

# **Behind Closed Doors Study Guide**

**Behind Closed Doors by B. A. Paris**

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# Plot Summary

B.A. Paris's *Behind Closed Doors*, the reader is treated to a well-structured plot depicting a marriage that looks perfect on the outside but is actually hiding many secrets. The book is all told from a first-person point-of-view and alternates the present day marriage between Jack and Grace Angel with the past, including the months leading up to the marriage.

Grace Angel finds herself married to handsome lawyer, Jack. In the beginning he charmed her with his good looks and devotion to defending battered women, but mostly because of his devotion to her sister Millie, who has Down's Syndrome. Soon after their wedding Grace finds that Jack is a psychopath.

As a child, Jack lived with a cruel father who kept his wife, Jack's mother, locked in the cellar. Together, father and child tortured her and when Jack was a teenager, he murdered her and blamed it on his father. As an adult, he has searched for a woman he can lock away and torture in a similar way; he has decided that with Down's Syndrome, Grace's sister Millie is a perfect choice. Because their parents have no interest in them, Grace and Millie are easy to lose in the world.

While maintaining a persona as a brilliant and kind lawyer, Jack makes his marriage to Grace seem perfect by forcing her to appear doting and lovely in public with his friends. At home, he keeps Grace locked in a small room and only periodically feeds her. Early in the marriage, she tried to escape, but Jack made her life smaller and smaller. His goal is to keep Grace around until Millie ages out of her school, in a short number of months.

Grace feels like their new neighbor, Esther, may see more into their marriage than others do, but she cannot be sure and she cannot risk saying something to Esther and getting into trouble with Jack.

Eventually, Millie also confesses that she knows Jack is bad. One day she smuggles a handful of sleeping pills to Grace and encourages her to use them on Jack.

Although the pills give Grace some hope that she will be able to escape her husband, it is difficult to plan to overpower him. Luckily, he is involved in a high profile, time-consuming case that, as court draws nearer, starts to wear on his mind. Grace uses it to her advantage, luring him into her room for a nightly chat over a glass of whisky as they discuss the case. Grace feels like she has time, but when Millie comes to their house for a birthday party, Jack is reluctant to let Millie leave, and wants to have her move in sooner. As soon as the court case is over, he promises, they will make it happen. Grace feels the pressure of a deadline.

The day the case is decided, Jack comes home telling Grace to get ready to go to Thailand, and when they return they will get Millie. Grace manages to dump the crushed sleeping pills in Jack's whisky, and then she lures him to the basement. "Millie's Room"



is a horrifying, windowless room that locks from the outside and is painted all red. Additionally, the walls are covered with grotesque paintings of Jack's former clients, battered and bruised. Although Jack intended the space for Millie, Grace lures him into the room and locks him in. She takes the flight to Thailand alone, telling everyone they know that Jack urged her to take their vacation so he could spend a few days finishing up the court case he had just lost. Grace tells Esther that Jack plans to join her in a few days.

Of course, Jack never shows up. In the meantime, Grace calls him often and leaves him messages, allowing everyone in the hotel to see her seeking after him. Eventually the London police get involved and find Jack dead from dehydration in the basement. Grace rushes home. Esther picks her up at the airport and, over coffee, coaches her on what she should say to the police to get away with the murder.



# Present-Past 1-34

## Summary

Present: Grace and Jack are having a dinner party, and she is nervous. Their guests are longtime friends Diane and Adam, and new coworkers Esther and Rufus. Grace feels like everything needs to be perfect. Grace considers Esther, who is the first person that has not made effusive comments about their beautiful home, which Jack decorated by himself as a wedding gift for Grace. It is large, beautiful, secluded, and secure. The guests mention a painting over the fireplace. It looks like fireflies, but it is made up of kiss marks. Jack mentions that Grace painted it for him, and that there are other paintings that are private.

The women invite Grace to lunch; Diane mentions the handful of previous lunch dates that Grace has broken at the last minute. As dinner nears, Grace begins the balance of the appetizers and the main course, nervous that they will not come out in time. She attempts conversation with Esther, who teases out the fact that Grace and Jack are both on their first marriage and Diane mentions that it was love at first sight. They serve the meal, and everything is perfectly timed, although Grace would prefer to cook something less complicated. Diane urges Grace to tell the story of how they met: she was at a music festival in the park with her sister Millie—a 17-year-old with Down's Syndrome. Millie was so moved by the music she got up to dance, and Jack joined her on the dance floor. Jack continues, saying that he had seen Grace the week before and loved her devotion to Millie.

The conversation shifts to Jack's job—a lawyer focused on battered women cases. He has a spotless record. Esther asks about Millie again, and Grace shares that her parents retired to New Zealand the year before so Millie is her responsibility. They discuss how Millie will move in with them when she turns 18; Millie is fond of Jack now but it was a slow process. Grace used to work for Harrod's but left her job for Jack, a fact which confuses Esther. The conversation moves to gardening and Grace is glad; however she wishes her life were more like Diane's and Esther's. Someone mentions a holiday, and Jack urges Grace to show their guests photos of their holiday in Thailand. Grace is reluctant but shows the album of her smiling in beautiful Bangkok. Everyone leaves after that; the evening went perfectly, and Grace reminds Jack that they have to take Millie to lunch the next day.

Past: the novel takes the reader back to when Jack and Grace met. Grace had several boyfriends that eventually left, the closer Millie's 18th birthday came. The story is as they told their friends, complete with the dancing in the park, although they did not tell how lonely and isolated Grace felt prior to meeting Jack. He asks to take them to tea, which leads to a dinner invitation. It is only three months later when Jack asks to meet Grace's parents, and then proposes. Grace's parents had not wanted either her or Millie, and so Grace is Millie's legal guardian. They are happy for Grace to marry Jack. Soon after agreeing to marry him, Jack insists that she quit her job as soon as they



married, and that he would pay for Millie's care. Grace agrees, and they plan their new home in the country.

## Analysis

Behind Closed Doors opens in the "Present" timeline with a dinner party. The author immediately drops clues about Jack's controlling nature with Grace's anxiety regarding dinner. She is obviously very concerned about not only the menu of impressive dishes, but they must come from the oven perfectly cooked and at the right time. The reader immediately can see that Grace is on some sort of stage, and is being tested; Grace muses in her mind that she would love to make something easy that can be thrown together, but that Jack chose the menu, and "anything less than perfection was not an option" (17). There are many ways Jack controls Grace; however the first section only shows the reader a glimpse.

The assembled guests are expected to make several comments about how beautiful the house is. The house is a symbol for the prison in which Jack keeps Grace; a prison that is beautiful to behold, but holds dark secrets, much like Jack himself. Grace is impressed that Esther reserves her praise of the house, although Diane gushes every time she comes in. The author also drops a few hints about the house itself: it is secluded, far from the village. Moreover, it is surrounded by high walls and boasts a high-dollar security system and dark shades on every window. The guests find Jack's concern for his wife's security quaint; but the author is hinting at what is truly going on in the house.

Grace's paintings are prevalent in the story, mentioned often as a symbol for the discrepancy between Jack's outer shell and his true nature. In Present, the guests notice the painting called "Fireflies," which is made up of several kiss-marks. On the surface, it is a painting that shows a great love between two people. However, during the dinner conversation Jack mentions "Grace's other paintings," and that they are "for our eyes only. Right, Grace?" (3) Jack's words cause Grace great distress, which should be a clue to the reader that something about the paintings is not right.

Towards the end of the dinner conversation, Adam mentions the Tomasin case, Jack's most recent law case he is working on. The couples have already discussed Jack's success as a defender of battered women, and a prosecutor of their husbands. There is some major foreshadowing when Rufus asks, "But, generally speaking, aren't cases of abuse usually easy to prove?" (11) Jack shares that the Tomasin case will be a hard one, but that it is very important for his career. The case will be mentioned often during the novel as a signal for Jack's downfall.

In "Past," Grace tells the story of meeting Jack, which involves her young sister joyfully enjoying the music alone. Millie is a wonderful character, and here is a symbol of innocence; in a beautiful, childlike way, she dances to the music without a care in the world. The Past also introduces Grace's parents, which are symbols of her loneliness and isolation, both of which make her susceptible to Jack's imprisonment. It seems



strange this early in the novel for Jack to say Grace's parents are "everything I'd hoped they'd be" (30), but later the reader will see how easy it is for Jack to prey on Grace, who has no support system in her life.

## Discussion Question 1

In "Present," what are some ways the author hints at the true nature of the Angel marriage?

## Discussion Question 2

How is Esther's reserved manner towards the Angels useful?

## Discussion Question 3

In "Past," are there any red flags that Grace should have noticed?

## Vocabulary

animatedly, etiquette, pedantic, irk, pristine, spontaneous, inflicted, penchant, comply, dimension, discreet



# Present-Past 35-54

## Summary

In the Present, it is the morning after the dinner party, and Jack and Grace prepare to take Millie to lunch. Jack watches as Grace dresses, suggesting which dress to wear. She chooses heels and a bag, which he holds while she does her makeup. It is cold and pleasant outside and Grace reminds herself to be patient and enjoy the long day in front of her, which is “hard won” (37). The house is magnificent, and has black gates which Jack controls with a remote. As they drive to London, Jack commends her on timing the previous night’s dinner, and comments that Esther was cool towards her.

They reach Millie’s facility. It has been a month since they have been to visit her. Jack reminds Millie’s caretaker that Grace had a terrible flu which kept her from visiting. Grace reminds Millie to say hello to Jack. He asks where Millie wants to go to lunch; she says the hotel and he smoothly redirects her to two other choices. They eat by the lake. Millie asks if Grace will walk around the lake with her and he insists not only on coming, but on walking right between them. Both women are frustrated. Millie tells Jack, “I like you but I don’t like Jorj Koony (George Clooney)” (40). They return Millie to her facility and promise to return the following week.

