

# **And the Dark Sacred Night Study Guide**

**And the Dark Sacred Night by Julia Glass**

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# Plot Summary

NOTE: This study guide refers to *And the Dark Sacred Night*, by Julia Glass, the Kindle Edition, Copyright 2014.

Kit Noonan is a mid-forties man who has lost his academic job and struggles to help his wife care for their two children. Part of Kit's angst is never knowing the identity of his father so when his wife suggests that he set out to find that information to get him unstuck in life, he does so and a whole new world opens up to him. Kit visits his mother's ex-husband, Jasper Noonan, who raised Kit as his own and Jasper provides the missing link to Kit's parentage. Kit's search leads him to Vermont where he meets his paternal grandparents, Senator Zeke and Lucinda Burns. Lucinda, especially is wild with joy to have Kit in her life and helps him learn about his father, a sophisticated man and New York Times music critic who died years ago from AIDS. Before long, another tragedy befalls the family when Lucinda dies on a family vacation and Kit is devastated by this loss. Ultimately, though, Kit comes to terms with the strengths and flaws of his biological father and embraces Jasper, the man who raised him and was the father he always longed for.



# Prologue and Chapter 1: Somebody to Love

## Summary

In the Prologue, a high school girl named Daphne attends a camp for music prodigies in Vermont one summer where she meets fellow musician, Malachy Burns. They talk about their futures in music, swim and just spend time sunning near a lake.

In Chapter 1, Kit Noonan's wife, Sandra, issues housekeeping orders to him as she prepares to leave for the day to tend to her landscaping business. The forty-something couple lives in New Jersey with their ten-year-old twins, Fanny and Will, whose care falls mostly to Kit since he is still unemployed, having not achieved tenure as an art history professor. Sandra's exasperation with Kit's ennui leads her to tell him that he has to leave the house and go find out anything he can about the biological father he never knew. She hopes that just by doing something, Kit will shake free of the inertia that has imprisoned him.

Kit's mother, Daphne, married his stepfather, Jasper Noonan, when Kit was nine-years-old. Jasper had two sons of his own, Rory and Kyle. The Noonans lived in a Vermont log house that Jasper built and Kit had to get used to living with strong male personalities. Jasper taught Kit how to ski which Kit loved because he got dedicated time with Jasper.

Kit chose a career as an Inuit art history professor but he did not get tenure, primarily because he did not write a book and did not network with others in his field. The loss of his job impacted his marriage and he and Sandra went to counseling where it came out that Kit's not knowing his biological father might have a lot to do with Kit's inability to function in his world.

During the years that Kit and Daphne lived with Jasper, Daphne taught music at a school that required her to have a long commute and she was not home much, so it was Jasper who primarily raised Kit. Kit noticed that his mother did not play her cello as much as she used to and she was tired all the time. On the night of Kit's graduation from eighth grade, Daphne tells him that she and Kit will be moving back to New Hampshire during the week and staying with Jasper on the weekends. Kit rebelled and decided to stay with Jasper full time to Jasper's delight. This arrangement stayed in place for three years until Daphne moved out completely. Daphne filed for divorce and Kit remained with Jasper.

Before long, Kit learned that Daphne had been seeing a man named Bart who was the principal at the school where she worked and she soon married him. Daphne and Bart had a daughter they named June who was born when Kit was a freshman in college. Kit recalls attending symphony concerts with his mother in New York when he was a boy



and remembers her joy during those times as they mingled among the people and walked the neighborhood time and again.

In the present, Kit knows that his not knowing his biological father has nothing to do with his inability to make tenure but he complies with Sandra's wishes and leaves the house. He remembers asking his mother about his father right after his own twins were born but she still refused to tell him anything and he never asked her again. Kit decides that he will visit Jasper even though it has been awhile since he has seen him.

The narrative transitions to the past when Daphne and Malachy are at the music camp and they attend a concert given by a visiting artist. Daphne sits by Malachy and moves her hand until it touches his where it remains for the concert. Afterwards, they are giddy from the performance and Daphne impulsively kisses him and he returns the kiss on her cheek before parting company.

## Analysis

The weight of secrets has taken its toll on Kit's life, or at least that is what his wife, Sandra, believes. She thinks that Kit has lost his job and cannot find another one because he never knew his biological father. Although Kit contests this idea, he is open to Sandra's demand that he leave the home for awhile in order to break the inertia going on in their family because of Kit. Kit's mother, Daphne, would never tell Kit anything definitive about his father, just compounding the secrecy. It seems that at some point, at least when Kit reached adulthood, his mother could have shared information with him without causing too much trauma.

Kit's story also shows that there are all types of families, not just the typical nuclear family of a husband, wife and children. Kit and his mother become their own little family and they live within the boundaries of her family until she is able to provide for Kit on her own. Not long after, Daphne and Kit move in with Jasper and his two boys to become a blended family. When that breaks apart, Kit keeps the ties he made there but now must establish a relationship with Daphne's new husband and daughter. By demonstrating that Kit did have a good bond and fatherly figure with his stepfather, Jasper, the author is suggesting that perhaps Kit's not knowing his biological father is not actually Kit's problem, but rather, the fact that he has had to adapt to so many different family scenarios. It would be hard to know where you fit in or really belong when your foundation shifts so frequently as it has for Kit all his life.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Sandra force Kit to leave the house for awhile?



## Discussion Question 2

What is a counselor's idea that could be the reason that Kit cannot get any traction in his life?

## Discussion Question 3

Does Kit think that his not knowing his biological father has anything to do with his inability to function in his life?

## Vocabulary

stunted, attenuated, incandescently, vigilance, flautists, allusions, prim, martial, diversion, mutation, limerick, livelihood, tawdry, vegans, skewed, illogically, hankering, spherical, lustrous, perused, recede, hoister, consignment, reputedly, dormers, amiss, momentum, mottled, meddlesome, giddy, wretched, soapstone, gothic, panache, exasperation, plight, adjunct, quantitative, mojo, benign, implication, metaphor, compelled, quintessentially, cubist, discrete, implosive, protege, vehement, emulate, rambunctious, disdainful, vortex, cryptic, horrendous, predispositions, coax, belligerent, haiku, virulent



## Chapter 2: Coming in from the Cold

### Summary

Jasper has had three major events in his life lately: first, a big pine tree fell and sheared off a corner of his house; second, his dog, Pluto, died; and, third, Kit shows up out of the blue. Kit is a part of Jasper's life he calls the "Daphne Decade" before his ex-wife, Daphne, left Jasper for another man. Jasper has not seen much of Kit after he left for graduate school, however, and has met Kit's wife, Sandra, only one time. Jasper enlists a local man, Jim, to help with the repairs on the house and intends to enlist Kit when he arrives too.

