her children see her now that they know about the affair. Ruth tells her to go easy on the kids and herself. Ruth asks if Deb will go to the opening.

Chapter 14 takes place at the opening. Kay and Simon have decided not to go. People arrive at the gallery and Deb is running late. Stanley, the gallery director, insists they can no longer wait for Deb to begin. The exhibit is a home and it is wired to explode to show how this can happen in the Middle East or America. The explosive goes off, injuring a woman in the audience. The police arrive before Deb. She wants to reach out to Jack, but does not. She sees a journal that was in the house and thinks she could clean it up for Kay to use. Deb notices that Jack used the Tigger toy that was once Simon's. She realizes she is not sure she wants to fix her marriage.

Chapter 15 opens with Deb getting home to find Simon and Kay gone. She calls Simon and he tells her that they are fine. Deb presses about where they are and he tells her a diner, but offers little else. He starts to turn the phone over to Ruth, who cuts the call short before talking to her mother. The kids end up not eating.

Jack cries in front of Deb and she asks how the woman who got hurt is. He tells her the woman is fine and tells her he does not care. They fight and he complains about how the kids treat him like a stranger.



Ruth brings the kids home while Jack and Deb continue their argument. Jack tells Deb that he thinks about having another child with her. Deb goes to talk with Simon. She wonders about how Simon would react to knowing that Deb knew about the affair for months. She tries to comfort Simon by telling him that Jack will continue to sleep on the couch.

The family orders Chinese food and Deb and the kids eat and watch television, without calling Jack to join them. He eats alone. Later Jack catches Deb reading through the pages in the box. She remembers a time when Jack made her happy. Jack asks Deb about Kay's upcoming field trip.

In Chapter 16, Stanley tells Jack that the injured woman is fine, but will likely press charges. He tries to explain to Jack that everyone in the gallery could sue him. Later that morning, Jack goes to a coffee shop. He asks Nicky if he knows how to reach Jordan because she is ignoring his calls. Nicky does not think she will talk to him either.

Chapter 17 opens with Deb talking to the kids about what happened with Jack. She explains that Jack made a mistake and Simon tells her it is okay if they divorce. Simon asks to buy a paper at the newsstand and Deb gets it for him, along with gum for Kay. Simon asks about Jack sleeping on the couch. He is embarrassed because his friend Donald is staying the night. Deb tells Simon that Jack can sleep in the bedroom for the night.

Chapter 18 is a brief chapter that exists within the confines of parenthetical. Simon considers how the affair affects him and how people will look at him knowing about his parents. He wonders if he wants the attention.

Chapter 19 is another brief chapter about Kay's fan fiction episode of Seinfeld on the bus, which is sexual in nature. Chloe, another girl on the bus, snatches the pages away and Kay tries to get them back. She returns to her seat, not wanting to see if the others are reading her pages. She finally asks and the girls tell her not to talk to them and call her a "perv" (112).

Chapter 20 opens with Deb at Lincoln Center, going to see her friend Izzy. Deb remembers her dancing career while Izzy talks about the dance production. Izzy asks about Deb's kids and Deb laments that they are not babies anymore. Deb mentions Jack's opening and Izzy apologizes for missing it. Izzy tells her that she is working on a book. Deb asks if Izzy wants to have children and Izzy says she does not know.

Chapter 21 opens with Deb calling Jack, but he does not answer. Jack forgot his phone at the studio and is picking up Kay from her field trip to the planetarium. He picks up the wrong book bag and they get it sorted. Jack asks Kay about her friends and Kay points out one of the mothers that Deb does not like. Jack wants to spend time with Kay, offering to take her to the park and for ice cream. Kay did not "want her father to have the satisfaction of meeting any one of her needs" (121). He tries to joke with her about a stuffed bear in the museum.



Jack convinces Kay to go in and she realizes that while the bear has not changed, she has. Kay compares the taxidermy of the bear to Jack's work as a sculptor.

## Analysis

Jack's affair weighs heavily on the family. For Kay, she is processing, not only a lot of graphic details about sex, but her father as a sexual being, and as someone who betrayed her mother. Because Kay uses her fan fiction as an escape, it is not surprising that she begins to process the affair through these characters. The Seinfeld characters are how she interacts with adults. She thinks of television as being like real life, but now she needs to accept that it is not. She is not able to see television as a heightened state of reality, just as she is not able to understand that what her family is presently dealing with is its own form of heightened reality.

The fan fiction allows for Kay to explore sex, but she becomes very insecure when she is on the bus and some of the other girls take her pages and begin to mock her. At first Kay tries to get the pages back, but she then accepts that they have them, trying to convince herself that they will not read them. She must know that they will and prepares herself for the embarrassment. The reader does not see Kay openly discuss sex or the affair with anything. She is keeping everything bottled up, similar to how Deb is processing what has happened.

Kay is not comforted by Deb's choice of words about the affair. For Kay, for something to have this much emotional power, it should mean something. Deb framing the incident as meaning nothing negates Kay's emotional reaction. This gives the reader insight on the author's commentary on insecurity and abandonment. Perhaps if Kay were older, Deb's comments would have offered Kay more comfort than confusion. For Kay what her father did is a major turning point in her life.

Simon and Kay's reactions to the affair are rooted in their affects on their family unit. Of course Kay and Simon are also unaware that Deb began her relationship with Jack while he was still married. Knowing this, they may have reacted differently. Simon is preparing himself for the worst. He even goes so far as to tell his mother that he is okay with his parents divorcing. While Kay dwells on the idea that this is everything, it is almost as though Simon just wants everything to be over.

In this way, Simon abandons the family. It is far easier for him to worry about the affects this will have on him and what he chooses to day-to-day. This is typical teenaged behavior, but it also shows Simon looking for some kind of control. While Jack may think that because the affair is over, the marriage can continue, Simon believes that it is best that the marriage ends. Divorce would have greater impact on Simon. Being a child of divorce would shape him as a person. He is able to reflect on this, particularly in Chapter 18. He is not thinking about how the affair affects his parents or his sister, but rather him. He is also interested in how the outside world views him. Simon is hurt by his father's actions, as is evidenced by his not wanting Jack to sleep in the bedroom with Deb. This should not be Simon's call to make, but Deb and Jack acquiesce to his



demand. But Simon does consider whether or not he wants the attention his parents' divorce might bring. In this moment the reader begins to see shades of Jack in Simon.

Just as Simon manages to distance himself from how others might feel, Jack exhibits similar behavior during his art exhibition. Jack is an artist with a decent reputation. He is anxious for this opening in particular because he feels it is his strongest work to date. The exhibit is a house that he has rigged to explode. Jack's intent for social commentary is to evoke a war zone in a post 9-11 world, but he also wants people to understand that this destruction can happen in the U.S., just as readily as overseas.

Jack demonstrates his insecurities when he asks Stanley to hold off the opening until Deb arrives. Jack is anxious about his exhibition and wants Deb there for moral support. He wants her to be able to see his accomplishment and remember what drew her to him in the beginning of their relationship. Stanley insists the shows needs to start and the explosion goes wrong, injuring a woman in the crowd. This accident is devastating to Jack because of what it means to his career. He does not seem overly concerned with the welfare of the woman. Once he realizes her injury is not dire, Jack moves on to what this means for him. Deb shows up after the explosion and sees the police and goes to Jack.

The accident at the exhibition is reflective of the state of their marriage: Jack does something wrong and Deb learns about it after the fact and must deal with the fallout. In looking at the ruins of the exhibit, Deb sees one of Simon's toys from when he was younger. She does not think she can repair the toy, but she understands the toy as a metaphor for her marriage, accepting the fact that she may not want to fix the marriage at all. This decision moves Jack and Deb further apart, foreshadowing what is to come in chapters ahead.