Past picks up just after Jack and Grace are settled on getting married. Millie’s caretaker suggests that Millie remain in her school until after her 18th birthday, over 15 months away. As promised, Jack takes Grace away for the weekend after she returns from Argentina. She is eager to have sex with him, but it takes half the weekend before that happens. She is trying to complete the firefly painting for him in time for the wedding. Grace sells her home and Jack is secretly working on the perfect house for them, which Grace will not see until after their honeymoon. A month before the wedding, Grace quits her job, per Jack’s request. After complaining of being bored, Jack gives her a puppy. Jack promises to have a housekeeper come and check on the puppy while they are on their honeymoon. Grace names the puppy Molly.

Finally it is the day of their wedding. Jack takes the puppy to the new house and he and Grace meet her family at the country home where the wedding will be. Jack gives both Grace and Millie each a pearl necklace. Grace’s parents are there to take part in the wedding; they will move to New Zealand after they return from their honeymoon. As they are descending the stairs into the church, Millie slips and falls down the stairs, breaking her leg. Her parents have to take her to the hospital. Jack offers to postpone the wedding, but Grace goes through with it through her tears. By the time the wedding is over, Grace’s mother has called from the hospital to report that Millie is fine apart from a broken leg. Grace promises to stop by the hospital the next morning on their way to the airport. After the wedding reception, she and Jack drive to the hotel to enjoy their wedding night.





## Analysis

Present picks up the day after the dinner party, when Jack and Grace are driving to London to take Millie out to lunch. In this section the author starts to reveal more details about the life Grace lives. Perhaps the most jarring is how Jack watches her dress--not in a sexual way, which is clear by how closely he watches each item of clothing she selects. Moreover, he contradicts her dress choice, making her wear a cream dress instead of blue. The author reveals later why Jack watches Grace dress so closely, but this early in the story the reader sees him directing exactly what she wears.

The house that Jack chose for Grace is a prison, as the author later reveals, and when they leave it to drive to London, she mentions the large iron gates that are remote controlled. Grace watches it as they drive away so she can see it from another's perspective. For Grace, the house is only beautiful on the outside.

On the drive to London, Jack and Grace discuss various things like a normal married couple. Jack mentions the dinner party, and how clever Grace was to time dinner so perfectly. This statement seems like a compliment but is a hint to how Jack sets up impossible tasks for Grace to fail. When he mentions that Esther did not seem to like Grace much, Grace responds that Esther must not appreciate perfection. Esther already stands out from Jack's and Grace's other friends because she seems to reserve the glowing praise of the beautiful couple. As the story goes on, Esther will take up residence in Grace's mind as a savior, the one person who understands Jack that can help her. The reader never really knows if this is true, however. In regards to Esther, Grace is thinking--hoping--that she is too smart: "It's not that she doesn't appreciate perfection, as I first thought, it's more that she's suspicious of it" (38).

The couple also discusses Jack's big case of the moment--the Tomasin case. The parallels to real life are very obvious. Grace mentions that the husband in the case is a wealthy philanthropist that nobody would suspect of wife-beating. The author firmly reminds the reader that power and influence can easily mask a deplorable character. This early in the novel, they appear to be discussing the husband on trial.

In the Past section, Jack and Grace prepare to marry and take Molly into their home in 15 months time. Before their wedding, Jack buys Grace a puppy and leaves it at their mansion during the honeymoon. Grace will later find that Jack has purposefully locked the dog away to die a horrible death of dehydration. This event is foreshadowing what will eventually happen to Jack.

## Discussion Question 1

How does the author use the alternating timelines to pace her revealing of the truth of Jack's and Grace's marriage?



## Discussion Question 2

What facts revealed in Present point the reader to Jack's true nature?

## Discussion Question 3

How is Grace's personality well-suited to Jack's?

## Vocabulary

turmoil, varnish, reiterating, flustered, dismayed, mortified, consigned, persuasion, adamant



# Present-Past 55-87

## Summary

Present picks up again after Jack and Grace leave their lunch with Millie. Grace expects to cancel lunch with Diane, but Jack insists that Grace attend, which surprises her even though he has said the same thing before. However, Friday arrives and as they drive, Grace starts to plot, but is disappointed when she realizes that Jack plans to attend lunch with them. The lunch is mostly a game of Diane's admiring comments and Grace attempting to make the marriage sound truly perfect. The conversation turns to books, and Esther offers to loan Grace the latest popular read and bring it over that afternoon. Jack sidesteps this offer by saying they would just buy it.

More comments follow in which Esther asks pointed questions and Jack volleys them to Grace to see how she will react. Esther asks about Millie moving in with them and Jack announces that Millie's room is red, her favorite color. Then she asks for Grace's phone number, but Grace does not have one. Likewise with her own email address—she shares with Jack. He puts it in his mobile phone, and Esther repeats it more than once, looking significantly at Grace. The ladies leave and Jack goads Grace because when he mentioned Millie's red room, her appetite flagged. Grace assures him that her appetite is fine; Jack says he hopes her fighting spirit has returned, because he has grown bored.

Past resumes as Grace leaves the bath on her wedding night, looking forward to a night of romance with her handsome new husband. However, she is disappointed to find her room empty. For the next hour she searches the hotel for Jack and leaves him several messages. Much later, Jack texts her, telling her to stop being hysterical and that he would see her in the morning. Grace realizes she has nobody to talk to about this, and soon feels ashamed that she acted so hysterically instead of trusting Jack and understanding that he must have had a work problem to deal with. She falls asleep. When Jack finally returns to take Grace to the airport, he is short, cruel, and cold. Grace is angry and bewildered, and Jack promises to explain everything when they get to Thailand. He passes by the hospital, where Millie spent the night with her broken leg, and when Grace reminds him they were meant to stop for a visit, Jack refuses. Grace begins to cry in protest, and Jack stops the car and demands Grace choose: she is welcome to go and see Millie, but she cannot go on the honeymoon if she does. She chooses to stay with Jack.

As they wait to board their plane, Grace convinces herself that the entire event was probably her fault. She commits to hitting reset and enjoying her trip with her husband. She spends most of the flight to Thailand asleep, and is disoriented when they arrive in Bangkok. The hotel Jack booked is not as nice as Grace would have liked. When they are settled, Jack tells her that the "dream" of what a great guy he is is over. That she has sold her soul to him, and that he basically owns both her and Millie. Grace takes her purse to walk out on him, and realizes that Jack has taken her passport and everything



from her purse while she was sleeping. He threatens to stop paying Millie's school tuition if she leaves him. He makes her sit down so he can explain the truth of their marriage, and then confesses that there is no housekeeper at home watching the dog.

## Analysis

The Present section begins to lay out exactly what the Angel marriage looks like: control. The thread of Jack's control over Grace is woven throughout everything going on the Present section; when the author switches to Past, the reader is able to see just how Jack managed to set the marriage up to his liking.

After lunch with Millie, Grace wonders how she will get out of lunch with friends. She and Jack have both referenced the fact that Grace has cancelled on Diane twice already, so Grace obviously does not expect to make the lunch date with Diane and Esther. However, Jack pushes the acquaintance and then insists on joining the women. The scene plays out very well, with Jack and Grace having their own conversation interwoven into the women's lunch conversation. For instance, Jack mentions two things that cause Grace's appetite to falter: Millie's red bedroom and Grace's ability to sew her own clothes. Moreover, Jack encourages Grace to eat dessert and then makes comments that he knows will cause her to lose her desire to eat.

Esther, who is set up as a beacon of hope and a savior for Grace, asks pointed questions about their marriage. Particularly when she realizes that Grace does not have a cell phone or her own email address, her curiosity increases. When she recites her phone number for Jack to enter into his cell phone, she makes a clever show of repeating it over and over again; Grace desperately tries to memorize it, grasping at an opportunity to have access to someone. This is an example of Esther possibly seeing the marriage a little more clearly than Diane does.

At the end of the lunch date, Jack mentions to Grace that he noticed her efforts: at connecting with the women, at eating something grand, and at trying to remember Esther's phone number. Contrary to trying to quash her efforts, however, he welcomes them: "Do I detect a renewal of your fighting spirit? I'm so glad. To tell the truth, I've been getting quite bored" (65). For Grace to entertain even a sliver of hope is what drives her efforts at escape and keeps her energy up; however, there is a fine line between having hope and pushing so hard she gets into trouble with Jack.

Past picks up after the wedding; Jack has abandoned Grace, the first evidence of him manipulating her emotions and preying on her misery. Perhaps the most jarring aspect of that first night is that Grace realizes she has nobody in whom she can confide: she has no close relationships anymore since meeting Jack. Grace's isolation is another prevalent theme in this novel, something Jack uses to his advantage and works hard to maintain. It is in that first moment that Grace begins to see the truth of this situation. She has nobody to turn to, and so she convinces herself that all of Jack's cruel behavior is her own fault. During their flight to Thailand, he has even put her in a state of desperate, tired hunger so that she must depend on him even for that: "He turned back



towards his newspaper and I was glad he couldn't see the tears of pathetic gratitude that had pricked my eyes" (82). By the end of the Past section, Grace and Jack are in the hotel in Bangkok and he has complete control of the situation. It ends on a cliffhanger with a taste of foreshadowing, as Jack tells Grace that he never arranged for anyone to feed her dog.

## **Discussion Question 1**

What are some qualitative differences between Diane and Esther?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Why would Jack wish to go to lunch with the women?

## **Discussion Question 3**

How does Grace conclude that Jack's erratic behavior must be her fault?

## **Vocabulary**

feverishly, deluded, purloins, furrow, interrogation, reprieve, apprehensive



# Present-Past 88-113

## Summary

Present resumes the action after Grace's lunch with Esther and Diane. Grace goes to her room, and Jack locks her in and lowers all of the shutters in the house. A moment later she hears Jack leave, but her stomach is full so it does not make her nervous. She recalls once when Jack was gone for three days without feeding her. Her current room, where she has lived for six months, contains a bed, a barred window, and a bathroom. Sometimes she wishes Jack would die in a car accident, most hopefully before Millie comes to live with them in four months' time. She considers killing him, but has no means; he is meticulous in his captivity. But she worries about what would happen to Millie if she went to jail. She knows that if she reported Jack's behavior, his credibility and impeccable reputation would win over her claims.