Jasper runs an outdoor gear store in Vermont and he is hoping for early snow to bring people to the area to ski. Jasper wonders why Kit has come but does not ask outright. Jasper tells Kit that his stepbrother, Kyle, is selling real estate now but has a drinking problem, and his other stepbrother, Rory, lives in Colorado with his wife and two kids. Jasper's age and health conditions prevent his giving ski lessons anymore but he does the dog runs and keeps the huskies at his place.

The next day, Kit helps Jim and Jasper work on repairing Jasper's house. Jasper drives in to check on things at the store and confirms that Loraina, his help and sometimes girlfriend, has everything under control in anticipation of an impending snowstorm. Jasper and Loraina have a sporadic intimate relationship and are very comfortable with each other. That night at dinner Jasper knows that Kit will have to soon reveal the real reason he has come and he knows it is going to have something to do with Daphne, a topic Jasper would rather avoid. Kit tells Jasper that his kids think he is away looking for a job, but, really Kit does not have a clue what to do with his life. Kit also tells Jasper that he hopes Jasper can share any information that Daphne might have told him about Kit's biological father.

Daphne had made Jasper promise that he would never tell Kit what he knew about his father, but Jasper thinks enough time has passed and he no longer owes any loyalty to Daphne. Jasper wants to sleep on the issue, though, and delays telling Kit anything. The next morning, Jasper tells Loraina that Kit has come to him to find out who his father is. Loraina thinks he should tell Kit whatever he knows. That afternoon, Kyle shows up at Jasper's house and he and Kit get reacquainted. The next morning, Jasper sees a newspaper article stating that Vermont Senator Zeke Burns has been hospitalized after having a stroke. Jasper asks Loraina to see what she can find out about the senator and his family and she reports back that they live on a farm not that far away from Jasper's house.

That night, Jasper, Kyle and Kit prepare for the snowstorm and the inevitable power outage. Jasper has found some information about Senator Burn's son, Jonathan, who is a professor in California. The storm has finally landed and the power outage brings out the survival instincts in Jasper while Kyle and Kit whoop it up as if they were boys again.



The next morning, Jasper shovels a path to the kennel to feed the dogs and realizes that two of them have escaped through the fence. Jasper takes Kit and eight dogs to pull the sled to find the missing dogs. The dogs are not to be found at three spots where Jasper thinks they may have headed. As they continue their search, they come across a young woman named Raven, gesturing wildly at them and they learn that she and her boyfriend, Bruno, had been hiking and got caught in the snowstorm. Her boyfriend has a broken leg and Jasper is surprised to see his missing dogs with the duo, keeping them warm.

Jasper, Kit and the dogs get Raven and Bruno back to Jasper's house and they can see that Kyle has plowed the drive. The power is still out so Kit volunteers to go down to the road, flag down the first driver and ask him or her to call the ambulance in town. Jasper learns that Raven and Bruno teach at an art school in Providence. Kit returns with the news that an ambulance will be arriving soon and before long the power returns to Jasper's house. After Raven and Bruno depart, Kit fixes dinner and Jasper answers the phone and is shocked to hear Daphne's voice. She is looking for Kit and Sandra told her where he is. Jasper feeds the dogs and heads back to the house where Kit says he did not tell Daphne why he is here and Jasper finally asks him that very question.

A couple days later, Kit is fixing breakfast and Jasper tells Kit that his parental grandmother had helped Daphne and Kit when Kit was very young by sending money but that Daphne put a stop to it when she became more independent. His grandmother got to see him a couple times when he was a baby but Daphne cut ties with her early on. Jasper tells Kit that his grandparents are Zeke and Lucinda Burns, his grandfather being a Vermont senator. Jasper shows Kit the newspaper article telling about Senator Burns' recent stroke. Jasper offers to call Lucinda because it might be too shocking for her to hear from Kit directly.

In a flashback, Daphne lingers in the meadow at the music camp, dreaming of being a famous musician one day. Malachy surprises her and they head to their special place to watch the July Fourth fireworks across the lake. The mood turns romantic and they kiss but Malachy pulls back, afraid of the intensity and the feeling that they could just be caught up in the drama of their wonderful summer. Malachy ends the encounter and leads Daphne back to camp.

## Analysis

Kit's arrival at Jasper's house is bathed in secrecy and Jasper thinks that possibly he and Sandra are divorcing. However, the real reason behind Kit's visit is to find out what Jasper knows about his biological father. Surely, Kit's mother, Daphne, must have told Jasper something about the boy's father during the ten years they were married. Daphne had always kept any information about his father a secret from Kit and his inability to get any traction in his life could be based on his lack of firm footing about his complete parentage.





When Kit does approach Jasper about wanting to know more about his father, Jasper has a few pangs of guilt related to Daphne because he had promised secrecy on the matter, but Jasper is an up-front person who believes that the truth is the hero in life. Besides, it has been so many years since Daphne left Jasper that he thinks it is time that Kit get the information he needs, at least as much as Jasper feels he can provide.

It must be fate that the article about Senator Zeke Burns having a stroke appears in the paper at the same time that Kit is visiting Jasper. Jasper knows that it was the senator's son who was Kit's biological father and he takes this as some sort of sign that he should reveal information to Kit.

The author uses the technique of foreshadowing in this chapter with the introduction of Bruno and Raven who need to be rescued in the aftermath of the snowstorm. Kit helps Jasper retrieve the two hikers and is kind to them while they wait for official medical help. This kindness will be returned by Bruno toward the end of the story.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Jasper think Kit has come to see him out of the blue? Why would he assume this?

## Discussion Question 2

Why had Daphne rejected further help from Kit's paternal grandmother? What does this suggest?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Jasper offer to call Lucinda instead of letting Kit call her?