After the explosion, Deb goes to see Izzy at Lincoln Center. Deb understands her envy of Izzy because she views Izzy as having something she could have had. While Deb may distance herself from her students because they are not good enough to achieve their ballet dreams, Deb senses that the dream was her's to have, if she had not gotten pregnant. Deb may have regrets about her dance career, but she does not seem to regret having children. In confronting Izzy, Deb is able to ask her whether or not she wants to have children and Izzy shrugs. Izzy even questions her ability to have children. Deb is looking for comfort in sharing regrets. If Izzy regrets not having children and ended up with a career as a dancer, then she is equal to Deb for the opposite reasons. It is clear that Deb is taking stock of her life given her realization at the exhibition.

While Deb has struggled to reach Kay, Jack fares differently. Kay is reluctant to connect with her father because she is angry with him. She believes that if they have a good time together that it is tantamount to forgiving or forgetting what he did to the family. Kay is beginning to understand herself a bit more clearly and the trip to the museum helps with that. She may not understand why Jack did what he did, but she is able to recognize that how she sees her world is changing.



## Discussion Question 1

What does Jack's visit to his former mistress' apartment demonstrate about Jack's character? What is his primary motivation for finding his former mistress? Who or what is he most concerned about?"

## Discussion Question 2

What is used as a metaphor for Deb and Jack's marriage in this section? Why might the author have selected this object to represent their marriage? What does this symbol help Deb realize about her marriage?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Kay write Seinfeld fan fiction? How does her approach to this hobby change in this section, and what does that suggest to readers?

## Vocabulary

confrontation, commemorative, denominations, tahini, infidelities, succumbing, vandalism, detonator, impenetrable, stoically, marzipan, tremor, precedent, furrows, discernible, reverential, ambient, unceremoniously, enacting, contended, sentient, indulgences, tumult, respite, inherently, quarantine, ravenous, proxy, interim, incessant, cliché, supernovas, interminable, tendonitis, brazenness, wiles, broaching, levitate, embalmed, incongruous, geriatric, dioramas, taxidermy, iridescent, festooned



# Chapters 22-31

## Summary

Chapter 22 opens with Jack and Kay still at the museum, while Deb and Simon argue at home. Deb got a call from one of the other mothers regarding the explicit nature of Kay's fan fiction. Deb has also decided that they will go to Gary's house in Rhode Island and they need to pack. Simon does not want to go and he swears at his mother and decides that his friend Donald should not come over at all. When Jack gets home with Kay, he tells Deb not to go to Rhode Island and be alone. She tells him they will have Gary.

Chapter 23 finds Kay thinking about spending time with Jack at the museum and how her parents behave at home. Kay wishes she could stop them from making the trip to Rhode Island.

Part Two: That Year and Those That Followed begins with Chapter 24. The chapter flashes into the future, revealing what happens to the characters. In the short term, the family goes to Rhode Island for two weeks, with Jack eventually joining them. It begins to detail the minutiae of the following year, such as Kay joining the hockey team and what kind of Halloween candy was passed out. The chapter continues, revealing that Simon got a fake ID and eventually moved to Houston. Kay went to college in California and goes by Katherine as an adult. She takes a job in web design. Jack dies from cancer.

Part Three: Jamestown and Out West, the Start of June begins with Chapter 25. It returns the narrative to before the time jump in Part Two. The family is in Jamestown, Rhode Island, staying at Gary's house. Gary is gone when they arrive, having left a note. The house is run down and in worse condition than Deb expects. Simon complains about being there and sends a message to Elena at home. That night, Kay tries to talk to Simon and he tells her he is trying to sleep. Kay wants to talk about their parents, but Simon does not.

Chapter 26 returns to Jack on the day his family leaves. He gets the paper and reads a review of his art show. He goes to see Stanley who tells him he will not continue the show because of potential law suits. Stanley tells Jack he is going out of town and for Jack to take a vacation.

Chapter 27 returns to Jamestown. Deb and the kids go to breakfast and Deb suggests that they go to the water for the day. A waitress tells them about sites in Newport, including a church. Simon balks at going to see a church. Deb says she wants them to see Rose Island. Later in the day it looks like it is going rain and they go to a grocery store without a car. They walk home before the rain starts.



In Chapter 28, Jack meets up with Ruth to drop off the cat for her to care for while the family is gone. He regards their relationship as having avoided "all that was conventionally known about husbands and their mothers-in-law" (168). They talk about cat litter and how Ruth has her groceries delivered. She tells him she does not want to get involved with his marriage, but tells him he is an "ass, and a moron" (171). Jack goes back to the studio and calls Deb, explaining that he is flying out to work on a commission for a university. He tells her it is good to hear her voice.

Chapter 29 finds Deb and Kay out for a walk and Simon staying behind to read a book. He is reading "The Fountainhead" in a sandwich shop when two girls approach him. Teagan and Laura introduce themselves and Teagan flirts with Simon.

Chapter 30 opens with Kay looking for a cat and Deb telling her about getting a call from one of the mothers. She wants to talk about what happened with her writing, but Kay does not. Back at the house, Gary is there and hugs Kay. Gary reminisces about being Kay's age and tells Deb about his girlfriend Nancy. He apologizes for the condition of the house. When they are alone, Gary mentions the email Deb sent and asks why she did not mention Jack's art show. Deb breaks down and tells him about Jack's affair.

Chapter 31 finds Jack at the airport. He recalls being eight-years-old and his fondness for a stewardess who gave him wings. He remembers his father traveling a lot for work and living in a Houston suburb. When the plane lands it is very hot.

## Analysis

The themes of family and adolescence continue to develop in this section. Each parent is seen interacting with one of their children. For Jack and Kay, Kay is reluctantly coming around to wanting to be around her father. She remains unsure of what she thinks about what has happened and does not really know how best to react. While their interaction may be somewhat cold, it contrasts with Deb and Simon who argue about whether or not Donald can spend the night. Ultimately, the argument is about Simon not getting what he wants, and ultimately what he wants is to not have to deal with the situation with his parents. He does not want to be embarrassed in front of his friend.

When Deb and Jack connect that night, she informs him that she and the kids are going to the house in Rhode Island. She knows that she needs to get away from Jack to have time to process what has transpired. Deb is at a crossroads and she does not know what she wants. Thus far she has largely been operating on what she perceives is the best decision for the family. Jack tells her that she should not be alone and she counters by telling him that they will have Gary. While Gary has been a friend to Deb for a long while, Gary and Jack were friends first. This comment is meant to hurt to Jack and perhaps even foster suspicion that he is not the only one who can have an affair.

Chapter 24 contains Part Two of the novel. In it the author makes the choice to jump ahead in time: first in small increments, and then leap forward into the future when the children are adults and Jack is dead. It is a bold choice to reveal the outcomes of the





characters so early in the novel. In some respects it diminishes the impact of what will happen with Kay in the coming chapters by eliminating risk, but it also shadows Jack's character. As Jack progresses through the remainder of this time, the reader knows that he will die from cancer in the not-so-distant future. It makes Jack's actions and inactions have stronger resonance as he figures out what he needs to be doing and how to interact with his family.

Part Three returns the narrative to where the reader left off in Part One. It is summer and Deb and the kids are at the house in Rhode Island and they are all trying to make sense of what has happened. The house is dusty and run down and becomes a metaphor for Deb and Jack's marriage. It demonstrates that it has the potential to be repaired, but the desire to do so remains questionable.