There is no clock so she is never sure when he returns home, but she has grown accustomed to the sounds Jack makes when he returns. He may or may not bring her a meal; he denies her the comfort of routine by making meals and their regularity unpredictable. Jack appears at the door and mentions they need to go see Millie over the weekend because her school summoned them via email. Although Grace does not know why the school did so, she feels nervous. Her window of opportunity grows shorter each day, and there is nobody to help her and Millie. She knows that Jack encouraged her parents to move all those months ago, effectively removing the only people in her corner.

Past brings the reader back to the moment in Bangkok when Grace's nightmare truly begins. Jack has just told her that he left her dog unattended in their house for two weeks. Grace is confused, but Jack goes on to tell her of his boyhood, when his father kept his mother locked in the basement and together the two of them tortured her and grew excited by her fear. When Jack was a teen he killed his mother and blamed it on his father, who went to prison. Since then he has been looking for someone of his own—to lock away and torture and drink in her fear. Not only is Grace his prize, but Millie: two people with nobody to care for them. As he talks Grace realizes he has her trapped: they are married, so they are both Millie's legal guardians. Grace has no money of her own. She has no means to get home from Thailand. She quit her job, ditched her friends, sold her house and gave all of the money to Jack. He had removed all of her documents from their luggage, as well as anything that would help her fight him off.

Jack leaves the hotel room to let her think about what he has just revealed. For several minutes Grace thinks she is locked in, but suddenly she finds the door open and goes to the lobby. She asks the staff for a taxi to the British Embassy because she has lost her passport. The hotel staff is skeptical; after a moment, Jack shows up and makes up a lie about Grace forgetting to take medication, implying she is mentally imbalanced. The staff completely believes Jack and only makes a show of placating Grace. They return



to their room and Jack threatens to force-feed her enough pills to kill her. He goes on to say that every time she tries to escape, he will make Millie suffer.

## Analysis

In Present, the author finally lays out what appears to be most of her cards. It is clear that Jack has Grace in captivity, and that he preys on her fear and isolation to keep her in control. In this chapter, when the reader sees the reality of Grace's existence, that the theme of hope becomes so prevalent. Grace says, "I spend my days suspended in time, a passive lump of humanity. At least, that is what Jack sees. In reality, I am biding my time, waiting for a tiny window of opportunity to open, as it surely will—because if I don't believe that it will, how could I carry on?" (89). She admits that she has to at least pretend, even if it is not real, that there will be an opportunity to make plans to escape, or she will cease to function. Grace also reminds the reader how well Jack chose her-- he saw her devotion to Millie and knew he could use it as leverage. Moreover, once he heard how isolated she was from her parents he was able to capitalize on that and expand on their strained relationship; Grace even insinuates that Jack convinced her parents into moving to New Zealand earlier than planned. At present, it does appear that Jack holds all of the cards: Grace is trapped in her own home and Jack uses Millie as a means of control over Grace's behavior.

In Past, the author takes the reader back to the day Grace learned the truth about her husband. Jack, who is not actually named Jack but assumed that name with the clever last name "Angel" as some sort of strange joke, has a horrible past. The reader learns that Jack is not an Angel, but is a psychopath who gets excited by fear and actually murdered his own mother. Jack Angel is only one of the author's clever use of names in this novel. Grace, Esther, and Millie also have names with significant meanings. The second day of Grace's marriage is when she learns how well Jack has plotted this life for her, and the hotel staff in Bangkok is swayed by Jack's power and influence. When Grace tries to get help from them, they believe Jack instead. Only in future chapters does the reader learn how often Jack has been to Bangkok and why.

## Discussion Question 1

In what ways does the author reveal how well Jack has planned for Grace's captivity?

## Discussion Question 2

Expand on Grace's statement, "fear is the best deterrent of all" (94).

## Discussion Question 3

Is it realistic that the hotel staff in Bangkok would so easily believe Jack's word over Grace? Why or why not?



## Vocabulary

attune, bearable, distress, charade, retrospect, deigns, adept, bizarre, semblance, renege, emigrate





# Present-Past 114-136

## Summary

Present opens on Sunday as Grace and Jack are headed to Millie's school. At the school, Millie's caretaker informs them that Millie is having trouble sleeping, and that they are giving her sleeping pills to help. She asks if Millie has a reason to be anxious; Grace obviously says no. They muse on whether Millie should see Jack's and Grace's home soon so that she is not nervous about moving. Grace invites the caretaker to come visit anytime. At the restaurant, Millie asks about Molly the dog and Jack tells her that Molly ran away. It is a new restaurant; Millie is always asking about the one in the hotel, and Jack always tells her no. After lunch Millie asks to use the restroom, and Jack insists that they all go together so he can watch Grace while she waits for Millie. Grace is more despairing than ever; if not for Millie, she would gladly die to escape her life with Jack. But she has to live for Millie's sake.

Past resumes their second morning in Thailand. Having failed at an escape attempt, Grace decides she should be as compliant as possible so she can at least make it back to England. Jack forces her to pretend to be an adoring wife, and she finds it hard because he is so able to turn on the charm. In the lobby, Grace apologizes to the hotel staff for her erratic behavior, pleading that she failed to take her medication. He takes her to a fancy hotel, where he takes staged photos of her at the entrance; afterwards they return to their hotel and he locks her on the balcony for four hours.

This routine is repeated for the next week. Jack and Grace make an appearance in the lobby for breakfast; they occasionally something tourist-like enough for him to take a few photos, and then he locks her on the balcony for four hours in the afternoon. It is clear after the second day that Jack is a regular visitor to the hotel. At times he taunts her, almost daring her to run from whatever fancy restaurant they're in to report on how terrible Jack is. Midway through their second week, Jack starts leaving her in the room in the evening for short periods of time. Although he cannot lock her in the hotel room itself, he warns her sternly not to try to escape. Grace starts paying attention to the surrounding hotel guests in hopes that she can get someone to help her. One night she tries; he is gone for long enough that she leaves the room and bangs on door next to hers. However, it is Jack next door; he waited there each night to bait her into trying to escape. He punishes her by saying she cannot see Millie for the first few weeks after she returns to England.

When it is time to return home, Grace is nearly frantic with fear that Jack has something even worse planned for their home. Jack drugs her on the flight home so that she cannot call out in the airport. The house is beautiful, exactly the one they had planned while they were engaged. The first thing Jack asks is if Grace would like to see her dog, Molly. He suggests she take some trash bags with her.



## Analysis

"Present" gives the reader a broader introduction to Millie. One of Jack's failings in this novel is assuming that everybody else around him is not as smart as he is. For his coworkers and local friends, this may be acceptable, but it is a crucial mistake when it comes to Grace and especially Millie, who turns out to have a better eye on Jack than anyone else. The author lays a few clues in this regard in this section, during which Jack, Grace, and Millie go to lunch again. Millie is always trying to get Jack to take them to lunch at "the hotel," because it has a bathroom that she and Grace can visit together. Jack works hard to visit restaurants with single-stall bathrooms so that Grace and Millie have no reason to visit at the same time. The fact that Millie pushes for the hotel restaurant indicates that she would like to be alone with her sister. Moreover, Millie's caretaker says she is having trouble sleeping, and that Millie is taking pills nightly to aid in this. It seems innocent at this point; surely Millie would be anxious to move away from her facility and in with Grace and Jack. However, Millie's behavior is a clue that her mind is working better than others.

In "Past" the reader gets a glimpse into how quickly Grace's mental state deteriorates, in the form of her hope depleting with each day. The more hope she carries that she can one day escape Jack's clutches, the better able she is to think clearly and keep her wits about her. In Thailand she witnesses how easily he can switch from the doting husband to the cold-hearted psychopath, and she catches herself forgetting: "The worst thing about these small forays into normality was the hope they gave me, because in public Jack reverted to the man I had fallen in love with" (126). These moments are doubly damaging, because not only does she remember cruelly that she has married a monster; she also sees how easily she was fooled, and still can be fooled at his hand. "If he was able to fool me, if he was able, even for a few seconds, to make me forget what I knew about him, how would I ever be able to convince people that he was a wolf in sheep's clothing?" (122). Even more, Jack's manner is so affable in public, Grace has difficulty envisioning a situation in which someone would believe her over him. Thailand is the beginning of Jack's efforts not only to entrap Grace, but to slowly whittle away at her resolve while keeping their life "interesting" for his base needs.

Although the reader has already witnessed in the Present timeline how Grace spends her days, Jack begins this practice on their honeymoon by locking Grace on the balcony of their hotel for four hours at a time. The problem of being locked out of her room is compounded by how lonely it is to feel helpless, and really, how helpless it feels to be lonely. This strange marriage of emotions is something Jack appears to understand well, because he insists on Grace's isolation throughout the entire novel.

## Discussion Question 1

Are there any indications that Millie is more aware than she seems of the nature of Jack's and Grace's marriage?



## Discussion Question 2

Why does Grace assume that Jack is a regular visitor to the hotel?

## Discussion Question 3

How is Grace's mental state affected during the honeymoon?

## Vocabulary

plummet, psychopath, misgivings, excruciating, solicitously, foray, succumb, acquiescence, valiant



# Present-Past 137-167

## Summary

It is Sunday again in the Present timeline, but Grace is fairly certain she will not be going to see Millie since they have been two weeks in a row. Still, she showers just in case, drying her hair with a small hand towel. When they first arrived at the house, Grace had several luxuries, all of which Jack removed each time she tried to escape. Jack has systematically removed everything in the house that Grace may enjoy. She reflects on the lunch with Diane and Esther, and how Jack threw random bits of conversation around in hopes that Grace would mess up so he could punish her. She is getting good at thinking on her feet.