## Vocabulary

blights, wonky, thoracic, euthanasia, palsied, slalom, pathetic, wazoo, befuddling, conundrum, lair, proverbial, lurid, influx, sacrosanct, mayhem, feigned, entity, torso, dire, elocution, dementia, convolutions, appalls, retrospect, anvil, paternal, tawdry, recurrent, gash, coy, quaint, sedate, shenanigans, insomnia, chauvinist, marinating, deftness, moxie, rhetorical, swanky, commodity, impresario, exasperating, scorn, obnoxious, hypothetical, equilibrium, callow, smug, kosher, skeptical, artifacts, mogul, supernova, actuarial, cliché

## Chapter 3: Things I Wish Were True

### Summary

Lucinda Burns makes accommodations at home so that when her husband, Zeke, returns from the rehab center after having a stroke, he will have everything he needs. She finds it difficult to prepare emotionally for her husband's new, diminished physical condition due to the stroke. Lucinda cannot help but think of caring for her son, Malachy, when he was toward the end of his life and she begins to understand why he had opted to take his own life. He had AIDS and felt there was no hope. Lucinda mourned Malachy and still does, in spite of her husband's efforts to relieve her suffering, even taking her on a trip to Italy which he had hoped would revive her spirits but did not.

Lucinda has received a phone message from someone named Jasper Noonan and, hopeful that it might be some news about Kit, decides to call him back later when Zeke is settled back home. Lucinda's daughter, Christina, takes Lucinda to the rehab center to get Zeke and he is very frustrated by the physical and speech limitations imposed on him because of the stroke. Lucinda recalls being young and being in love with Zeke's older brother, Matthew. She wrote him letters when he went to war but was devastated when he married Dora, the girlfriend of his brother, Aaron, who died in the war.

Lucinda's son, Jonathan, calls from California to check on her and Zeke and announces that he and his husband, Cyril, will be coming to home to Vermont for Thanksgiving and will take care of everything. Jonathan and Cyril are professors at Berkeley. Lucinda struggles with taking care of Zeke and is relieved when his physical therapist, Zoe, comes to help because Lucinda has a break for at least a little while. Lucinda invites Zeke's aide, David, to lunch to help manage Zeke's anxiety about work that is not being done since he has been gone from his office.

Lucinda returns Jasper's phone call and is delighted to learn that Kit wants to talk to her. Jasper gives Lucinda Kit's phone number and she promises to call within the next couple of days. Lucinda recalls how proud they were when Malachy went away to music camp, never having realized how talented he really was. Lucinda never knew what went on at camp until she received a letter from Daphne later that year telling her that she was pregnant with Malachy's baby. When Lucinda shared the news with Zeke, he phoned Malachy who confirmed the information, much to his parents' dismay. Zeke thought the baby should be aborted, but Lucinda's staunch Catholic beliefs wouldn't let her agree to that. Zeke offered to buy Daphne off with money, but she was intent on keeping the baby.

Jonathan arrives two days before Thanksgiving and Cyril will join him when he finishes a conference in Boston. Jonathan does all the shopping and preparations for the holiday, something that Lucinda usually does but she is content to let it go this year. Lucinda has never seen Jonathan so happy and assumes it is because of his relationship with Cyril whom he married a few years ago at the age of 50. That night,



Lucinda calls Kit and he is thrilled to speak to her. Lucinda has to tell him, though, that Malachy was gay and died from AIDS several years ago. Kit knew his father was dead but did not know the circumstances; all he knows now is that he has a family.

Thanksgiving dinner is a fabulous feast prepared by Jonathan and Cyril. Christina, her husband, and one of her daughters also share in the celebration. During dinner, Jonathan and Cyril announce that they are adopting a boy who has led a troubled life and they are both scared and excited at the prospect.

Lucinda shares the news that she has connected with Kit. Christina and Jonathan are shocked and Lucinda tells them what she knows about how Kit came into the world. That night, Zeke gives Lucinda a large envelope of photos of Kit at various ages. Zeke had paid a photographer to shoot some photos of Kit because Malachy had wanted to know about his son after he got sick and knew he would die. Lucinda feels betrayed that Zeke had known about Malachy's need to know more about Kit but never told her. Lucinda recalls being in New York and taking care of Malachy toward the end of his life. She also cannot help but remember how he had enlisted the help of his friend, Fenno, to take Lucinda to a formal affair one night so that he would have his apartment to himself and be able to commit suicide.

In a flashback, Daphne and Malachy's summer at the music camp neared its end, and one night they went skinny dipping in the lake. As they played in the water, Daphne stated her love for Malachy who deflected the declaration. Daphne made overt sexual moves toward Malachy who told her that he took things slow and got out of the water. A few nights later, Daphne and Malachy performed to great reviews in a final summer concert. During the night, Daphne woke from a dream and decided to go to Malachy in the boys' dorm. Daphne climbed into Malachy's bed and they had sex, but Malachy didn't return Daphne's declaration of love. Daphne didn't see Malachy for a couple days later and he told her that he was not able to give her what she needed from him. He apologized for hurting her but Daphne was not able to accept it.

## Analysis

A big part of both the underlying story and the obvious story in the book is homosexuality. Malachy was a gay man, and although he was intrigued by Daphne during their days at the music camp, he could not be the boyfriend she wanted him to be. He tried to let her down gently all the while deflecting her advances, but Daphne was intent on a relationship with him. During those days, homosexuality was not openly discussed or acknowledged so it would not have been easy to tell Daphne the truth about his sexual inclinations. Perhaps if there had not been such a social stigma about being gay during that time, Malachy would have been honest with Daphne and Kit would not have been conceived at all.

Malachy embraced his life and grew comfortable with his sophisticated gay lifestyle as an adult, but he eventually died of AIDS during the epidemic that ran rampant in America during the 1980s. It is interesting to note that Lucinda cared for him toward the



end of his life in spite of being a staunch Catholic which judges homosexuality to be a sin. She also befriended Malachy's gay friends, proving that she could rise above her old belief system to ultimately care for her son and acknowledge that different ways of life are possible.

Lucinda's beliefs are also put to the test when her other son, Jonathan, who is also gay, marries another man and makes plans to adopt a son. Perhaps the author wants the reader to consider that alternative lifestyles do not make a person bad or good; it is the person who is either bad or good and should be viewed appropriately.

## Discussion Question 1

How do Zeke and Lucinda differ in how they viewed Daphne's pregnancy?