Simon continues to act out, but Kay makes an attempt to talk to Simon and is rejected. Deb and the kids go on with their lives as though everything is fine, discussing sites to see in Rhode Island. In contrast, Jack is alone. He reads a review of his exhibit and thinks that it should go on, but he is unable to convince Stanley to absorb the liability of showing an exhibit with explosives. Jack's frustration with this turn of events leads him to the decision to go out to Phoenix to look at a space for a commissioned piece. It seems natural for Jack to turn to his work in light of his family being away, but his work is where he likes to play. He has used his studio as a place to have his affairs, and traveling out of town on his own, prompts the reader to wonder if he will not have another affair.

Prior to leaving, when Jack talks with Ruth, he does not seem to understand that he is making poor choices. Ruth calls him an "ass, and a moron" (171). For a brief moment, he reaches out to Deb and tells her it is good to hear her voice, but the impact of his declaration is muted by how he reacts in the coming section.

When Jack gets to the airport, he thinks about his father and the first time he ever flew. The reader gets some insight into the way that Jack has conditioned himself to objectify women. This does not excuse his behavior, but it sets a precedent for why he needs women to make him feel special.

This section also witnesses Deb confide in Gary about Jack's affair. Gary thinks that the issue with Jack stems from what happened at the exhibition. Gary is not shocked by the reveal, but offers a sympathetic ear to Deb. Her decision to confide in Gary demonstrates her trust in him. Where trust is lacking, however, is with Kay. Deb makes repeated efforts to try and talk to Kay about what happened and answer any questions she may have about sex. Kay dismisses each one. It is possible that Kay does not trust her mother or feel comfortable enough discussing the matters. She may not want to know any more than she does. It is also possible that she is angry with herself for making the choice to open the box in the first place.





## Discussion Question 1

What does Deb's decision to take the kids to Gary's house suggest about Gary's relationship with the family?

## Discussion Question 2

Why is Simon reluctant to talk about his parents' marriage? Is it due more to his age or her personality?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Deb confide in Gary about her marriage? What does this suggest about her relationship with Gary? How does Gary react, and what does his reaction suggest about his relationship with/knowledge of Jack?

## Vocabulary

dissipated, alienated, increments, rosettes, dehydrated, timbre, innocuous, deigned, ambiguously, proximity, postpartum, eccentrics, trundled, concierge, tedious, exonerating, bugle, derogatory, circumvent, ergonomic, sallow, tarmac, respite



# Chapters 32-45

## Summary

Chapter 32 reveals that Simon remembers more about Gary than Kay does. In the morning, Gary and Deb make breakfast for them all and Simon returns to his reading. Kay has been hiding a cat in her closet. Deb tells her she can feed the cat, but that it needs to stay outside. Simon tells Deb she looks like her mother. That afternoon, they all go to the sandwich shop and Simon sees Teagan, who works at the shop. Deb asks if the kids want to talk about Jack and Gary interjects about Deb and Jack spending time apart. Teagan invites Simon over to her mother's house the next night. Simon tries to play it cool and tells her he will try to come.

Chapter 33 returns to Jack, who is in Phoenix. He takes a rental car and enjoys driving and thinks about how easy it would be to buy a gun in Phoenix. He gets to the university campus and is sticky from the heat. He gets a call from Deb and tells her he is in Arizona. Deb puts him on hold and Jack needs to go. He gets to the museum and meets Jolie, whom he has only talked to on the phone. She looks exactly as he thought she would. She hugs him like an old friend.

Chapter 34 returns to Deb. She tells Kay where Jack is. She wants to talk to Kay about what happened, but tries to call Jack again.

In Chapter 35, Jolie takes Jack around the campus. Jack tells her he does not have anything prepared for an exhibit and only wanted to see the space.

Chapter 36 opens with Deb thinking about how Kay can never stay mad at her father for long. She feels that men are "allies to their children" (205), while the women work. Deb and Kay go for another walk and Deb points out flowers along the way. She brings up Kay's writing and tells Kay to feel free to ask any questions she may have about sex. Kay tries to explain that she does not understand why she is upset about what happened. Deb explains about the affair being hurtful and Kay wants to know why Jack would do something if he knew it would hurt the family. Kay tells her mother she does not want to call Jack dad anymore.

Chapter 37 returns to Jack with Jolie. She feels bad about his show and shares that they still want to commission a piece. Jolie tells Jack she has an 18-year-old son and he tells her she does not look old enough. She scoffs at the line. They drink and Jolie puts her thumb in his belt loop. He removes it and tells her goodnight.

Back at his room, Jack thinks about having done the right thing. He does not have wi-fi at the hotel and ends up finding some audio files in his email. He listens to a recording of an interview he did with his former mistress when they met. She asks about how current events influence artists and why he moved to Hell's Kitchen. She asks about his father and about an exhibition Jack did about 9/11 and how he wished he was in New



York when the attacks happened. He goes to a mini mart and back to the bar where a girl kisses him.

In Chapter 38, Deb and Gary have iced tea and reminisce. There are a lot of memories in the house and she feels old. She comments on an ugly pitcher and Gary jokes that "ugly things don't break" (223).

Chapter 39 returns to Jack in Phoenix, thinking about whether he should go home. He remembers making out with the girl from the bar, but not her name. He returns the car to the rental place.

Kay names the cat Wolf in Chapter 40. Simon tells her to keep the cat away from him. He goes to Teagan's house and sees a yard sale sign out front. Teagan opens the door and tells him her mother is asleep. They go to the back porch where Laura is and she introduces Simon to Manny. Simon tells them he is still in high school and Laura asks if he knows they are in high school as well. They continue talking, and Laura and Manny end up leaving. Simon wonders if they left on purpose. Teagan asks him questions about New York and whether he has gone to the Chelsea Hotel. She tells him she thought Gary was his dad and Simon corrects her, but does not elaborate. Teagan talks about the men that have come and gone in her mother's life. Teagan kisses Simon and invites him to come back the next day.

Chapter 41 finds Kay feeling like she does not have rules at Gary's house. She follows Simon, but thinks it is challenging because Simon does not appear to know where he is going. She waits for Simon while he is in Teagan's house and sits on the concrete and decides to call Jack. He tells her that he is going to visit his mother. She asks him when they are all going to go home. He does not answer and asks her if Deb knows she is calling.

Chapter 42 is a brief chapter of Jack driving to visit his mother, chain smoking and listening to evangelical preachers on the radio.

Chapter 43 is another brief chapter. Deb is up late. She thinks about Gary and the kids. Kay thinks about everyone having secrets.

In Chapter 44, Jack arrives at his mother Phyllis' house. She lives with a man named Charles and she tells Jack that she is surprised to see him. They drink tonic water because Charles is sober. Jack tells Phyllis that everything is fine at home. She asks if he is going to stay. He looks at the stuff in his old room and checks out the renovations around the house. Charles tells Jack they should have a talk after dinner.

Chapter 45 opens with Deb, Kay and Simon fishing with Gary. Kay is grossed out by the lures and Simon catches a fish and is impressed with himself. Kay needs to go to the bathroom while they are on the boat. Deb refers to it as "the burden of our sex" (252).



## Analysis

After Jack's interaction with Deb on the phone, the reader is left to wonder if Jack has changed or will continue to be unfaithful. Once Jack gets to Phoenix, it seems likely that something may happen with Jack and Jolie. They spend the day together and Jack learns about her. Prior to this, they have just been friendly on the phone. They do not experience any awkwardness upon meeting, but Jolie's comments about Jack's exhibit strike a chord with him. He does not want to be reminded of failure, which is why he is in Phoenix, looking to start a new project.

Of course Jack does give Jolie a line and she does appear willing to sleep with him, but he changes his mind. For a moment, it seems like he may be serious about his marriage, but there is more to it. Because Jolie knows about what happened with the exhibition in New York, Jack senses failure. Sleeping with Jolie is not what he wants. When he rejects her, it gives him control over the situation.