Esther comes to the house. Grace has no friends but she feels like Esther may be suspicious of their marriage. In the past year Jack has made sure Grace has lost all of her friends and degraded her relationship with her parents; he stands over her and dictates letters and emails to her. A while after Esther leaves, Jack comes to Grace's room and gives her the book Esther had suggested. She had invited them to dinner and hoped Grace would read the book before then, so Jack wants her to read it. After a few pages Grace notices that some random assortment of words are shaded over—they spell out 'do you need help?' This is both exciting and depressing. Jack has the police fooled and Grace has no idea how to respond to Esther. She knows that Jack probably went through the book, and only after he insists again that she read it quickly does she realize that he probably did the shading himself.

Past picks up the action just after Jack and Grace return from their honeymoon; Jack has just suggested Grace go to "visit" Molly with the suggestion that she take a garbage bag with her. He has already told her he did not hire a housekeeper to care for the dog in their absence. Molly is dead from dehydration; Jack locked her in the basement vestibule. Jack expands on his plan, to replace Grace with Millie, so that he can terrify her because he physically preys on fear. He sends Grace outside to bury the dog in the backyard. She attacks him and he easily overpowers her, promising she will not see Millie anytime soon. He sends her to shower and she is comforted by the nice accommodations. Jack takes her all over the house and Grace is at odds with her feelings: how nice the house is, how pleasant it would be to have Millie there, but how terrible Jack is and how he plans to hurt them. She passes out. When she wakes she is comfortable and well-rested, but Jack has locked her in the bedroom. He tells her it is for her own good, but comes in to feed her. With the door ajar, she rushes out of the room and down the stairs only to find the ground floor shrouded in darkness. Jack catches her easily and uses a remote control to raise the steel shutters installed on every window. He goads her that the wheels are already in motion and that Millie is moving in with them.

Grace decides to fake an illness so Jack will take her to the doctor. After many days of feigned pains, Jack takes her to the doctor and even leaves her alone during the exam.



However, when Grace tries to tell the doctor all about Jack's treatment, the doctor asks how she has been feeling with her depression, especially since her suicide attempt. She is even more discouraged that she cannot talk to anyone. Her parents eventually come to visit just before their move to New Zealand; Jack makes sure they do not suspect anything. After they move he finally takes Grace to see Millie; it has been five weeks since their return from Thailand. Millie is irascible. After lunch at the hotel, Millie pitches a fit until Grace will take her to the bathroom—which is down a long hall where Jack cannot follow. Millie says Jack is a bad man and he pushed her down the stairs at the wedding. Grace frantically tells her how important it is not to tell anybody the truth about Jack. The sisters make up a code in which Jack is George Clooney, but Millie must pretend to like Jack.

## Analysis

The Present timeline develops with the hint that Esther may be onto Grace and Jack. Grace both wants it to be true, but is afraid that it is true. Esther stands out among Grace's friends as more incisive and "seeing," and while it gives Grace strength and hope to think that someone is on her side, it is also fearful to consider what to do with that information. Esther has already shown initiative by asking more telling questions and by actually driving to the house to drop the book off despite Jack's protests. Grace spends hours pondering the possibility that Esther sent her a message in the book, and it lights her from within, giving her hope and the mental ability to think again about escape. It is only at the end of the chapter does the author reveal the probability that Jack marked up the book instead of Esther. The fact that Grace recognized this is telling because she is one step ahead of him, a position she has not yet been in. Although it is a small thing, the entire situation with pivot in Grace's favor as she wiggles into the figurative space in which she has the upper hand on Jack's plans.

Past takes the reader back to the early days after the honeymoon. The first event is Grace finding that Jack has allowed her puppy Molly to die of dehydration. Although he hinted as much in Thailand, Grace did not really consider the implications of his statement. Molly's death has a surprising effect on her, perhaps because she sees a much broader version of Jack's psychotic nature--that he would allow a puppy to die a painful death just to send Grace into a state of surprised terror. The fact that Molly is locked in the basement and specifically dies from dehydration is also foreshadowing, because Grace will eventually allow Jack to die in the same way. Indeed, the author drops a heavy hint when Grace says, "When I knelt down beside her and found her body cold and rigid, I thought about the terrible death she must have endured. It was then that I didn't only vow to kill Jack, but to make him suffer as he had made Molly suffer" (146).

The author reminds the reader of the painting Grace made for Jack, now prominently displayed in the living area. It is a mockery, for Grace made it when she felt she was in a loving relationship with a wonderful man and now she is living in complete horror. Yet Jack hangs the painting up as a reminder of how easily Grace was duped by his charm



and good looks. She will always regret that painting, and his displaying it in their home and pointing it out to their friends.

Still in the Past timeline, Grace returns to Millie for the first time since her marriage. Millie represents a kind of childlike innocence that Grace loses forever after marrying Jack; however, she is also the main example in the author's emphasis on how people hold hidden value; specifically, on the surface Jack is a valued member of society, while Millie is forgettable. Jack himself states that Grace and Millie are perfect for his purposes because nobody would ever notice them missing. However, Millie shows more wit and cleverness than anyone in the entire novel, and the first glimpse of this comes in the first meal they all share after the honeymoon. Grace is able to both affirm Millie's suspicions about Jack and urge her to keep them a secret; together, the two overlooked sisters will manage to best a psychotic killer, mainly because he underestimated them both.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Discuss how Millie is written both with childlike innocence and shrewdness that sees more clearly than everyone in Grace's life.

## **Discussion Question 2**

Why does Molly's death cause Grace more stress and fear than the two weeks spent with Jack in Thailand?

## **Discussion Question 3**

How does the thought that Esther reached out to her, whether or not it is true, affect Grace's outlook on her situation?

## **Vocabulary**

stultifying, monotony, ingenuity, feign, woozy, forfeit, subservient, docile, adamant



# Present-Past 168-185

## Summary

The Present timeline picks up a few days after Esther leaves the book for Grace. It is Saturday night and they are to have dinner with Esther and her husband Rufus. The next day they must go to see Millie, because it has been three weeks and Millie's caretaker called to ask where they have been. Grace is especially concerned that she will say something during dinner that will get her into trouble with Jack. When she dresses for the evening, she purposefully chooses a dress she does not want to wear, knowing that Jack will make her take it off. She ends up wearing the dress she wanted. The small amount of confidence shows in her mannerisms, and she ends up talking more freely than usual. Jack makes a few pointed comments about Millie moving in with them to rein Grace in, one of them about her beautiful red room. Grace realizes how much time has passed in her growing complacent, and that she only has 75 days until Millie will move in with them.

Diane announces that she is pregnant and Grace starts to cry, thinking about how her life should be with Jack. It causes a huge scene, one Jack covers up by saying Grace recently lost a baby. His lie makes for an even bigger scene, and Grace is grim, knowing that Jack will punish her later. When they return home, Grace begs Jack not to punish her, but Jack says that he is growing impatient to have his own person to torture in his house. Grace suggests they go back to Thailand so he can get his fix, so to speak; Jack says the Tomasin case is too demanding to allow a trip. He gives Grace a choice for her punishment: skip their lunch with Millie the next day, or spend the night in the basement.

Past resumes after Grace's lunch with Millie. Grace figured Jack did not realize how well Millie would have understood what he was up to. She feels the need to redouble her efforts to escape. Since the doctor did not work, she tried a policeman. However, Jack was such good friends with the police that they did not believe her. Jack punishes her by keeping her away from Millie, but then he tells her that he will let her paint again. Grace is momentarily pleased, but then Jack forces her to paint portraits from the women he defended in court, so her paintings are of bruised and battered women. He threatens her with putting Millie in an asylum.

Grace does the portraits but still tries to devise ways to escape, and Jack is always a step ahead of her. Each attempt at escape lands her in a more restrictive situation, the last one being the box room in which the reader finds her in the Present timeline.

## Analysis

In the Present timeline, Grace gambles and loses with her confidence. The biggest blow from the scene at Esther's house is that Grace truly begins to mourn the loss of a real





life and marriage. Whenever Jack acts like the loving husband, she forgets for a moment that he is actually a terrible person, and the reality, when it comes, is that much more horrible. One of the ways Jack tortures Grace in public is by mentioning "Millie's red room." Although at this point in the novel the reader does not know what the red room contains, the reader should know that Millie's favorite color is yellow, not red. Moreover, Jack's tendency to bring it up just reminds Grace what is in store for both of them.

The reason Grace feels somewhat normal as she goes to Esther's house is because she experienced a small victory over Jack in her clothing. Knowing that Jack likes to make her think she is about to get what she wants only to take it away, Grace purposefully chooses a dress she does not like so that Jack will suggest a different one. Thus, Grace is able to wear a red dress to Esther's and Grace feels like she has won.

When Grace suggests Jack go to Thailand to "get a fix" of sorts, he says he cannot because the Tomasin case is keeping him busy. For a man as cold and calculating as Jack, the Tomasin case unravels his control bit by bit, allowing Grace to get the best of him in the end. However, the reader does not know that yet; only that Jack is busy at work with a difficult law case about a battered woman and a man that certainly cannot be guilty--a situation similar to Jack's and Grace's.

Finally, Grace specifically states one of the author's main points--that Jack loses in the end because he underestimates Millie: "It was easy to underestimate Millie, and presume that the way she spoke was a reflection of the way her mind worked, but she was a lot cleverer than people gave her credit for" (178). Indeed, Millie is clever enough to hatch a plan to save her and her sister, and Jack is never the wiser. He thinks because she is disabled that he can control her, and he is wrong. Grace thinks that Jack assumed Millie did not know he pushed her on purpose, that it was an accident. However, Millie was suspicious of Jack from early on.

## Discussion Question 1

Discuss Grace's underlying struggle with the loss of a regular life and marriage. Beyond merely living with a madman, she has been robbed of a normal marriage. How does this affect her?

## Discussion Question 2

What effect do Jack's portraits have on Grace?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Grace's ability to wear what she wants give her confidence?