## Discussion Question 2

Do Lucinda's family members exhibit typical reactions when hearing the news about Kit's existence?

## Discussion Question 3

How does Malachy try to tell Daphne that he was gay without really telling her?

## Vocabulary

adjacent, judiciously, encroaching, gusto, jarring, belatedly, immersed, immutably, constituents, frescos, sotto voce, rhapsodized, ad infinitum, symmetry, follies, torso, liturgical, pall, futility, copious, crevice, paranoid, quaver, beckoned, mirage, vague, cosmos, hieroglyphic, insolent, symposium, resilient, ecumenically, iteration, betrayal, hummus, tedious, shrill



# Chapter 4: The Bright Blessed Day

## Summary

Malachy's old friend, Fenno, and Fenno's lover, Walter, have organized a family reunion on Cape Cod. Kit and his twins have arrived from New Jersey and Daphne and Lucinda will arrive soon. It is Fenno and Walter's hope that the family can address unspoken issues and talk about Malachy who is central to all of them. Fenno and Walter fit seamlessly into the predominantly gay town of Provincetown. They have known each other for several years but have been a couple for only ten years. Walter owns a couple restaurants and Fenno had owned a bookstore until a rent increase forced him out of business.

For many years, Walter begrudged Fenno's relationship with Malachy because he always thought they had been lovers and Fenno could not love anyone else. Fenno talks to Kit about Malachy and Kit is sad that he could have known his father before he got sick and died. Fenno tells Kit that Malachy was not the fatherly type even though many gay men become fathers. Malachy had lived a sophisticated life of travel and music and was too self-centered to have a child around. Fenno had never been Malachy's lover but Fenno was the friend he trusted to help him kill himself when he was dying from AIDS. Fenno tells Kit that Malachy had enlisted him to escort Lucinda, who had been in New York caring for him, to a formal event so that Malachy could overdose on pills and commit suicide in peace.

Kit reveals that Daphne is not happy about having to attend this reunion because Malachy is a distant memory for her and she does not want to dredge everything up again. When Daphne arrives, she is polite but cool. Fenno thinks about what his therapist has told him about how our pasts are never really in the past. He references the Louis Armstrong song, "What a Wonderful World," which points out how amazing the world really is in its lyrics: "the bright blessed day and the dark sacred night." According to the therapist, the past is the dark sacred night and that there would be no bright present without it.

Fenno rushes through town to get to the ferry to meet Lucinda who is poised and happy to see him. The sight of so many healthy gay men moves Lucinda to tears since Malachy was denied that fate. As an older gay man, Fenno recalls the days when AIDS was a death sentence for gays in the 1980s, and he cannot help but feel pain and sadness for those who died too soon. At dinner, Daphne and Lucinda are careful not to veer into conversation that will bring them too close to Malachy. Later, Lucinda thanks Daphne for coming because she knows it must be difficult for her and she validates that Daphne raised Kit to be a wonderful man, something that Malachy could not face doing. Daphne deflects the compliments, saying that she is here only because Kit wants her to be.



During the group's stay, a huge storm hits Cape Cod and everyone is stuck inside for a day reading and playing board games. When the storm ends by Sunday morning, Lucinda leaves to take a walk and perhaps find a Catholic church so she can go to mass. Daphne decides to leave today instead of Monday, much to Kit's chagrin. Before she leaves, Daphne admits to Kit that she used to Google Malachy and saw articles about his glittering career and then not too long later, his obituary. He had died by the time Kit asked about him and she told Kit that Malachy was dead.

After a few hours, Fenno and Walter are concerned because Lucinda has not returned from her walk. Kit goes out to look for her while Walter takes the twins out for lunch. At the house, Lucinda's cell phone rings and Fenno answers to hear her daughter, Christina. The Provincetown police have called Christina because Lucinda has been drowned in a rogue wave on the island. Through her weeping, Christina tells Fenno that she will get the earliest flight out and get to Cape Cod as soon as she can.

Fenno learns later that Lucinda had walked out on the breakwater and was overtaken by a huge wave and drowned. Kit is devastated by Lucinda's death and is so unable to function that he has to call Sandra to drive to the cape to take the kids back to New Jersey. Fenno and Walter, who had planned to spend another week in Providence, pack up their things and leave early.

After their return to New York, Walter heads to his restaurants to check on things and Fenno unpacks their suitcases. He pulls out an item that he had planned to give to Kit on their vacation but Lucinda's death preempted his giving the gift. The gift is a quilt that had belonged to Malachy which he called his "insomnia quilt" and used during the last months of his life. Malachy had asked Fenno to put it away before Malachy committed suicide because he did not want it to get soiled. Fenno had kept it but it but never used it because it reminded him of a funeral shroud.

In a flashback, Daphne endured the slights and gossip that goes along with being a pregnant teenager in a small town. By chance one day when she was pushing her baby in his stroller, Daphne came upon her former music teacher who encouraged Daphne to become a music teacher. This encounter changed the way Daphne viewed her future and she knew she would be fine if she could teach and raise her son.

## Analysis

Homosexuality and AIDS are still important to the story. Malachy's friend, Fenno, and his lover, Walter, take the family on a trip to Provincetown on Cape Cod, a community well known for its gay residents and visitors. This creates the dramatic irony of the straight characters being in the minority for once.

Fenno and Walter are now older gay men and consider themselves lucky to have lived through the AIDS crisis in the 1980s. They lost many friends to the disease and sometimes wonder if the young gays of today will ever understand the horror and grief of that period because their lives are so much simpler in comparison. Related to AIDS



death is the incidence of suicide among AIDS patients including Malachy. He opted to take his own life because his body was devastated by the uncontrollable disease. At least by committing suicide, Malachy had some measure of control over what happened to his body and to his life in general.

The title of the book is explained in this chapter when Fenno recalls his and Walter's therapist talking about the Louis Armstrong song, "What a Wonderful World." Walter had had an especially difficult time coming to terms with Malachy's being a big part of Fenno's past. Their therapist tells them that the past never really goes away and people use them to gauge the present. The song's lyrics seem to resonate with him in this regard when it says, "the bright blessed day and the dark sacred night." According to the therapist, the past is the dark sacred night and that there would be no bright present without it.

## Discussion Question 1

Why would Walter resent Malachy so much? What does this suggest about Walter?