In his hotel room Jack finds on his computer an interview his mistress conducted with him; it is not something he has listened to yet, so he decides to do so. He is alone in a room listening to an interview of himself. Jack is completely isolated in his own world. Yes, he thinks of the mistress, but he thinks of her in the context of how she was interested in him. Even during the interview, Jack appears self-absorbed. When he talks about New York after 9/11, he wishes that he had been in the city. He wants to be part of something that resonates, and ultimately be something he cannot be. Perhaps from a boost of ego, or a reminder of his loneliness, Jack decides to go back to the bar and ends up making out with a woman whose name he cannot remember.

Back in Rhode Island, Deb, Gary, and the kids have settled into a routine. Kay has been caring for a stray cat, effectively completing the family unit from home. Seeing a cohesive family unit in juxtaposition to Jack in isolation shows how the family will continue on after Jack's death. The family has already moved on.

Deb does try to reach out to Jack, of course. She calls, but their conversations are strained and brief. The longer she is separated from Jack, the shorter her patience for him is. She also has time to reflect on the nature of the relationship she has with her children. She views herself as the caretaker and thinks about Jack as an ally to Kay and Simon. This is especially true of the relationship between Kay and Jack. Kay is interested in where Jack is and whether or not the family will come together.

It prompts Kay to think about her family in the context of secrets. Perhaps Kay wishes the secret of the affair had not come out. She likely thinks her life would be as it was before, but deep down she has to understand that this is fantasy. Just as she thought earlier about television not being real life, Kay is grappling with her new reality.

Deb tries to talk to Kay about the fan fiction. Kay likely feels like she is going to be in trouble for writing about sex, but Deb wants Kay to feel comfortable enough to talk about sex. Instead of discussing sex, Kay talks about her confusion over the emotional repercussions of what happened. She does not understand why something that did not



happen to her hurts her so much. It further demonstrate Kay's emotional immaturity, but her questions offer insight into her growth.

Kay also feels unencumbered by rules being away from home. Kay does not do anything drastic, opting to follow her brother and call her dad without her mom knowing. These are small infractions, setting up expectations for Kay to take it further in the coming chapters.

Simon copes with what is happening with the family by ignoring it. He is distracted by a book, texting friends, or flirting with Teagan in the diner. While Simon was reluctant to come to Rhode Island, he tries to make the best of it. He still harbors insecurities from his failed kiss with Elena and insecurity over his age. With Teagan, he has a fresh opportunity. He does not misrepresent himself, but tries to play it cool. Whereas he was over eager in his kiss Elena in an early chapter, he does not want to come off as such with Teagan. As Simon spends time with Teagan and her friends, he becomes suspect as to why Laura and Manny leave him alone with Teagan. She kisses him and invites him back the next night. Similar to how Jolie comes on to Jack, Teagan makes the first move with Simon. While Jack rejects Jolie, it is obvious to the reader that Simon will return.

Deb spends time with Gary. It is likely that Gary is a surrogate for Jack because Gary and Jack have a long history. Deb talks about feeling old, which is something Jack does not reflect on. Gary is able to reminisce with Deb and projects understanding. Gary does not make a pass at Deb, but instead stands in for the part of Jack that Deb ultimately misses. It may even be an aspect of Jack that was never present in their relationship. Gary's comment about ugly things not breaking seems to indicate that he believes Jack and Deb's marriage can withstand what has happened. Clearly, Deb is questioning whether it can and it is unclear as to whether or not Deb believes what Gary has to say.

During the fishing trip, Deb makes the joke about "the burden of our sex" (252) when Kay complains about having to go to the bathroom on the boat. Deb means it as a joke, but the subtext is there. Deb sees men as having more freedom and this bothers her. Deb is coming to the realization that she wants freedom from Jack.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Jack tell Phyllis everything is fine at home? What does this suggest about the relationship between Jack and Phyllis?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Deb want to talk to Kay and Simon about the affair?



## Discussion Question 3

How does Jack's interaction with Jolie and the other woman at the bar inform Jack's view of his marriage?

## Vocabulary

inevitable, affirmation, vouched, jaunty, genial, inverse, metronome, audiology, reverence, imposition, consensus, subsisted, cordoned, urbane, fermented, embossed, curios, volition



# Chapters 46-61

## Summary

Chapter 46 opens with Charles and Phyllis saying grace in a restaurant while Jack looks on. They debate whether a shrimp is a fish and make other small talk. They head home and Phyllis goes to bed, leaving Charles and Jack to talk. Charles challenges Jack's assertion that everything is okay at home, wondering why Jack showed up unannounced. Jack does not offer any information, but Charles extends his advice and tells Jack to go be with his family. Jack gets angry and he asks who is looking out for his mother. He questions whether or not she eats and accuses Charles of having "her go into raptures" (261). Charles does not want it to turn into a discussion about religion. Charles tells him that he knows what Jack thinks of him, but does not know what Jack thinks of his mother. He tells Jack to get along until he leaves.

Chapters 47 opens with Jack the following morning. Being around the house and his mother and Charles reminds him of why he moved far away. He calls Deb from a rotary phone and tells her he thinks he is probably dying and she tells him he is not. He tells her he is with his mother. Deb asks about the commission in Arizona and they talk and it turns to the affair. Jack explains that he screwed up and she counters by telling him that he cannot do what he did and expect it not to hurt the family. He tries to make sense of why he did what he did and tells her that when he was with his mistress that did not mean that he was closer to her than Deb. Deb tells him that she no longer trusts him and tells him not to come to Rhode Island. He tells her she cannot keep him from seeing the kids.

Chapter 48 is a brief chapter about Jack after the phone call. He wishes he could have a drink and tries to find a way to get into Charles' locked liquor cabinet. He hears Charles in the kitchen and Jack decides he should leave first thing in the morning.

Chapter 49 is another brief chapter. Deb is having a birthday and is relaxing. She and the kids go to Newport and eat at an Italian restaurant. Simon texts Teagan under the table and Deb makes him stop.

Chapter 50 shifts to Teagan, who has left the front door unlocked for Simon. Simon sneaks into her bedroom. When Simon left the house, Kay decided to follow him. Kay waits while Simon is inside. Upstairs, Teagan and Simon have sex. Kay thinks about walking home and remembers what Jack told her about it being darker in Rhode Island than in New York. Deb and Gary continue to celebrate Deb's birthday. Deb dances in Gary's room. Gary puts his arms around her and compliments her; Deb accuses him of being drunk. Kay gets home and twists her ankle at the steps. Deb hears and goes to Kay, asking what happened. Kay will not tell her anything. Now Gary and Deb both try to get Kay to tell them what happened and she tells them Simon is gone.



Deb carries Kay to Teagan's house and sees Simon walking toward them. Deb wants to speak with Teagan's mother and Simon gets angry, even more so with Kay. Deb confronts Teagan's mother Deirdre about Kay coming home by herself in the dark. Deirdre does not know what is going on and Deb tells her that Teagan and Simon were together. Gary asks if Deb is okay and no one realizes that Kay has disappeared.

Chapter 51 begins the search for Kay. Deb calls Jack on Simon's phone when she cannot find her own. She tells him Kay is missing and Jack tells her he is coming.

Chapter 52 is a one-page chapter in which Deb asks what the police are doing to find Kay.

Chapter 53 finds Jack arriving in Jamestown at dawn. He drives by the library and stops at the water basins and finds Kay sitting with Deb's phone, the battery removed. He carries her to car and tells her they are going home.

Chapter 54 returns to Deb speaking with a police officer with Simon and Gary nearby. Jack arrives with Kay and tells them she is fine.

Chapter 55 opens with Deb waking up and finding Jack and Gary talking in the kitchen. Jack tells her he is leaving and she tells him he does not have to. Deb watches Gary and Jack walk out, "her husband and his friend" (300).