## Vocabulary

misconstrue, sadistic, pensive, dilute, collective, commiserating, flailing, solidarity, stipulation, inanely

# Present-Past 186-195

## Summary

Present picks up the day after Grace's accidental meltdown at Esther's house. She wakes in the basement with Jack urging her to hurry so they can make it to see Millie. Janice the caretaker reports that Millie is sleeping better and she is doing very well. Janice urges Jack and Grace to take Millie to the hotel for lunch so she can report about the facility at school the next day, and so the women are able to talk privately for just a moment in the bathroom. Millie gives Grace a handful of sleeping pills, indicating specifically for her to use them to kill "Jorj Koony."

In the Past timeline, a month has gone by and Jack and Grace visit Thailand again for Jack to get his fix doing whatever money can buy there that is illegal in England. When they return Grace bashes him over the head with a bottle of wine just before Diane and Adam are set to visit. She did not hit him hard enough, and he was able to restrain her while calling to cancel on their guests. Then he told her that he was going to "show her Millie's room." Grace is desolate about seeing Millie's beautiful yellow room, but finds he ushers her to the basement instead. There is a hidden steel door behind a storage shelf. It is painted blood red, floor and ceiling, and is filled with the portraits Jack forced Grace to paint of his clients. He tells her it will be Millie's room and locks her inside. She panics but eventually forces herself to calm down. There is no door handle or anything from the inside.

## Analysis

The two Present-Past chapters in this section are short, but the author lays the groundwork for what will be at stake for the remainder of the novel.

In the Present timeline, the author again shows Millie's value when she single-handedly contrives to get Grace alone in the hotel bathroom. After several weeks of suffering Jack's rebuff when innocently asking to eat at the hotel, Millie pulls in Janice and her teacher to support her choice. Again, Jack does not think for a moment that Millie is up to something, because he does not believe her capable of scamming against him. However, Millie not only found a way to get Grace alone, but brings the biggest element of the novel into play: the sleeping pills that she has pretended she needed for weeks on end. That the hope of escape would come from Millie, both the most unexpected quarter and the Jack's most sought-after prize, is an awesome ironic twist. Moreover, the sleeping pills are introduced as Grace's symbol for possible escape. For the remainder of the novel they are the most important thing in her world, and they start her mind churning again towards escape and freedom.

In the Past timeline, Jack introduces Grace to Millie's bedroom. It is a huge blow to Grace's state of mind, because there is a beautiful yellow bedroom in the house. "As I



lay there, I tried not to consider the possibility that he would never let me out of the hell he had created for Millie, and when I remembered how I had truly believed, on the strength of a beautiful yellow bedroom, that somewhere deep inside him lay a tiny shred of decency, I wept at my stupidity" (195). However, the basement is what Jack truly intends for Millie, with its six walls painted blood red, its door which locks from the outside, and the portraits of battered women on the walls. Grace actually suffers a panic attack the first time Jack locks her inside, and he is thrilled and hopeful that Millie will suffer even more when her time comes. Another ironic twist here is that Jack's continual crowing about "Millie's red room" in public will be his undoing.

## Discussion Question 1

Is Grace wise to try to escape from Jack? What changes between the early part of their marriage, when she tried often, and the Present timeline, when Grace realizes it has been six months before she has tried to escape?

## Discussion Question 2

Is it realistic that Millie would have been able to fool her medical caretakers and hide away a number of sleeping pills?

## Discussion Question 3

What are some of Jack's fatal flaws?

## Vocabulary

anchor, internal, adamant, incandescent



# Present-Past-Present 196-232

## Summary

Present picks up right after Millie suggests “killing Jorj Koony” with the sleeping pills. Grace is shocked and at first she protests, but Millie somehow understands the danger to herself particularly and urges her sister to do it before she is supposed to move in with them. Although she is scared of Jack finding out, Grace stuffs the wadded tissue containing the pills into her shoe. Millie thinks she flushed them, and Grace begs Millie to trust her.

Because Millie’s spirits are dampened when they return to Jack, he is suspicious and asks Millie why. Grace intervenes and says Millie is frustrated that she cannot see their house. Jack says he cannot understand why not, and decides they can find a way. By the time they take Millie back to school, Jack announces that the following weekend they will have Millie over to the house. Grace quickly invites Janice to join her, and then suggests they put the visit off one week and make it a birthday party for Millie, who will be 18. On the drive home, Jack insinuates that Grace has just made it worse on herself, and she confesses that she feels hopeless to stop him, in hopes that he will feel he has overpowered her. When they return home, Esther calls; Jack allows Grace to speak to her to keep up their charade, and Grace finds herself inviting Esther to Millie’s birthday party. To Jack, she makes the excuse that it was Esther’s idea and that she has been trained to be too perfect to refuse. After a brief argument, Grace bitterly tells Jack to just cancel the party. He refuses, because he believes it is what Grace actually wants. When undressing, she manages to slide the pills into the waistband of her pajama pants, and eventually hides them under her mattress.

Past finds Grace the morning after her first night in the basement, or “Millie’s room.” Jack begins to make Grace’s life a game: setting up near impossible tasks in hope that she will fail so he can punish her in the basement. The dinner parties are an example of this. Jack chooses complicated menus and expects them to be perfectly cooked and perfectly times. He would lock her in the room whenever she “failed” in the slightest and tell her to imagine Millie in there, until Grace would shake with fear and Jack with excitement.

In the Present timeline, it is the day of Millie’s birthday party. Jack is excited, and Grace is reserved. Millie and Janice come for an early lunch and Jack gives them a tour of the house. He shows Millie the yellow bedroom and she loves it. It is a very pleasant lunch, and another reminder to Grace how life could be if Jack was not who he is. The other guests arrive. When Millie opens her gifts Jack promises Millie “some wonderful portraits” from Grace. Grace is visibly shaken, and Esther notices. Esther’s present to Millie is a pretty sequined box, red to match the room Jack has told them about, but Millie argues that her room is yellow. Everyone agrees that Jack told them Millie’s bedroom was red more than once; Esther is particularly insistent and watches Grace and Jack carefully. When she mentions how ill Grace is looking, Jack announces that he



is taking her to Thailand. Grace, afraid that the trip will interfere with her plans to drug Jack, asks if his court schedule will allow a trip. The mention of the Tomasin case brings comments from the other men, who ask if the husband is not innocent this time. Diana specifically says the husband seems too perfect, to which Grace responds that those are the worst kinds. The remainder of the party is a feint between Jack and Grace, in which Grace tries to fill Millie's social calendar while people are assembled, only to have Jack announce that he is thinking of taking them both to New Zealand.

## Analysis

The Present timeline moves towards the climax as the Past timeline moves closer to the Present. Grace has sleeping pills in hand, but she cannot allow Millie to think that she kept them in case Millie tells someone. She fakes flushing them, and regrets that she cannot praise her sister for her ingenuity and bravery. Moreover, Grace confirms that the pills are literally a lifeline for her: "But despite what I've just told Millie, I know I'll never be able to flush them down the toilet because they represent the first glimmer of hope I've had in a long time" (196). Indeed, Grace's mind works more quickly and more sharply than it has for months. She is able to both act lethargic and depressed, and knowing how Jack's own mind works, she outsmarts him once more in small ways. She begs him to cancel Millie's birthday party because "it's no use" and Jack insists they have it so Grace will suffer. In this way, Jack is too trusting of his own intellect and too little of Grace's. After all, for all of Jack's intelligence, he is easy to read where she is concerned, and she is able to assume that he will make the decision that makes her suffer more.

Millie's birthday party is the beginning of the real climax in several ways. Jack and Grace both find themselves in a private battle in public space, as she tries to enlist their friends to make plans with Millie. Meanwhile Jack lays the groundwork for the sisters' sudden move to New Zealand, so that the neighborhood will not be surprised when the women disappear. It is stressful for Grace, and Esther notices. To this point, the reader has not been certain how much Esther suspects, but after Millie's party it seems certain that Esther has some idea that Jack's and Grace's marriage is hiding something terrible.

Perhaps Jack's biggest gaffe is how often he has mentioned Millie's red bedroom in public. Of course he did so to make Grace uncomfortable and remind her of her place, but when Esther picks up on the hint and gives Millie a red box to match her room, the discrepancy is out in the open. Millie proclaims that of course her room is yellow, as is her favorite color. Jack is caught, which makes Esther even more suspicious.

Jack's proposed trip to Thailand in a month's time, and the finish of the Tomasin case, both of which are supposed to dovetail with Millie's move-in date, will be the climax of the novel. Jack wants one more trip before Millie moves in. Grace does not want to go to Thailand because she cannot make plans to drug Jack if they are away, and the plans hinge on the Tomasin case. The assembled crowd make several foreshadowing comments, the most telling of which is when Diane says the husband does not look like a violent man; to which Grace responds, "Jack says they are the worst kind" (228).



Again, this conversation catches Esther's attention and lets the reader know that the Tomasin case is important.

## **Discussion Question 1**

How do Grace's plans force her to take risks? Why is she now willing to take such risks?

## **Discussion Question 2**

What are some ways in which Jack has, as Grace says, "overplayed his hand?" (229).

## **Discussion Question 3**

How is Jack able to recover from Grace's attempts to keep Millie in the social spotlight?

## **Vocabulary**

indignantly, flourish, tangible, crestfallen, retort, lethargy, inquisitive, incoherent, ample, fabrication



# Past-Present 233-244

## Summary

The Past timeline now takes place in the two weeks preceding Millie's birthday party. Grace plans on giving the pills to Jack, but has to make some decisions about how many to give him, and how to give them to him. She begins by not eating and acting very depressed when he comes to see her. After several days, when Jack asks why she is not eating, Grace makes up something about finally realizing how hopeless her situation is. As if to seal her fate, she asks him if she can have a glass of whisky because it reminds her of her father. He does, and also urges her to eat because she cannot help him with Millie if she is sick. She lays on the pity, asking Jack to see things from her perspective, and eventually convinces Jack to bring her a whisky every night with dinner to help keep up her strength. Because he wants her to stay healthy, he agrees. By the time Millie's party rolls around, the nightly whisky is a ritual that Grace needs to keep.