## Discussion Question 2

How does Daphne feel about being at the family reunion? Why does she agree to go? What does this suggest about her?

## Discussion Question 3

What does the author mean by "the dark sacred night"?

## Vocabulary

panama, meanders, roisterous, eloquent, moratorium, artisanal, prototypical, deja vu, idiosyncratic, alacrity, stranglehold, insolent, privet, ingenuous, exorcised, literalist, conduit, insidious, chastised, neophyte, devotee, igneous, stratified, discourse, farrago, chagrin, phalanx, dowager, undulation, burgeoning, fantasia, intransigent, squeamish, proxy, encroached, mimicry, proclivities, ebullience, osteoporosis, malicious, terminus, tangible, pragmatic, incursion, surrogate, tempest, repertoire, entourage, empathic, baroque





# Chapter 5: What I'd Be Without You

## Summary

Kit, Sandra, Zeke, Christina, Daphne and Bart all come together at the music summer camp in Vermont for a special concert. They are all overwhelmed by the stately beauty of the camp and grounds. Daphne, of course, is especially happy to be attending because of that one special summer she had spent there as a girl. Christina pushes Zeke in a wheelchair and many people recognize the former Senator and stop to talk to him. Kit has developed a good relationship with Zeke and he spends a lot of time with his grandfather working on a project to archive all of Zeke's papers from his senatorial career. Kit is also pleased to have found some of his father's papers and personal items that Lucinda had saved.

Kit spends two or three nights at the Vermont farm every week so the care of the twins falls on Sandra who is overextended with her landscape business too. In addition, Kit spends two nights a week in Providence, Rhode Island, where he works on a special art archival project at a museum. He got the project when he was recommended by Bruno, the young man he and Jasper saved during the snowstorm in Vermont several months ago. Bruno and Raven teach at the Rhode Island School of Design and he recommended Kit for the project.

Prior to the concert, Daphne takes Kit on a little tour of the music camp and indulges her sentimentality as she recalls the wonderful time she had spent here. Everyone enjoys the concert tremendously and Daphne is especially moved when she has the chance to talk to one of her former teachers. After the concert, Sandra and Kit drive to Jasper's house where they had left the twins for the evening. Kit wonders if he will ever be able to explain to his children about his complicated family dynamic but right now he is content with his memories of Jasper and the father he was to him for most of his life.

## Analysis

At last, this unusually blended family has come together and everything is peaceful. What defines a family is no longer the concept of the nuclear family of several years ago. Kit now has the benefit of knowing his father's family even though he never knew his father. Daphne has even mellowed and leaned into the new family concept, especially because it is something that Kit wants. Amazingly, Malachy's family has accepted Kit, his wife and their children and embraced them lovingly. Lucinda, who was the conduit, is no longer here but her love and tenacity make the reunion possible and all the family members' lives are changed for the better because of her.

Perhaps Sandra was right in that Kit needed some closure about his father so that he could get some traction in his life. Kit seems much happier now and he has delved into some big archival projects that get him back on the right track. One of those projects





comes from knowing Bruno, the young man that he and Jasper rescued after the Vermont snowstorm. Perhaps the author wants to tell the reader that there is goodness in people and sometimes you must stay your course through uncertainty and fear, but there will be a breakthrough in time. Karma can be a good thing. Kit was good to Bruno when Bruno needed to be rescued, and now Bruno is good to Kit when Kit could use something tangible to hang on to.

And, finally, the concept of fatherhood comes to a close in this chapter. Obviously, Malachy, was Kit's biological father but he could not or would not accept him in his life. What makes a real father is someone who is around and available to a child and that is exactly what Jasper has always been for Kit. Kit can now acknowledge that and wonder what he would be without Jasper's influence in his life.

## Discussion Question 1

What is Kit and Zeke's relationship by the end of the book? Was this expected?

## Discussion Question 2

Why might Daphne want to show Kit the music camp where she spent that one wonderful summer?

## Discussion Question 3

Who does Kit really consider to be his father?

## Vocabulary

convergence, contraption, catastrophe, eclectic, ornate, horticultural, serpentine, endear, buffoonish, coffered, curatorial, apex, vacillating, aerated, dung, garnet, shroud, punctiliousness, covert, ennui, prosecco, pro bono, scrim, gait, rapt, manifest, fiefdom, cache, sinuous, myopic, depositions, amicable, unremitting, antiquated



# Characters

## Christopher (Kit) Noonan

Christopher (Kit) Noonan is the protagonist in the story. He is a 40-year-old man who worked as a college professor but lost his job when he failed to make tenure. Kit suffers from a mild depression about his situation and this puts pressure on his home life. His wife suggests that he take a trip to find himself, and, hopefully, come back ready to engage in life again. His wife hopes that he will be able to find information about the biological father he never knew that will make him whole again.

Kit is a mild-mannered person and does not pressure people so it is against his nature to pry and dig into private places where he feels he does not have a right to be. That is why it is difficult for him to try to find out any information about his biological father.

Kit has a challenging relationship with his mother, not only because she would never really tell him anything about his father, but because she is self absorbed and has made decisions that benefited her primarily, leaving broken relationships in her wake.

## Daphne Noonan

Daphne Noonan is Kit's mother. When she was a young woman, she attended a prestigious music camp in Vermont where she met a young man named Malachy. Daphne fell in love with Malachy but he did not return her affections, mostly because he was gay, but also because she was so pushy about her feelings. Daphne was the aggressor in a sexual encounter with Malachy one night that ultimately resulted in her pregnancy. She opted to have the baby and stayed with her parents until she could support herself and the baby.

Daphne had financial support initially from Malachy's mother, but ultimately she rejected it because she wanted to remain independent. Daphne also did not want any emotional ties with Malachy's family so she kept their existence a secret from her son. Daphne is very self-centered, never really considering her son's feelings about not knowing about his father or his paternal family members. Daphne also tired of the inconvenience of being married to Jasper and left him, even though Kit loved him and chose to remain with him.

Daphne does not understand all the commotion in creating a blended family of Malachy's family with herself and Kit but she ultimately goes along with it because it is something that Kit wants. This action demonstrates that although Daphne is certainly a flawed person, she does have true maternal love for her child.