In Chapter 56, the family argues about what Simon did. He tells Deb that he is not like Jack and that what he did was fine. As Simon walks out, Deb tells him to use a condom.

Chapter 57 is a brief chapter in which Simon goes to see Teagan. He sneaks into her room and she is in bed. He tells her that he is leaving the next day and Teagan tells him that she cannot stay with her mother. He tries to reassure her that she only has to stay with her mother one more year.

Chapter 58 returns to Jack and Deb, with Jack trying to make Kay smile. Deb notices the bond between Kay and Jack.

In Chapter 59, Simon stays with Teagan for awhile. He tells her that she can come and visit New York and that they will visit the Statue of Liberty and go to the Chelsea Hotel. She walks him out and he cannot decide if it was "brave" or "weak" (308) to leave Teagan.

Chapter 60 takes place that afternoon. Deb and Kay go get something to eat. Deb and Jack are beginning to argue and Kay drops a plate to distract them. Jack scolds her, but Deb gets out of the booth and walks out.

Part Four: That Year and Those That Followed consists of Chapter 61. It opens similarly to how Part Two opens. Jack and Deb divorce. "The girl who wrote the letter" (316) spends time in Pasadena and finds books in her desk at a temp job. Later the girl writes stories about what happened. Simon and Katherine have lunch and she pays.





Afterwards, they go to their old apartment building and tell the doorman they used to live in the building and that they have keys.

## Analysis

The theme of family is explored with Jack's relationship with his mother. Jack relates to his mother in much the same way he does the other women in his life. He tells them only what he thinks they need to know - in this case, Phyllis does not need to know what is happening at home - and seek a positive affirmation from them. While Phyllis questions Jack's motives for coming home, it is Charles that confronts him. Jack is angry that Charles would try and tell him what to do. Charles is not anything to Jack and because that does not mean anything to Charles, Jack questions how Charles cares for Phyllis. Jack suggests that Charles is not looking out for Phyllis' well-being and that their religion has become a distraction. Charles does not want to make the conversation about religion, but ultimately it is about faith. For Charles it may be his personal faith, but Jack is questioning his own motives for his lack of faithfulness.

The next time Jack speaks to Deb, he dramatically suggests that he is dying. Deb scoffs at the notion, but the reader knows that Jack likely has cancer at this point in time. In a way, Jack's impending death does not differ from the impending death of his marriage. Deb has accepted her anger toward Jack. She is no longer able to contain it and tells Jack she does not trust him. Jack tries to apologize, but with the trust gone, there is nowhere for their relationship to go. Deb does not ask for a divorce, but it is clear what she wants. She knows that nothing Jack can do will make up for how he has damaged the family. This is likely why she threatens to keep Kay and Simon from him. Jack tells her she cannot do that and Deb knows this to be true. This is her opportunity to hurt Jack in a way that he has hurt her.

Jack also tries to assure Deb that the affair did not mean anything. This hardens back to what Deb tried to explain to Kay in an earlier chapter. For Jack it may have only been about the physical act of sex, and this is how he is able to justify his infidelity. If he did not betray Deb emotionally, perhaps the affair is inconsequential.

This parallels with Simon's sexual experience with Teagan. Simon goes to Teagan's with the understanding that they will have sex. Not long after, he leaves to sneak back home. It is not until the next day that Simon is confronted with the emotional aspect of his brief relationship with Teagan. He tries to reassure Teagan that everything will be fine and frame it in such a way that she can look at as a finite piece of time. It takes a while, but Simon sees how emotionally devastated Teagan is. When he finally leaves her he questions how to frame the decision. He can see the decision as both weak and brave. In this moment he should be able to recognize how his mother must feel given Jack's affair. She can be seen as brave or weak for staying with her husband just as easily as she can be considered brave or weak for leaving him.

Deb is growing closer to her decision, but understands her decision extends beyond herself. While Deb and Gary are celebrating Deb's birthday, they share a moment when



Gary pulls her close and compliments her. During the visit, there has been emotional intimacy between the two and this allows for the possibility of more. Deb tells him he is drunk, suggesting that nothing would have happened between them, but Kay's arrival interrupts them.

Just as Kay followed Simon earlier, she sneaks out when Simon sneaks out. She does not know what Simon is up to in Teagan's house, but eventually gets bored and returns to Gary's house. Had she not gotten hurt, Deb and Gary might not have heard her. This is similar to Kay opening the box. Without her actions, secrets may have been kept.

Deb is furious with Simon and Kay when she starts to put the pieces together about what happened. Because she does not know what to do with her anger, she confronts Teagan's mother Deirdre. In doing so, Deb is yelling at the mother because she sees herself as failing to be in that moment. Deb is the one responsible for looking out for her children and she got caught up in her own world.

This becomes even more apparent when they notice that Kay has disappeared. The impact of the disappearance is lessened by the fact that the reader know that Kay is just fine in the future. Because of this, Kay's disappearance is not a question of what happened, but rather why it happened. Kay make the decision for several reasons. It is an opportunity for her to have a secret, as is evidenced for her taking the battery out of the phone so she cannot be located. It is her way of exerting control over the family when she has felt out of control since she opened the package. It also gets her attention for something different.

For Kay, opening the package marked a turning point in the family. It affected everyone differently, but it cast a shadow over all of them. The affair becomes a turning point in the family unit. If Kay can disappear and bring the family together, perhaps it can overshadow the affair, and deemphasize its impact.

Kay's disappearance brings Jack back into the fold. The next day at the diner, it is clear that Kay's stunt is not able to remedy the breakdown of her parents' marriage. Kay again acts out, dropping the plate on the floor. In doing so, the act of something else breaking allows for Deb to make the move to break the marriage. She makes the decision to walk away.

Just as Part Two was one chapter that projected into the future, Part Four is another solitary chapter that does the same. While she is not mentioned by name, the fate of "the girl who wrote the letter" (316) is revealed. Like Kay, she writes fiction about what happened and the reader is given a brief glimpse into her life. More importantly, it demonstrates that she moved on with her life, yet the affair continued to impact hers as well.

In the final sentences, Kay and Simon return to their old apartment. Perhaps they want to recapture something from their youth, but they also understand that whatever they are looking for no longer exists.



## **Discussion Question 1**

Why does Jack get angry with Charles? What does Jack and Charles' conversation reveal about each character and their relationship with Phyllis?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Why does Deb confront Teagan's mother? Who is she actually mad at?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Why might Kay and Simon return to the apartment building as adults?

## **Vocabulary**

unsheathed, ascetic, sluiced, monastic, rotary, akimbo, cavalier, levity



# Characters

## Deborah "Deb" Shanley

Deb is the second wife of Jack and mother to Kay and Simon. She is a ballet teacher who was once on track to become a professional ballet dancer, but she gave up dancing because of her pregnancy.

Deb began her relationship with Jack while he was married to his first wife. Deb cares for her children and tries to get her daughter, Kay, to open up after the family learns about Jack's affair.

While Deb is aware of Jack's affair by the time the letter and box arrive, she struggles with how to process the level of detail about the affair she now knows. She tries to work things out with Jack, but as the information weighs on her, she begins to pull away.

Deb thinks she wants to reconcile her marriage, but doubt begins to creep in. She begins to withdraw from Jack and reflect on her life and the career she gave up. Deb ends up leaving Jack, deciding that she would rather end the marriage.

## Kay Shanley

Kay is the 11-year-old daughter of Deb and Jack. She likes to write Seinfeld fan fiction and has trouble with peer pressure and bullying at school.

Kay opens the letter and box addressed to her mother, Deb, and is shocked. Kay does not know what to do, so she goes to her brother Simon for help. She does not know how to process all of the information and begins to withdraw.