The Present timeline is now a month down the line, at the proposed trip to Thailand at the close of the Tomasin case. Grace stands in front of her house, a suitcase at her feet. Esther pulls into the driveway and urges her to hurry so she does not miss her flight. Grace turns and waves at the house before sliding into the car. Grace mentions to Esther that she wishes Jack was coming; she feels bad that he lost his first case. The Tomasin case is over, Jack has lost, and Grace is on her way to Thailand alone; she speaks at length to Esther about how wonderful it would be if Jack was along on the trip. They make plans for Esther to see Millie while she is gone, and then Esther drops Grace at the airport to fly to Thailand.

## Analysis

The Past has nearly merged with the Present as the novel moves towards the climax. The Past timeline is now just before Millie's birthday party, and tells how Grace enacts her plan to poison Jack with the sleeping pills. Jack finds himself in a bind; his flaw has ever been underestimating Grace and Millie and being too excited by the success of his own plans. All it takes is for Grace to feign despondency and surrender, and Jack feels he has already easily won. However, both women are more valuable than he suspects. He realizes that if Grace is sick, or dying, or appears to be so, than he cannot actually convince Janice to give Millie into his care; thus, he needs Grace to be viable and appear happy and helpful. When she begins to starve herself, it puts him in a hard situation, and Grace wins. Even in her isolated state, she manages to get Jack to do something on her terms.

Present picks up a few weeks after Millie's birthday party, the date of the Thailand trip Jack announced at the party itself. The writing in this short section is eerie, as the reader sees Grace without Jack for the first time. After blowing a kiss to the house, she



climbs into the car with Esther, who is driving her to the airport. The reader is confused by this point, but Grace continues a steady chatter of how much she will miss him and how awful it is since Jack lost the Tomasin case. The comments about the case have been leading to this: that the husband was innocent and the wife was lying. Of course, this case is the opposite of Jack and Grace Angel, but the idea of the public being swayed by a person's appearance at goodness is a direct parallel. The reader does not see how Jack is handling the loss; only Grace is there to tell Esther that he is taking it hard, and has to work all weekend to catch up; which is why she is going to Thailand alone. As a narrator, Grace does not tell of what has occurred to allow this unprecedented event; the past is the past, and the present has allowed Grace to be alone. However, as a short section of writing it presents a very well-drawn cliffhanger.

## Discussion Question 1

Discuss how Grace manages to talk Jack into bringing her a whisky. Why does he comply with her request?

## Discussion Question 2

What events have come together to allow for Grace to gain the upper hand against Jack?

## Discussion Question 3

Is it unusual that Esther would chat so easily with Grace alone, when their entire friendship has occurred under Jack's watchful eye?

## Vocabulary

foundations, despondent, stave, octave, culprit,





# Past-Present 245-275

## Summary

Past resumed action at the end of Millie's birthday party, when everyone has left. Grace asks Jack if his grand plan is to tell everyone the sisters have moved to New Zealand, and Jack confirms his plans. He goes on to say that it was so hard to let Millie leave that he will insist she move in with them after the trip to Thailand. Grace decides she must kill Jack as soon as possible; certainly before leaving for Thailand. Grace acts a little bit dramatic about how hard her life is, and asks if Jack will share a whisky with her. He complies, and they talk about the Tomasin case over a whisky. The husband looks good, but Jack reminds her that his good appearance does not make him a good man.

After he leaves, Grace takes four sleeping pills and crushes them with her foot before mixing them with some water. She takes them to gauge how they will affect Jack, and decides that the 16 pills she has left will be enough to knock him out but not kill him. She must decide how to deal with him after he is asleep. For weeks Grace slowly convinces Jack to bring up two whiskies and stay with her for a few minutes before leaving, because she is lonely. As the Tomasin case begins, Jack lingers in the evenings and discusses the case with her every night. When the jury goes out, Jack tells her to prepare to leave for Thailand the next day, and so Grace knows she is out of time. Jack admits that the wife in the case lied to him, and that he would probably lose the case the next day. As Grace goes to sleep that night she considers Molly, and the basement room, and knows what to do.

Present finds Grace flying to Thailand alone, finally away from Esther and the need to act like the concerned wife. She is not ready to relax yet, and fears Jack will appear around every corner. The hotel manager is surprised to see her alone, but Grace assures him that Jack will follow her on Wednesday after his work is done. The manager knows from the news that Jack lost the Tomasin case. Once she is in her room, Grace calls Jack's office and leaves a message, stating that she has arrived safely. Next, she calls Millie to say hello. The next morning she calls Jack and leaves him another voicemail. After spending the day by the pool, she leaves a similar message on Jack's cell phone, asking why he has not called her back. The next several days pass in the same manner: Grace is seen around the hotel but also keeping to herself, and leaves several messages per day on Jack's voicemail and cell phone. On Tuesday, when Jack would be preparing to leave for Thailand, Grace phones Adam, who works in the office. She asks if Adam has seen or heard from Jack. Adam is immediately concerned; they all thought Jack went to Thailand with Grace. The next morning, Grace waits in the hotel lobby for Jack to arrive. When he does not, she phones him again from the hotel lobby, frantic. The next day Grace phones the Embassy and finds that he did not board the flight in London at all. Another day passes with Grace swapping messages with Adam and other people from home, until finally the British Embassy comes to her hotel to tell her that Jack has been found dead in their home. The police are convinced that Jack killed himself.



## Analysis

The Past timeline sees Grace preparing to murder Jack. The requirement to do so has grown more urgent as the trip to Thailand grows nearer. The Tomasin case is moreover a vehicle not only to introduce some broad irony to the story; it also provides a means for Grace to find a weak place in Jack's armor. For all of his being happy with his psychopathic nature, he also prides himself on being an excellent lawyer, but the Tomasin case has wrecked him. And either because he is human enough to need real connection, or it helps his mind to discuss the case after a day in court, he spends his evenings having a drink with Grace. In the Tomasin case, the wife ends up being the liar, and the husband is innocent; however, the oft-repeated sentiment is that although the husband is a doctor and a philanthropist, one cannot judge the husband just because he looks good on paper. This is an obvious parallel to Jack.

The pills have given Grace "a new lease on life" (244). There are enough to render Jack unconscious but not to kill him. At the end of the Past timeline, Grace wonders what to do with him after he is asleep, and whether or not she has the guts to literally murder him. At the close of the chapter, she remembers Molly the dog, and Millie's bedroom: foreshadowing for how Jack is eventually going to die.

The Present timeline finds Grace in Thailand at the same hotel where she and Jack have stayed a number of times, surrounded by the same solicitous hotel staff that supports Jack because of his money and good looks, and secretly thinks Grace is mentally imbalanced. The author truly does a masterful job for 15 pages describing Grace's last trip to Thailand in first-person POV as she waits for Jack to join her. As she tells everyone, he stayed behind in England to finish his work after losing the Tomasin case while Grace flew on ahead. Grace's internal monologue does describe her day, how she wastes away the hours, how many times she calls Jack and leaves messages on his mobile and voicemail; however, Grace never admits to the reader whether or not she knows where Jack is. The words of the chapter are suggestive but not definite, and leave with only the police's assertion that Jack killed himself over the grief of the Tomasin case.

## Discussion Question 1

Discuss the author's ability in the Present timeline to describe Grace's three days in Thailand. Is it clear to the reader that Grace already knows what happened to Jack?

## Discussion Question 2

Is Grace's concerned-wife act convincing? Why or why not?



## Discussion Question 3

Does Jack's willingness to spend the evenings with Grace show a human side of him? Why or why not?

## Vocabulary

balked, provocative, discredit, tabloids, robust, trite, menace, allay



# Past-Present 276-end

## Summary

Past picks up the story the day that Jack and Grace are supposed to go to Thailand together, when they are supposed to hear the verdict on the Tomasin case. Although the plans assume he is going to lose the case, Grace plans for every eventuality. While he is gone she crushes the pills into a fine powder. Jack appears in her room with two glasses and announces that he lost. She asks him to look in her eye for an itch; while he is doing so she shakes the powder into the whisky glass and switches them. Meanwhile, Jack admits that the wife in the Tomasin case lied to him. Losing the case does not bring out Jack's best side, and before Grace can help herself she throws her whisky in Jack's face. He is thrown off and she takes advantage, running down the stairs and hiding. She has no idea if he had enough of the pills to slow him down. He catches her in the foyer, and drags her by her hair to the basement. At the doorway, Grace hangs on him so hard he has to enter the room with her. She knocks him over; the pills make it hard for him to get up and Grace rushes out of the room. The door locks from the outside, and Grace leaves him there. While he bangs on the door below, Grace finishes her packing and washes the whisky glasses. Luckily she is easily able to locate the plane tickets and her passport. She calls Esther for a ride to the airport, pleading that Jack has already had too much to drink and he insists that she goes.

Present finds Grace arriving at Heathrow, having left Thailand as soon as she learned of her husband's death. Her mind races with how to talk to the police about Jack and the house. She worries that the suicide story will not stick, and must be careful not to talk of the problems in their marriage lest it give her a motive. All the police would say is that Jack died of a drug overdose. Because she does not know where or in what condition Jack was found, it is hard to plan for the questions. Esther is there to fetch her, and helps her along to a café where they can wait out the traffic. Once they are settled Esther reveals that Jack did have drugs in his system, but not enough to kill him. He had actually died of dehydration, in a room that was locked from the outside. Esther asks Grace if she knows anything about it, and Grace feigns ignorance.

Esther begins to lead Grace through a series of questions, feeding Grace the answers so that they will come to her more easily when the police ask her: how Jack said his career was basically over, that he could not stand failure, that he could not live with the stain of losing, that he must have wanted her gone so he could die in peace.

Esther asks Grace about the pills, and about the basement. Grace prepares her answers: the pills were the same ones that Millie took. Jack learned about how good they were from Janice. About the room, Grace says that Jack sat there to study his files away from the rest of the house, and that she did not know about the portraits. Esther provides that they were so graphic Jack probably wanted to keep them from her. Esther got the details of the crime scene from Adam, who wanted Grace to be prepared before the story hit the paper the next day. Esther also reminds Grace that they were the last



ones to see Jack alive—that they both waved to him in the window—although Esther needs Grace to remind her whether or not Jack was wearing his coat. Grace realizes what Esther is doing for her and starts to cry. When she thanks Esther, her friend asks what color Millie’s room was; Grace tells her it was red.