## Jasper Noonan

Jasper is Kit's former stepfather, having been married his mother, Daphne, for about ten years of Kit's childhood. Kit loved being around Jasper because of all the male activities they would do together. Jasper is an outdoors type of man who has been a ski instructor and still operates the dog sled runs. Jasper is a no-nonsense type of person and could be considered to be gruff, yet he totally opened his life to Kit who opted to live with Jasper when Daphne left to be with another man. It is Jasper who ultimately helps Kit connect with his biological father's family and whom Kit considers to be his real father in the end.

## Sandra Noonan

Sandra Noonan is Kit's wife. She runs her own landscaping business and cares for their ten-year-old twins. Sandra is capable of tough love by ordering Kit out of the house to find himself by finding out about his biological father.

## Will Noonan

Will Noonan is the ten-year-old son of Kit and Sandra Noonan. He is Fanny's twin.

## Fanny Noonan

Fanny Noonan is the ten-year-old daughter of Kit and Sandra Noonan. She is Will's twin.

## Malachy Burns

Malachy Burns is Kit's biological father. He had a sexual encounter with Daphne when they were young and away from home but he never loved her or indicated that he did. Malachy was not prepared to be a father then and never really wanted children in his life. Malachy was gay, got AIDS, and opted for suicide at the age of 38.

## Zeke Burns

Zeke Burns is a U.S. Senator from Vermont. He has a stroke, which is publicized in a Vermont newspaper, which is the catalyst to Kit's connecting with the Burns family as his long-lost relatives.



## **Lucinda Burns**

Lucinda Burns is Malachy's mother and grandmother to Kit. She had tried to have a relationship with Kit when she found out about him as a baby but was shut out by his mother. When Kit connects with her years later, she is thrilled to not only know her grandson, but also to have a part of her dead son, Malachy, back in her life.

## **Fenno**

Fenno is a gay man who was a very close friend to Malachy when they lived on the same street in New York City. Fenno helped care for Malachy when he was sick with AIDS and was aware of Malachy's plan to commit suicide. Fenno is a major force in getting Kit together with Malachy's mother and Kit's mother so that there might be some peace and the creation of a blended family.

## **Walter**

Walter is Fenno's romantic partner. Walter harbors resentment for Malachy because of Fenno's friendship with him, and that resentment colors their relationship.

## **Rory Noonan**

Rory Noonan is one of Jasper's two sons. Rory was never a problem for his father and now lives in Colorado with his wife and two children.

## **Kyle Noonan**

Kyle Noonan is one of Jasper's two sons. Kyle was always a difficult kid to raise and he now has drinking problems and trouble keeping a job. He plans to get married and Jasper hopes that will help him get grounded in his life.

## **Loraina**

Loraina is Jasper's sometimes-lover and the woman who also works at the outdoor gear store that Jasper manages.

## **Christina**

Christina is Zeke and Lucinda's daughter. She is also the sister to Malachy and Jonathan.

## **Jonathan**

Jonathan is Zeke and Lucinda's son and brother to Malachy and Christina.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Nature

Nature demonstrates the power of creating ambiance and determining situations throughout the novel.

The beauty of the natural setting of the music camp creates an almost other-worldly environment both when Daphne and Malachy attend there and also many years later when the whole family returns for a concert.

Sandra runs a landscaping business which symbolizes the attempt to try to control nature and powerful forces.

There are also powerful storms that wreak havoc with the characters. A snowstorm in Vermont and then the hurricane in Provincetown both show the power of nature and the vulnerability of men and women.

The power of nature is clearly at work when Lucinda is overcome by a rogue wave near the shore and is drowned.

## Music

Music is a powerful symbol in the story because it is the foundation for Daphne and Malachy's meeting at the camp. Malachy became a music critic; Daphne takes Kit to a concert in New York City; Lucinda listens to Malachy's audio tapes; and finally, the whole family attends an outdoor concert at the end of the story. Music is a universal symbol of connection and it works well in this story.

## Huskies

Jasper's huskies keep him vital in spite of the fact that he is aging and cannot do the things he used to enjoy. They are his legs and get him out into the snowy world he loves without putting himself in jeopardy.

## Burns farm

The Burns farm symbolizes heritage and what is often considered to be a typical family dynamic. It has been passed down for generations in the Burns family and is a constant in a newly changing world.



## **Insomnia Quilt**

Malachy had a brilliantly colored quilt that he used when he was ill with AIDS. He gave it to Fenno shortly before he died and Fenno kept it in a drawer in his bureau. Fenno plans to give it to Kit so that he will have something tangible from his father. The quilt not only symbolizes comfort for a dying Malachy, but also for Walter it means that Fenno is finally giving up Malachy for him by giving the quilt to Kit.

## **Thanksgiving**

Thanksgiving for the Burns family is an important event in that it symbolizes the unity of the family and the constancy of the heritage that they celebrate each year on this holiday.

## **Food**

Food is an important symbol of love and unity in the story for several of the characters. While he has been unemployed, Kit has learned to cook and excels at it. He prepares meals for Jasper and Kyle when he visits Jasper's house. Jasper also cooks basic meals for Kit but food symbolizes comfort and that is what Jasper provides for him. Lucinda takes care with preparing food for Zeke after he has his stroke and she lets Jonathan and Cyril take over the preparations for Thanksgiving dinner this year. Walter is a big foodie and owns restaurants in New York City. Food takes center stage at the Provincetown family reunion as Fenno and Walter attempt to provide comfort for this blended family going through huge transitions.

## **Kit's Family**

A family can be composed of many different combinations and Kit's family symbolizes the departure from the typical nuclear family of two parents and a child. The world is made up of many types of people and relationships and a family can be the best representation of that cosmos.

## **Malachy's Photos of Kit**

Malachy had hired a photographer to shoot pictures of Kit unbeknownst to anyone else. The images symbolize Malachy's interest in the boy but his inability to care for him or have him in his life as symbolized by his keeping the photos, and Kit, in a box.

## **Fenno's Bookstore**

Fenno must close his beloved bookstore because the rent has increased to a point that he cannot afford to stay. Because books symbolize knowledge and curiosity, the closing

of the store symbolizes Fenno's plunge into uncertainty at this point in his life both personally and professionally.





# Settings

## New Jersey

Kit, Sandra and their twins live in New Jersey.

## New York City

Malachy lived and worked in New York City when he wrote for The New York Times. He also died there when committing suicide in his apartment.