Kay continues to write, while the events of her real life creep into her work. It causes Kay trouble with her classmates as well. She resists talking to her mother about sex because she is embarrassed. Kay also resists interacting with her father because she does not want him to think that she is okay with what he did.

Kay follows Simon when he sneaks out and ends up running off when Simon gets caught. She is a curious child who acts on impulse. She does not always think through the consequences of her actions. Kay wants her family to return to the way it was, but she realizes that it cannot.

## Jack Shanley

Jack is married to Deb, his second wife. He began his relationship with Deb while he was still married. He is surprised by Deb's reaction when she gets the letter and box



from his mistress because she already knows he had an affair. He also regards his former mistress as crazy, but explains no further.

Jack is an artist who has an exhibit opening soon as the novel opens. The art opening does not go well, leading to an accident with explosives. Jack believes this to be his best work and is disappointed that the exhibit does not continue after the accident.

Jack travels to see his mother after going on his trip to Phoenix. He does not have a good relationship with his mother or her significant other, Charles.

Jack wants his marriage to return to normal, but he is more comfortable in his marriage than happy. He wants to have a relationship with his children and makes an effort with Kay when he picks her up from her field trip and again when he finds her after she has runs off.

## **Simon Shanley**

Simon is the 15-year-old son of Deb and Jack. He gets high with some of the seniors in his high school and flirts and texts with Elena, one of his classmates, eventually having an embarrassing kissing encounter with her. Simon is curious about sex and wants to be sexually active.

When Simon's litter sister, Kay, shows him the letter and box that their father's ex-affair sent, Simon and Kay present it to their mother, Deb. Simon is infuriated with his father and does not think that Deb reacts in a severe enough way. He does not think that Jack should be allowed to sleep in the bedroom with Deb, and is embarrassed about his parents' possible separation and how that might look to his friends.

Simon is reluctant to go to Rhode Island, but then meets Teagan and they begin a flirtation. Simon goes to Teagan's house where they drink and eventually have sex. Simon is unaware when Kay follows him when he sneaks out at night.

Simon wants his family to stay together, but he also wants his parents to divorce, thinking that it would just be easier for him to deal with without enduring all the messy stuff in the interim. He also wants to be able to help Teagan, but he knows that there is nothing he can do to help her out of her situation with her mother.

## **Ruth**

Ruth is Deb's mother. She knows about the affair and Deb talks to her after she receives the letter and box. Ruth takes Kay and Simon out to a diner, but they do not eat. She watches the cat while the family is away and talks to Jack about what she thinks of the affair.



## **Mistress/Jordan**

The mistress, who is referred to by name once in the novel, sends Deb a letter and box of emails that were exchanged between her and Jack. After she sends it, she leaves town and is missing throughout the novel. In part four, it is revealed that she went home to Pasadena after the affair.

## **Teagan**

Teagan is a waitress at a diner that Simon meets when the family is in Rhode Island. She is a high school junior and flirts with Simon. They end up having sex. After Deb confronts Deidre, Teagan's mother, about Teagan and Simon, she worries about having to live with her mother until after graduation because they do not get along.

## **Charles**

Charles is Phyllis' significant other. He is religious and a recovering alcoholic. He confronts Jack about going home to his family.

## **Phyllis**

Phyllis is Jack's mother. She is religious, frail and does not eat much. When Jack comes to visit, she is suspicious that something is wrong, as Jack does not visit often.

## **Isabel "Izzy" Davey**

Izzy is Deb's friend from when she was a dancer. She is a professional dancer who has had a great deal of success. She recently signed a book deal.

## **Gary**

Gary is Jack's friend and roommate from college. They both attended the Rhode Island School of Design. They got the house in Rhode Island together. Gary has become friends with Deb over the years and flirts and dances with Deb the night Kay follows Simon when he sneaks out.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Seinfeld Fan Fiction

The fan fiction that Kay writes symbolizes how she struggles to interpret what is happening around her. She writes about Seinfeld because it is a show about nothing, and she feels that her life is mundane. As she begins to process what is happening in her family, Kay's writing becomes more explicit.

## The Box

The box symbolizes Jack's affair. Deb is able to get past Jack's infidelity until she is confronted with tangible proof that it happened. Seeing the box makes her question her marriage as well as how she reacted to the affair when she found out about it.

## The Explosion at the Art Exhibit

The explosion at the art exhibit symbolizes the breakdown of Jack and Deb's marriage. Just as the explosion causes his exhibition to close, the box causes Deb to confront the fact that she wants out of her marriage.

## The Art Exhibition

The art exhibition is symbolic of Jack's view of his marriage to Deb. He is able to control the marriage from his point of view and create it into something he thinks it should be. When he sets the explosives as part of the exhibit, it further symbolizes how Jack's actions will blow up his marriage.

## Models

The models that Jack has sit for him symbolizes how Jack sees and objectifies women; he wants to mold them into how he sees them.

## Ballet

Ballet symbolizes the control Deb wants to maintain over her life and marriage. Just as she was able to control her movements and teach her students as well, she is able to keep her world in order.



## Sex

Sex is symbolic of acting on desire without consideration of consequence. Jack cheats on both of his wives. He cheated on his first wife with Deb and now an affair has broken up his marriage to Deb. Simon has sex with Teagan without considering how Teagan might feel, given that Simon is going back to New York. Kay writes about sex in her fan fiction as a way to explore what she is learning about sex and then has her pages taken from her on the bus.

## Affairs

Affairs symbolize Jack's boredom and overall disrespect for women. Jack has at least two affairs of note, but there are likely others. The first is with Deb, which led to their marriage. The second is the mistress who sends Deb the box. Jack seeks out both women because it is exciting to him, and it energizes his life and the art he wants to create.

## Disappearance of Mistress

The disappearance of Jack's mistress symbolizes how she is viewed as insignificant by Jack. She does not sign her name on the letter and is never called by her name until nearly halfway through the novel when Jack asks Nicky if he would be able to contact Jordan. Her identity is not important, leaving the reader to focus on the idea of a mistress, rather than the person who is the mistress.

## Kay's Disappearance

Kay's disappearance is symbolic of a dysfunctional family. While Deb and Jack both try to reach out to Kay, she is unable to process what is happening with the family and her emotions. Her disappearance is a way for Kay to escape the family and return with some understanding of how she views her new life.





# Settings

## The Apartment

The apartment is where the Shanley family lives. It is in an apartment building with a doorman. Kay receives the package intended for Deb from the doorman. Inside the apartment, scenes take place in the master bedroom and bathroom, the kitchen, as well as both Kay and Simon's rooms.

## The Studio

Jack's art studio is located in Hell's Kitchen. It is where he works on his art installations as well as conducts his affair with his mistress. He comments that even though the area is not great, he has never felt a need to change the locks.

## Gary's House

Gary's House is a house he purchased with Jack after they went to the Rhode Island School of Design together. It is outside of Newport and is dusty and somewhat run down.

## Teagan's House

Teagan's house is where Simon sneaks in and has sex with Teagan. It has a front porch where they sneak beers as well. It is where Deb goes to confront Teagan's mom while Kay goes missing.

## Dance Studio

The dance studio is non-descript. It is where Deb teaches ballet classes and reflects on the dance career she abandoned after getting pregnant with Simon.



# Themes and Motifs

## Infidelity and Sex

The author uses the theme of infidelity and sex to examine how the immediacy of physical gratification complicates the development of intimacy.

From the outset of the novel, the mistress sends the letter and box to Deb. Because the mistress is hurt by how her affair ended with Jack, she is looking for some type of physical release to mitigate her feelings. While the reader does not get much insight into her character, it is reasonable to examine her behavior through the lens of someone hurting and reaching out. The mistress may be reaching out in a way that hurts others, but she may also want Deb to know who her husband is. That is not to suggest some kind of solidarity between the women, but rather to demonstrate that how she lacks any other outlet.