## Analysis

Ironies abound in the closing chapters of *Behind Closed Doors*. Jack lets his guard down around Grace, which is a strange twist of irony; she wished for him to show her kindness for 15 months, and when they get into a rhythm of some sort of companionship, she uses it to gain the upper hand. Grace has been underestimated, undervalued, and isolated for the duration of the novel, and it is ironic that Jack, who has no real human connection due to his own lack of humanity, would depend on his wife for connection during a trying time in his life. Grace says herself that she spent months in near lethargy, but her mind is surprisingly sharp in the handful of minutes it takes to erase the home of the struggle. The fact that she washes the glasses and keeps her hands away from Jack’s desk are examples of her thinking about the event from the police’s perspective. It is both fitting and symbolic that Jack would die in Millie’s room, a place of horror of his own creation; and that he would suffer horribly for four days from dehydration while Grace played the devoted wife in Thailand. It is also ironic that Jack would lose the Tomasin case because he was bested and deceived by the wife in the case, Dena Anderson. Indeed, every woman Jack has underestimated-- Grace, Millie, Esther, and Dena Anderson--have gained the upper hand and won against him.

The last chapter is another feat of chilling writing. The author finally reveals that Esther, like the Jewish princess she is named for, is Grace’s deliverer. Whether or not she knew the entire time is still unclear, although Esther’s final question about the color of Millie’s bedroom hints that the scene of Millie’s birthday party was a defining moment for Esther. What unfolds in the end of the novel is Esther verbally leading Grace through a series of questions the police will ask, allowing her to verbalize the answers with Esther--and for the two women to align their stories--before she must speak to the police. Finally, Grace realizes that she has an ally, and it brings a satisfying ending to the novel.

## Discussion Question 1

Is it clear that Esther suspected something all along?

## Discussion Question 2

Is it ironic that Grace was able to fool Jack by exploiting his sympathy?



## Discussion Question 3

What are some indications that Esther suspected what had happened when she drove Grace to the airport?

## Vocabulary

commiserate, gratified, incensed, tangible, incoherently



# Characters

## Grace Angel

Grace is the main character. She is a woman who has always felt alone and isolated; her parents were never close to her and threaten to move to New Zealand the first chance they get. Grace's only close friend is her sister Millie, and because she has promised to take care of Millie when she reaches adulthood, it is hard for her to form close friendships or relationships with men.

Jack preys on this isolation. He says that it is Millie who first attracts him to Grace, and that Grace is only a means to him getting Millie into his house of horrors; nonetheless it is that much easier to pull Grace into the world he has created because nobody else cares. Her parents have all but abandoned her, and many of her friends and boyfriends slowly fall away because of her devotion to her sister.

Because the book is written in first-person, the reader gets to share in Grace's internal monologue as she goes from shock and despair, to complete misery. Midway through the narrative, Grace realizes that she must fan a flame of hopefulness if she is to survive, so she begins to outwit her husband by feigning despondency while secretly scheming, one day at a time.

## Jack Angel

Jack is a deplorable character for many reasons, the most of which is that he has a carefully manicured persona he shows the world that is the complete opposite of the monster he truly is. The most egregious of these gaps between truth and fiction is that he is an attorney that specializes in battered women. The reader learns early on that he has never lost a case, and that he has earned a reputation as a champion for battered women. When his true nature is revealed, it is a shocking contrast to Jack's public face, particularly when Jack tells Grace that he works with battered women so he can put himself in their husband's shoes.

Like many sociopaths, Jack's fault is that he is so intelligent he fails to account for Grace's intelligence, and especially Millie's intelligence. He presumes the weakness of his prey rather than seeing their strengths. Moreover, he fails to recognize the light in Grace's eyes as she schemes to kill him.

## Millie

Millie is Grace's much-younger sister, a late addition to her family. Because she has Down's Syndrome, Grace's parents had no interest in caring for her, and handed her off to other caretakers. Grace is technically her guardian, and her parents are retired and living in New Zealand.



The reader learns of Millie in the first chapter, in the present, when the true nature of Jack's and Grace's relationship is still hidden. The author does a skillful job of pulling at the reader's heart strings, as she tells of how Jack immediately offered to let Millie live with him and Grace forever. Later, of course, Jack reveals that he wants Millie in his home so he can torture her and prey on her fears.

It is horrifying, and yet the reader is allowed to see that Millie is the first to see Jack as he truly is; and for the remainder of the novel Millie is clearly intelligent enough to hide her true opinion and play the part of the weak, stupid girl Jack thinks she is.

## Esther

Esther is married to Rufus, who is a friend of Jack's from work. The reader meets her in the first chapter, when Jack is pressuring Grace to make a good impression on them. At first it seems that Esther dislikes Grace, or at least is jealous of her beautiful home, handsome husband, and seemingly perfect existence. However, as the narrative progresses, Grace begins to think that maybe Esther suspects the truth about her marriage.

The author does not actually reveal Esther's suspicion until the last few pages, which is skillful writing that only adds to the tension as Grace wonders if she is truly alone in the world. Even though the reader is never entirely sure what Esther suspects, for Grace, the possibility is enough to give her hope; and she builds on this hope for the bulk of the novel.

## Diane

One of Jack's and Grace's neighborhood friends is Diane, whose husband also works with Jack in the local law firm. As a gushing, adoring friend who basically thinks that Grace and Jack are the most perfect people in the world, she is set up as a foil to Esther, who obviously reserves her judgment. Diane is blinded by Jack's handsome face, beautiful house, and obvious wealth.

## Grace's parents

Grace's mother and father, who remain nameless throughout the novel, are a key element to the plot because their absence both adds to Grace's feeling of isolation and gives Jack clear access to both sisters without the parents getting involved. As the novel opens, they live in New Zealand; however, as the novel's timeline dips into the past, the reader discovers how instrumental Jack was in convincing the couple to move, promising great care of Grace and Millie in their stead. They, too, are fooled by Jack's charm and solid resume, and the reader is left with very little respect for people that would sign away control of their child and basically abandon both daughters so they could retire in style.





## Rufus

Rufus is Esther's husband. Like Jack, he is a lawyer. Like Diane and her husband, he seems to be fooled by Jack's wealth and success at the office. Both of the men in the couples Jack and Grace are friends with add little to the plot, except they appear to be a chorus of yes men for Jack, and they mention the law case, which will eventually be the point of Jack's undoing and an opening for Grace.

## Adam

Adam's only true contribution to the plot is that he continues to mention Jack's current law case, in which the husband cannot be guilty; it is Jack's job to convict the husband of the wife's injuries. The case itself is an obvious parallel to Jack and Grace--Grace spent the early weeks of their marriage trying to escape and tell everyone she could of Jack's true nature, but nobody believed her. Every time Adam is in a scene in the novel, he mentions the case, which is some heavy foreshadowing on the author's part.

## Thailand Hotel Staff

As a unit, the Thailand hotel staff is another example of people that are drawn in by Jack's wealth and influence. However, in contrast to Jack's coworkers and the local police, the hotel staff know that Jack is in Bangkok for illicit and egregious sexual practices, and they accept his money and look the other way.

## Local Police

The local police make a few appearances in this novel. Early in their marriage, Grace appeals to them for help in the village, and they send her right back in to Jack's arms. They are such good friends with him from his work in the courts that they do not believe her. They remain largely out of touch until the end of the novel, when Jack turns up dead.

## Millie

Millie is Grace's younger sister who has Down Syndrome and whom, therefore, Grace has been assigned guardian as soon as Millie turns 18. Grace and Jack have agreed to have Millie come live with them full time as soon as Millie turns 18, which is approaching rapidly in the Present storyline.

Jack's ultimate undoing is his underestimating of Millie and her ability to plot against him. Millie proves herself to be quite intelligent, faking sleeping problems in order to obtain weeks worth of sleeping pills, which she then hides and eventually sneaks to Grace to use to drug Jack.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Millie

Millie is a wonderful, complex character that both symbolizes a kind of innocence that is lost when Grace marries Jack, and also is the best example of one of the author's main themes: that people often make assumptions about a person's value or goodness based on their outside appearance. Millie is a forgettable person, in Jack's opinion, because she has Down's Syndrome. However, Millie is really the impetus for Grace's opportunity to free them both from Jack. She not only has the wit to fake an illness so she can steal sleeping pills, she is strong enough to look her older sister in the eye and insist that they do not have to put with Jack's behavior. All of this strength is wrapped in a sweet young girl who claps her hands when she is happy and pouts when she is mad.

## Sleeping pills

The sleeping pills Millie smuggles to Grace one day at lunch symbolize hope for an escape for Grace from Jack's clutches. Once Grace has them hidden in her room, they are constantly on her mind. Because the author spends so much time in Grace's head, the reader knows that Grace has a mental picture of the pills and what they will hopefully mean to her. Not only this, but only when the pills are in Grace's possession is she able to thoughtfully plan her escape attempt. The pills are both possibility and impetus.

## Grace's paintings

Grace's paintings symbolize Jack's control over her. Jack's and Grace's house is filled with paintings that she created. One of them she painted before she truly knew Jack, and the rest are paintings that he forced her to complete against her will. All of them are a painful reminder of just how much he controls her. The "Firefly" painting, which is an array of kiss-prints arranged to look like fireflies, was done during their courtship, and every time Grace sees it during the "Present" timeline of the novel she is disgusted at how she was taken in. The remainder of paintings in the house are copies of evidence photos of Jack's many victims, in effect portraits of beaten, terrified women. Nobody would ever wish to paint such a thing, but Grace did because she had no choice, and they remind her of how little freedom she has in her life. Furthermore, the fact that Jack wants them are evidence of his depraved mind.