## Vermont

Jasper's home is in Vermont and Kit lived many years of his life there. Zeke and Lucinda Burns also live in Vermont where Zeke was a U.S. Senator.

## Cape Cod

Fenno and Walter arrange the family get-together in Cape Cod for Lucinda, Kit, Daphne and Kit's children. It is where Lucinda dies while taking a walk close to the water and a random wave engulfs her.

## New Hampshire

Daphne grew up in New Hampshire and raised Kit there for the years prior to her marriage to Jasper.



# Themes and Motifs

## Family

A family can be created with many different compositions and the author wants the reader to understand that the nuclear biological family being the norm is almost a thing of the past.

Kit's life started out different from the societal norm from the beginning. Born to a single mother and living in his grandparents' home until his mother became independent and moved out, Kit never really experienced the traditional nuclear family. Whisked into Jasper's home after his mother marries, Kit is plunged into a new family dynamic that includes a stepfather and two stepbrothers. It is here that Kit finally learns the male dynamic and the real meaning of love.

Of course, Kit's biggest exploration into what family means is his search to find out about his biological father which introduces him to family members he never knew existed. How can Kit blend all these new people into his life and how can he explain his convoluted background to his own children? Will they be able to understand the twisting path that sometimes creates a family? The author wants the reader to understand that any family dynamic is possible, that love can come from the least expected places and that life is full of surprises, both good and bad. The family is the nucleus for people's lives and Kit has hit the jackpot with his extended family network.

## Secrets

Sometimes a person's secrets are best kept secret, at least according to Daphne, Kit's mother who had an ill-fated love experience with Malachy as a teenage girl. The author wants the reader to know, however, that Daphne wants her secret about Kit's parentage to be kept not because she is ashamed but because she is hurt. Daphne assumed that Malachy returned her affections that summer and when she realized that he did not, and did not want to be part of Kit's life, she was devastated. Daphne had always been an over-achiever and this emotional wound is something she prefers to keep to herself.

Kit's existence is a secret for Malachy's family as well. Even though Zeke and Lucinda knew about Kit early on, they chose to keep him a secret from their other children and their friends. At first, Lucinda tried to help Daphne but when Daphne rejected her, Lucinda stepped back into the shadow of secrecy. After Malachy's death, the secret of Kit became even more painful for Lucinda to bear so that when she is reunited with him many years later, her joy is almost palpable.

Perhaps the author wants the reader to know that while the motives to keep things secret may seem valid at the time, there are always far-reaching repercussions for those who are affected by them.



## Homosexuality

The social taboo surrounding homosexuality in the 1960s resulted in Malachy and Daphne's strained relationship, because Malachy did not feel safe telling Daphne the truth - that he was gay.

Homosexuality just was not a topic that was discussed in the 1960s when Malachy met Daphne at the summer music camp. Daphne was enamored with Malachy from the moment she met him and was pretty aggressive in her pursuit of him. Malachy tried to deflect Daphne's advances but she would not accept his polite protestations. If only Malachy had felt free enough to tell Daphne the real reason he was not interested in her, she might have backed off and they could have been friends. As it was, though, Malachy was forced into secrecy about his homosexuality and the fate of many people was inexorably altered.

Homosexuality challenges the traditional family concept, too, in that both Malachy and Jonathan are gay sons in the Burns family. Positioned in what must have been a very traditional, conservative lifestyle of a long-standing Vermont family, their being gay must have been both surprising and challenging for their family to manage because it was simply so new. Lucinda, especially, adapts well and Malachy even tells her that most gay men come out to their mothers first because they are typically more understanding than their fathers are on the topic.

Homosexuality is a big factor in the extended family, too, with the inclusion of Fenno and Walter. It is particularly poignant that they take the family to the highly gay populated community of Provincetown for their family reunion. The author wants the reader to understand that a family can take many shapes and that these two wonderful men, Fenno and Walter, are compassionate, loving and generous in their desires for only the best for Kit and the others.

## The past

The author wants the reader to know that a person's past never fully goes away and can infringe on his or her present at any time. After all, the past is what has makes a person the way he or she is today and it is not realistic to expect to discard it completely. Clearly, Daphne would have preferred that her ill-fated love for Malachy could remain in the past but their intimacy resulted in a child. That child, naturally, wants to know about his father; Kit was denied that information throughout his childhood because of his mother's rejection of the memories of her past.

Unfortunately for Daphne, her relationship with Malachy that summer was short lived and he became a memory for her, but Malachy will always be Kit's father no matter what and that part of the past cannot be denied.

It is thoughts about the past that drive the book's title too. Fenno and Walter talk to their therapist about Malachy's role in Fenno's past and how that infringes on their present.



The therapist tells them about the song, "What a Wonderful World," and the lyrics that talk about "the bright blessed day and the dark sacred night." In order to have a bright present, the past is necessary. In many instances, the past may seem dark and something to evade, but it is necessary in order to appreciate the brightness of the present.

## **Fatherhood**

The novel stresses that fatherhood is not determined simply by blood, but it is a lifelong commitment to be present in a child's life.

Jasper essentially became Kit's real father when he took Kit in when he was ten-years-old. Many years later when Kit thanks Jasper for what he had done for him, Jasper deflects and tells Kit that being a father really just means being present. That was huge for Kit, though, who had no presence of a father in his life. Just being around a strong male figure who taught him to ski, to cook and how to be a man in the world was pivotal in Kit's emotional development, as his biological father was not present at all in his life.

By the end of the story, after the search for Malachy and the revelation of his extended family, Jasper reaches the conclusion that it was indeed Jasper who was his true father simply because he wanted to be and that made all the difference.



# Styles

## Point of View

And the Dark Sacred Night is written in the third person limited point of view. As this viewpoint uses only pronouns such as "she" and "he," readers are privy only to the characters' actions, but not their private thoughts. For example, the author writes, "She goes upstairs to dress. When she returns, she tells him she's going to the garden center to pick up salt hay, which goes on sale once Halloween scarecrows have served their purpose. Would he deal with the children's sink, which isn't draining properly? Would he transfer the clothes from the washer to the dryer when the cycle is done? Would he please rake" (10)? It would be interesting to know what crossed Kit's wife's mind when she went upstairs - to know what she is really thinking about Kit at that point - but readers can only guess.