The affair is the most obvious use of infidelity and sex. How it relates to Jack's character, however, demonstrates how he struggles with intimacy. He did not engage in an affair because of a great love, but rather because of boredom or because he can. But the affair that incites the action of the novel is not Jack's first affair. While the text alludes to the fact that there were other women, and he does kiss a woman in the bar in Phoenix, Jack's first marriage ended because of an affair with Deb. This affair does not marginalized their relationship. Jack may actually love Deb. He tells her that he does, that he misses her, and he thinks about how he loved her even more when she was pregnant, a time he considers most at risk for infidelity. The trouble Jack has is in sustaining his emotions. He feels the need to indulge the physical gratification when it is available to him, rather than remaining faithful.

The two women Jack interacts with in Phoenix give contrast to how Jack views women. Jolie is someone whom he has a type of working relationship with. She also knows about the explosion at the exhibition. Jolie is empathetic to Jack and makes a pass at him at the bar. He rejects her because there is a level of intimacy in their relationship. He is able to kiss the woman in the bar later because he has no relationship with her. He does not even remember her name.

Simon and Kay are both facing issues with their developing sexuality. Simon experiences a fail when Elena tries to kiss him and he reacts poorly. He is unable to get anywhere in the relationship with her. When he later meets Teagan, he follows her lead and the two do end up having sex, but once Teagan reveals her struggles with her mother and wanting to escape, he bails on the relationship. Granted, Simon is out of his element in Rhode Island and there does not appear to be any reasonable explanation for them to have a successful relationship, it is interesting to watch Simon. He does feel badly for Teagan, but understands his helplessness.



For Kay, her age and lack of education in sex leads her to confusion. In order for her to process what she has learned about her father's sex life, she retreats into her fan fiction to explore. The adult characters can process the events, but they are fictional. She is unable to talk to her mother about the affair or sex, even though Deb makes repeated efforts to engage her in conversation. Kay simply is not ready.

Deb flirts with Gary during one of the nights in Rhode Island. She does not act on any impulses. Gary has a girlfriend and Deb still views herself as married. But they are interrupted by Kay coming home hurt after sneaking out. If this had not happened, it is possible that something physical might have transpired between Deb and Gary. Because Gary is a longtime friend of Jack's Deb projecting onto Gary sees him as a surrogate for the intimacy she lacks with Jack at the moment. Nothing happens, demonstrating how Deb will need to walk away from Jack ultimately.

## Adolescence

The theme of adolescence is used as a way to compare and contrast how children and adults react to given situations.

There was no hesitation when Kay opened the box from Jack's mistress. Kay's decision to open it may be reflective of her age. At 11, she is curious and not really thinking of potential consequences. Further, she has no way of knowing or suspecting that the box would contain such explicit contents. She shows it to Simon first and then the two of them take it to Deb.

Deb tries on multiple occasions to talk to Kay about sex and what has happened, but Kay is not ready for the discussion. She withdraws and avoids the topic. While it is unclear what Kay does or does not know about sex in general, it is likely nowhere near the explicit details contained in the box. She does try to speak with Simon about what happened, but he shuts down the conversation.

Similar to Kay, Simon withdraws, but they are actions common to a teenager: he texts his friends, sneaks out, prefers to read a book than talk with the family, and gets high. His actions toward the family, however, are more explosive. Simon is hostile and harbors a lot of anger towards his father. He feels embarrassed by what has happened and fantasizes about how he will handle his parents' divorce. He even goes so far as to tell his mother that he approves of the divorce before it is even being discussed. Simon is also exploring his own sexual desires. He has an unfortunate kiss with Elena when he smiles when she kisses him and she kisses his teeth, and he ends up having sex with Teagan.

Deb and Jack's reactions mirror Kay and Simon's. Deb retreats into herself, thinking about her past and trying to figure out what she wants in light of learning more about the affair. Jack thinks he should be able to control the damage of the package because he has already told Deb about the affair. After the time he spends with Jolie and the



unnamed woman from the bar, Jack goes to see his mother. Jack is not sure what to do, similar to Simon, yet he feels the need to do something.

## Insecurity and Abandonment

The author uses the theme of insecurity and abandonment to give insight into the motivational fears that cause people to pull away from others.

Jack's mistress send the letter and box to Deb, not because she and Jack are in love and want to run away from each other, but rather because she is hurt by Jack ending the affair. It is clear that she cared for Jack because of the pain she must have felt to do something that she knows will hurt him, his wife, and his family. She leaves town and does not answer Jack's calls because she feels abandoned by him.

Similarly, Jack may be inclined to have affairs because he is not secure in his own marriage. He knows that this type of behavior can lead to a marriage ending, as he witnessed with his first marriage, he continues to seek the attention of others. The reader sees his insecurity in the way he asks Stanley to delay the opening of his exhibition because Deb has not arrived. It is not that Jack wants Deb there as a way to share something with her and connect during a troubling time in their marriage, but rather because he needs her moral support. When the exhibition goes wrong, Jack is understandably upset, but his focus is on his exhibition and not the injured party. Watching Jack, Deb begins to wonder if she even wants to work on their marriage.

Deb feels as though she gave up more for their marriage than perhaps Jack did. She left a successful career as a ballet dancer to have a child. She knows it is not a career she can return to, so the fact that she was working on the marriage after learning about the affair shows that she may have abandonment issues as well. After seeing how Kay and Simon react to the news of their father's affair, Deb demonstrates insecurity in how her children view her. She begins to see her knowledge of the affair as acceptance of the affair.

Kay's relationships with the girls at school show how middle school girls prey on each other's insecurities. Kay is insecure about her writing, her delay in learning to ride a bike, and in being unable to discuss sex with her mother.

Simon's bravado and willingness to endorse a divorce shows his insecurities as well. He is scared of how he may be viewed if his parents' divorce and he wants to intercept the reaction. He wants to avoid embarrassment and be angry with his father in a way that he does not see his mother being.

## Family

The theme of family is explored through the dysfunctionality of people coping with an emotional crisis.



It is difficult to view the Shanley family as what people may consider a normal family, however that may be defined. This family is introduced through the eyes of the mistress. The reader learns about the affair before any of the characters are met. It is uncomfortable to witness Kay open the box because the reader knows it is not a design delivery. As the information that is in the box spreads to each member of the family, the reader meets the characters in the context of how their lives are being thrown into a type of chaos.

Deb is worried about being viewed as weak by her children because she already knew about the affair. This self-consciousness foreshadows how she will come to the decision to leave Jack. She feels the need to take action because she does not want to be viewed as weak by her children.

Jack is surprised that Deb reacts as she does because of her knowledge of the affair. To counteract Deb, he tells her what he thinks she wants to hear: that he loves her, thinks about having another child with her, and telling her it is good to hear her voice. While he says these things, he does not make an effort to change the behavior that led them to this part of the marriage. When he travels by himself to Phoenix, he turns down an advance from Jolie, leading the reader to wonder if he has changed. But the same night he returns to the bar and messes around with another woman, indicating that he has not.

Jack expects Deb to be at the gallery opening because he needs for her to be there. He tries to get Stanley to hold the opening so that Deb can be there. He needs emotional support from Deb, but does not offer it in kind to her. He expects his relationship with his children to stay as it was after the news as well. Jack sees a quick change in Simon, so he makes more of an effort with Kay. While there is some indication that Jack and Kay were close prior to what has happened, Kay is reluctant to allow her father to be part of her life. She thinks about how she does not want to give him the satisfaction of thinking he has been a decent father to her.

None of the family members can separate their knowledge of the affair and the contents of the box from their pre-existing relationships with family members. The box changes the way in which they view each other and how they view themselves in context of this moment. While it is natural to think that this would be a touchstone in any family history, the Shanley family accepts it as a defining moment for how they interact with each other.