As the author also provides flashbacks to illuminate Daphne and Malachy's relationship, she maintains the third person limited point of view.

## Language and Meaning

The language, terminology, and cultural references used in And the Dark Sacred Night is traditional for the twenty-first century. The author expertly transitions tone with the various characters for their roles in the story. Kit is a 40-year-old man struggling with depression and ennui so his speech is more measured and lethargic. The author gives him more hope in his language as his past slowly falls into place though. Jasper, however, is more reflective and contemplative in his language and tone because he is in his seventies and is the sage in the story. The same is true for Lucinda whose tone and language are more thoughtful and polished.

## Structure

And the Dark Sacred Night is structured around Kit's journey to discover who his biological father is. Bits of the other characters' lives are shared and explored, but only is so far as they can be connected back to Kit's journey toward family.

While Kit's search for his biological father is told in chronological order, the author inserts flashbacks to Daphne and Malachy's summer at the music camp to provide the readers with a more complete picture of how Kit's parents met, the situations around Kit's conception, and the aftermath of that summer.



## Quotes

I need a break from this... inertia of yours, and I think you need to move, I mean pry yourself free from a place that's become so familiar you simply can't see it.

-- Sandra (chapter 1 paragraph 2)

**Importance:** Kit's wife, Sandra, is exasperated with Kit's sense of ennui about life ever since he lost his teaching position at a local college. She has tried everything she can think of to bring Kit out of his enertia but nothing has worked. Finally, she recommends that he leave for awhile to go find his biological father in the hopes that that knowledge will ground him and give him some renewed enthusiasm for life.

So yes, there was a second person who made you, along with me. But he was a boy, not a man, and boys can't really be fathers.

-- Daphne (chapter 1 paragraph 1)

**Importance:** Kit longs to know about his biological father but Daphne resists telling him anything of any substance. She lets him know that he was a boy and too young to take responsibility for another person and Kit is forced to live with that explanation.

I was around the place some. That's nine-tenths of it, I think. Being present when needed.

-- Jasper (chapter 2 paragraph 2)

**Importance:** Kit has told Jasper that he thinks he was a good father. Jasper deflects a little bit in embarrassment but is secretly pleased to hear what Kit thinks of him in that context.

I've lived forty years without knowing," says Kit, "and in a way, what the hell difference could it make, right?"

-- Kit (chapter 3 paragraph 3)

**Importance:** Kit wants to know about his biological father and is to the point of being apologetic about it. He hopes that Jasper can tell him something but also wonders if all the angst he goes through is even worth the bother anymore. Plus, he has lived this long without knowing, so would having the information really change anything?

Not at all, no," Jasper says. "No, it was normal, healthy teenage lust. A two-way burst of passion. The old firecracker. Ordinary that way.

-- Jasper (chapter 2 paragraph 10)

**Importance:** Kit wonders if his mother never told him about his biological father because she had been raped and did not want him to think he was a product of something so ugly. Jasper sets Kit's mind at ease, assuring him that there was nothing violent or forced about Kit's conception, just lust between two teenagers who did not know how to handle the situation.



Mrs. Burns, I have news I think you'll be happy to receive. I promise you I'm not a salesman.

-- Jasper (chapter 3 paragraph 3)

**Importance:** Jasper leaves a surprising message for Lucinda on her answering machine. He did not want Kit to call her to announce himself because he is not sure how healthy Lucinda is and does not want to give her a heart attack from the shock.

Give her money if you like, I'm not opposed to that, but please remember that she's the parent, she's the one who was so determined to raise that child. She never considered our son's feelings; remember that too.

-- Zeke (chapter 3 paragraph 2)

**Importance:** Lucinda was so caught up in learning that she had a grandchild that she never really asked Zeke his opinion on it. When he does reveal his thoughts, he is at the opposite end of where Lucinda is on the subject. Zeke would have been fine to pay Daphne to keep quiet or abort the child but Lucinda's beliefs would not allow her to think like that.

Your mother was telling the truth. I think you'll see why she had a hard time telling you more. Mal was gay, and he died from AIDS. Twenty years ago. I can talk about it, so don't think you can't ask me anything you want. I want you to.

-- Lucinda (chapter 3 paragraph 10)

**Importance:** At last, Kit is able to talk to Lucinda, his grandmother, and she is open and compassionate. Kit finds it easy to talk with her, as opposed to his mother who has been secretive and closed about his father. Kit is finally able to exhale and feel that his past is not a bad secret and that he is entitled to know all he wants to about his father and his family.

I want to talk about my homosexuality. Or I need to. I don't mean to shock you, but there's no other way to do this. I'm not going to give you a bunch of wink-wink hints. Dad knows already. I talked to him Tuesday, when he picked me up. Moms are supposed to be easier--most guys start with their moms, or that's what I hear --but not everyone's mom is... religious the way you are. I know you're thinking I'm damned to hell. If that's what you believe, I can't change it. If you want to talk about God, you're wasting your time. Sorry.

-- Malachy (chapter 3 paragraph 6)

**Importance:** Malachy shares his homosexuality with his mother and he is very confident in himself. He's not asking for forgiveness or permission and hopes that his mother will accept him. Malachy knows about Lucinda's strong Catholic beliefs related to homosexuality and hopes that she can get past them, but it is fine if she is not able to do that.

Mal had a son. His name is Christopher--he's called Kit. He's forty-two.

-- Lucinda (chapter 3 paragraph 4)



**Importance:** Lucinda breaks the news to her family about Kit during Thanksgiving dinner. She did not quite know how to approach the topic so she just chose to be direct with the other family members.

Someday, Daphne, I'll be at your wedding, and I'll say, 'See? See how it all turned out the way it was supposed to be?'

-- Malachy (chapter 3 paragraph 7)

**Importance:** At music camp, Daphne keeps pressing Malachy to love her and want to be with her physically but he deflects her. She cannot believe that they were not fated to be together. He tries to let her down easily but she is not accepting of his words.

Have you ever listened to the lyrics, closely? The list of things that prove how wonderful the world really is? I'm taken every time by this: 'the bright blessed day and the dark sacred night.'

-- Therapist (chapter 4 paragraph 1)

**Importance:** Fenno and Walter's therapist talks to them about managing the things in their past and tells them that the past is never really past. He tells them that the past is like night, dark and sacred, and the bright blessed days would be nothing without the nights.