## Regrets

The author uses the theme of regrets as a way to give insight and understanding as to why the characters react both passively and actively to the breakdown of the family.

The effects of Jack's affair are not limited to the marriage or how his relationship with Deb changes. The reader does not know how or why Deb came to know about the affair before the letter and box arrived. Instead, the reader is privy to the fact that Deb knows



about the affair and that they are trying to make the marriage work. The box's arrival makes the affair far more rooted in reality than the abstraction of knowing something without having seen it. In this way, Deb's reaction to the letter and box may signal her regret for having accepted what Jack told her about the affair.

In fact, Deb is struggling with her own regrets. Jack's act of betrayal prompts her to remember how they met, began their affair, and how nervous she was to tell Jack she was pregnant. It is not that Deb regrets having children, but she does regret leaving her career as a dancer. She teaches ballet, which gives her access to the art she loved, but ballet is not a career that she can return to after her kids are grown. Her regrets partly fuel the distance she keeps from her students. While she thinks it is because she knows most will not make it, one may suspect that she also wants to avoid getting close to one who does.

Kay regrets opening the box and knowing what she does about her father. She is emotionally unprepared for what she learned. Had she not opened the box, Kay and Simon might never have known about the affair, but the end result of their marriage likely would have been the same. Other regrets Kay experiences are when the girls mock her for her writing. She does not regret the writing, so much as getting it taken away from her.

Like Kay, Simon regrets knowing what he does about his father's affair. While Kay retreats into herself, Simon lashes out. He is argumentative and demanding of Deb. He wants nothing to do with his father. While there is some resolution between Kay and Jack, the same cannot be said for Jack and Simon. After Simon spends the night with Teagan, he is also confronted with the reality of connecting with someone sexually. While Simon is not emotionally invested in Teagan, and ultimately Teagan is not emotionally invested in Simon, she does see Simon as a type of escape. Teagan is unhappy in her home life and once she reveals how much this hurts her, Simon feels guilty that there is not anything he can do for her.

# Styles

## Point of View

The point of view of the novel is a third-person, omniscient narrator. The primary lens of the story is examined through the eyes of Kay, an 11-year-old girl, learning a graphic account of her father's affair.

The novel looks at what happens when people do things they should not. Kay should not open the box. Simon should not sneak off to be with Teagan. Jack should not have had an affair, and Deb should not have had an affair with Jack while he was married to his first wife. By framing the characters thusly, it allows the narrator to examine regrets, insecurities, infidelity, sex, and existing in a dysfunction family.

The inciting incident of the novel comes in the form of a letter, which is provided as full-text at the opening of the novel. Throughout the book, other perspectives are given, including Deb, Jack, and Simon.

The point of view of the novel also gives the reader insight into how each of the characters fared moving forward from this time in their lives.

## Language and Meaning

The language in the novel is fairly straight forward and easy to comprehend. The tone is conversational and intimate and the narrator is reliable. Swear words are used throughout, both as expletives and as graphic content about the affair. Any vulgarity is not out of place, however; it is appropriate and the harshness reflects the impact the affair has on the family.

Dialogue exchanges are typically short. It is natural and the voices of each character appropriate to their age and station in life. The author makes some stylistic choices with sentences, but this does not affect their readability.

The author gives basic information about the settings, but leaves them as a neutral backdrop for the family drama to unfold.

There is emphasis on the family unit, but as the novel progresses, the family becomes more fragmented. Each of the family members reacts differently to the news and act out in different ways.

## Structure

There are four sections and 61 chapters in the novel. The parts are titled: Part One: New York, the End of May; Part Two: That Year and Those That Followed; Part Three:

Jamestown and Out West, the Start of June; and Part Four: That Year and Those That Followed. Both Part Two and Part Four consist only of one chapter each. The rest of the novel's 61 chapters are part of the other parts.

The chapters are typically short, with some chapters being only a page or two long. Each chapter shifts focus to a different character, often times giving a continuation of what one character is doing before giving the reader the information about what is happening to someone else in the meantime.

The novel opens with the text of a letter to Deb, telling Deb about Jack's affair. The letter accompanies a box of pages giving intimate accounts of the interactions between the mistress and Jack. Aspects of the pages are alluded to and an occasional fragment is offered, but the overall scope of what is in the box is left to the reader's imagination.

Parts Two and Four flash forward in time, giving the reader insight into what happens immediately after the events of Parts One and Three, as well as what happens years in advance. Part Two reveals Kay's future career and Jack's death. Part Four allows the reader to know what happened to Jack's mistress.





## Quotes

Falling in love is just an excuse for bad behavior.

-- Mistress (chapter 1 paragraph 11)

**Importance:** The quote shows how the mistress is able to justify her affair, suggesting to Deb that her feelings for Jack were real, as were Jack's.

That was something Simon couldn't believe, how his mother didn't pore over every page.

-- Narrator (chapter 4 paragraph 1)

**Importance:** The quote illustrates Simon's confusion at his mother's reaction to the news of the affair.

The girl was crazier than he'd thought, and it was impossible to talk to Deb with this between them, this prop.

-- Narrator (chapter 5 paragraph 36)

**Importance:** The quote demonstrates how Jack dismisses both women: he believes the mistress to be crazy and that he is unable to talk to Deb because she holds the evidence of his affair when he wants to dismiss it as a distraction.

Life wasn't like television, but did it have to be so different?

-- Narrator (chapter 10 paragraph 17)

**Importance:** The quote illustrates how Kay is coming to terms with growing up. What she knows of adult life is what she has seen on television, yet she is having to deal with her own adult reality.

Anyone who'd danced had an unusual patience for pain.

-- Narrator (chapter 13 paragraph 1)

**Importance:** The quote gives insight into not only Deb's tolerance for pain, but her ability to endure what Jack has done to their marriage and why she stays.

She could not fix the Tigger any more than she could fix anything else, and wasn't sure anymore that she wanted to.

-- Narrator (chapter 14 paragraph 27)

**Importance:** The quote shows that Deb is beginning to question her desire to fix her marriage, instead leaving it destroyed like Jack's exhibit.

He knew what came next, and he wanted to show the world and the building people, everyone, that he was ready. Divorce!

-- Narrator (chapter 18 paragraph 9)



**Importance:** The quote illustrates the way Simon is preparing himself for the breakdown of his parents' marriage, using bravado to mask the pain of what may happen.

Deb was about to say that it didn't matter how she knew, just that she did, and that she wasn't mad, not at all, but Kay's attention seemed to have darted away.

-- Narrator (chapter 30 paragraph 11)

**Importance:** The quote shows the distance in the relationship between Deb and Kay and the difficulty Kay has discussing sex with her mother.

Gary's presence had always signified a sort of absence - the absence of his mother's attention, of his father's, the absence of a conversation directed toward himself.

-- Narrator (chapter 32 paragraph 1)

**Importance:** The quote illustrates Simon's attitude toward Gary and how he represents the void of something lacking.

There were just too many secrets. And today she'd made one of her own, calling her dad.

-- Narrator (chapter 43 paragraph 7)

**Importance:** The quote demonstrates the connection between Jack and Kay and how Kay is able to move past one set of feelings to act on a deeper set of feelings.

All those eyes and no one had noticed yet, that the eleven-year-old on the curb had been for some time gone.

-- Narrator (chapter 50 paragraph 115)

**Importance:** The quote illustrates how Kay feels disassociated from the family, lost in all the confusion of what is going on around her.

The girl who wrote the letter, the girl who loved Jack, spent some time in Pasadena, in her childhood home."

-- Narrator (chapter 61 paragraph 8)

**Importance:** The quote gives the reader insight into what happened to Jack's mistress after her disappearance.