## Molly the dog

Molly the dog is a symbol of Jack's true nature and evil capabilities, but she also foreshadows his eventual death.



There are many ways that Jack exerts control over Grace, and many things that start out as a gift but end up being an element of horror or torture. Jack buys Grace a puppy during their engagement, promising that she will be waiting in the house when they return from their honeymoon. However, Jack purposefully locks the dog in the laundry room during the honeymoon; when they return from Bangkok the dog is dead from dehydration. Jack forces Grace to bury the dog in the backyard while he watches, gloating.

## Clothing

Grace's clothing symbolizes control. Although he has no interest in her sexually, he watches what she wears carefully, mainly to be certain that she is not hiding anything under her clothing. Moreover, Jack likes to choose what she wears just so he can exert control over her life. Grace puts her hand on a blue dress just to hear Jack say, "No, the cream one" (36). As the novel progresses and Grace starts to exert small pieces of independence, she learns how to work the system, skipping over a dress she wants just so Jack will divert her back to it.

## Names

A few of the characters have names that are symbolic of their defining characteristics. Jack Angel is a made-up name; he tells Grace that he chose the last name "Angel" because it worked well with his job as a champion of beaten women. "Jack" is a good first name, because many handsome, confident men bear that name; however, so do many famous killers in life and in art, such as Jack the Ripper and Jack Torrance (From "The Shining"). Grace, is of course, a name that means kindness and mercy; Jack sees her as a weak, spineless individual, easy to pray on. Millie is a derivative of the name Millicent, which means strong. Finally, Esther is the name of the Jewish princess that was instrumental in freeing her people from a destructive law.

## Millie's bedroom color

The colors of Millie's dual bedrooms, both the one Jack has for public viewing and the one he truly intends for her, are symbols for the true intent and meaning behind each room. Her public room is yellow, Millie's favorite color. The color yellow means joy, happiness, intellect, and energy--all depictions of Millie's true character. However, Jack's real, intended room for Millie is painted red, which signifies war, danger, strength, and power. All of these are aspects of Jack's true character and indicative of the terror he wishes to inflict on Millie.

## The Tomasin case

The Tomasin court case is an allusion to Jack's and Grace's own life. It is a battered woman case in which everyone believes the wife is lying. Jack is representing the wife



throughout the novel; it is his job to convince the courts that the husband is guilty. This is a fascinating flip of facts on behalf of the author: Grace appeals to the police a couple of times in this novel, and nobody believes her. It is also ironic that Jack is defending the wife, when in his own life he actually is the perpetrator. Perhaps the most significant aspect of the Tomasin case is that it thoroughly distracts Jack as the book reaches its climax, and in this distraction over the case Grace is able to gain the upper hand and eventually kill him. The last bit of irony is that Jack loses the case.

## Grace's parents

Grace's parents--specifically their relocation to New Zealand as soon as Grace and Jack marry--are another symbol of Grace's isolation from the rest of the world. Their removal not only isolates Grace, but Millie, and through their marriage appoints Jack as co-guardian over Millie. However, more important than the legal technicality is the fact that being parent-less adds to Grace's loneliness, which contributes to her sense that nobody cares for her.

## Jack's house

Jack's house is a lot like Jack himself: very beautiful with a lot of curb appeal, but the inside is stocked with horrors. Jack has owned his house for long before he met Grace; the night they "planned their dream home," he was directing her wishes, funneling them into the house he already owned. He already knew that the doors locked from the outside, and that there were shutters on the windows and strong gates that were only controlled by remote. Jack knew before he brought Grace into his life that his own mind was filled with terror and horrors that he was planning to unleash on her and her sister when he had the chance.



# Settings

## Grace's series of bedrooms

When Grace and Jack return from their honeymoon in Bangkok, they return to the beautiful house of their dreams, which Jack has actually already owned for years. Jack immediately locks Grace in her bedroom, which is expansive and nice, with reading material and windows. However, as Grace grows non-compliant and continues to attempt to escape, Jack downgrades her accommodations. First he takes away her magazines and books; then he sends her to smaller bedroom. Eventually, her room is a small, windowless box, furnished only with a bed and a small bathroom.

## Millie's room

"Millie's room" is a double-edged sword between Jack and Grace. Before Grace knows about Jack's true nature, Millie's very own bedroom in her favorite color of yellow is a great gift to Grace. It's a reminder of how good Jack is to her. However, later in the novel Jack shows Grace Millie's real room, which is a windowless room painted in a terrible, garish red. The door only locks from the outside, and the walls are filled with hand painted portraits of beaten, bruised, and battered women. Jack uses its existence to taunt Grace and remind her what is at stake. The mere mention of "Millie's room" is enough to bend Grace into submission. Grace only spends one night in the room, and it is very significant that Jack dies in that room.

## Bangkok Hotel

Jack is a regular at a semi-seedy hotel in Bangkok, Thailand, notorious capital of the sex trade and the place for wealthy, sexually deviant businessmen to visit. To their friends in England, Jack and Grace are lucky and glamorous for their many trips to Thailand; none of them know exactly why Jack visits. When Jack and Grace arrive there on her honeymoon, she learns who Jack truly is, and all of her visits there are awful. In the very end, when she knows Jack is locked in Millie's room, she visits the hotel and plays the part of the devoted wife while she waits for news of his death.

## The park

The unnamed London park is where Jack and Grace met. There was a band playing and it was a beautiful day, and Millie got up to dance to the music in front of everyone. The nice version of the story is that Jack came over to dance with Millie because he thought she was so charming, and Grace was, in turn, charmed by Jack completing Millie's moment. The true version of the story is that Jack, when he saw that Millie had Down's Syndrome, thought she would be an amazing victim for his psychopathic



interest in fear. In either case, the park was the origin point for Jack's and Grace's relationship.

## **New Zealand**

New Zealand is where Grace's parents move after her marriage to Jack. With her parents gone, who were never very involved in her life anyway, the last tie between Grace and other people is cut. When she and Jack return from Thailand, Grace's parents move away, and Grace is left with only Millie in her world. The irony, however, is that she does not want Millie in her world because it turns into a horrible place.



# Themes and Motifs

## Hope

Throughout the course of the novel, Grace comes to realize that hope is the driving force that will allow her to escape her captivity. Although the exact circumstances of her confinement change throughout the narrative, it is a hope of getting away and keeping her sister safe that allows her to stay mentally alert, think, and plan for escape. When she first returns home from her honeymoon with Jack, she is housed in a large, well-appointed bedroom, but eventually the accommodations shrink and grow more austere the more she tries to flee Jack's control. By the time the story starts in the Present, Grace is basically in a windowless box, with only a bed and bathroom for company.

However, as long as Grace is able to think one day ahead, towards even an opportunity to leave, she is able to stave off the depression and fear that Jack longs to see. Even if the hope is fleeting and practically impossible, Grace nurtures and fans the small flame of hope so that she can remain, on the outside at least, impassive to Jack's torture.

This truth is evidenced by how much more calmly Grace is able to handle Jack's pressure by the current timeline in the story. In the Past sections, she tells the reader how many times she tried to escape, how she spoke to the police, how she begged and screamed and lost control. By the Present timeline and moving towards the end, Grace is able to resist Jack's attempt to draw her fire: for example, when Esther delivers a book for her to read and Jack outlines fake messages in the text, hoping that Grace will send a message in response, she is able to hold to a small part of hope that she can control him by resisting him. She is flippant about the book, barely registering its presence, and Jack is enraged at her dismissal. However, this event is an important turning point in Grace's development towards strength.

Soon after this point in the plot, Grace's sister Millie gives her the sleeping pills that will eventually become Jack's demise, and that small package wrapped in toilet paper is Grace's sole point of focus throughout his temper tantrums and awful, psychotic jabs about her sister.

## Control

Although Jack clearly holds the cards throughout the narrative, it becomes clear that whoever (between he and Grace) has power over the other's emotional state has the upper hand. Jack technically is in charge of Grace's captivity and whether or not she lives or dies; however, whenever she can resist his attempts to scare her or make her lose control, she gains a small amount of mastery over her captor.

Early in their marriage, when Jack's true nature is revealed, Grace completely loses herself to screaming fits and attempts to escape. Jack not only is a step ahead of her at every turn, but he feeds on her terror and inability to keep it together. He is allowed to



enjoy her outbursts, and then further control her by punishing her. Over the course of a year Grace's accommodations go from a large, airy, open bedroom with books and windows, to an airless, lightless box of a room. At times he even locks her in his horrid basement, his torture chamber intended for Grace's sister Millie.

However, when Grace learns to dull her senses in his presence, to appear listless and immune to his taunts, jibes, and traps, it has the intended effect on Jack. His tight supervision over her captivity slips as Grace pretends she doesn't care what he does. The only way she is able to administer his sleeping pills is by getting him to bring drinks to her room, a process she is only able to achieve through long weeks of ignoring his taunts and traps. He is so tense with the need to control her that he loses control himself.

This truth is a glimpse into the psyche of a sociopath character. Jack thrives on exacting terror from Grace, and when she is able to feign indifference to fear, he loses his grip on her.

## Isolation

Jack uses isolation as a means to wear down Grace's sense of humanity. This is a reflection of the author's assertion that people need to feel connected in order to fully experience their own humanity.

The author uses the Present-Past alternating chapters to chronicle Grace's progress from absolute desolation to having the strength and wit to kill her husband and escape; and it is not an accident that in the first Present chapter, Grace meets Esther. In the 18 months Grace has lived under Jack's incarceration, she has met and dined with several women, but none of them have seemed to actually "see" her until Esther. The reader has no idea whether or not Esther is actually suspicious of Jack until the very end of the novel. However, the small amount of connection Grace feels with Esther is all she needs to build on. For Grace, just the possibility that someone other than Millie, who is helpless and isolated in her own way, understands what she is going through restores her to feeling that she is part of the world again.

During the Past sections, the reader sees Grace grow more and more desolate as Jack shrinks her existence. Her room grows smaller, her wardrobe more narrow, and her meals more sporadic. He limits her human contact to nothing, unless he is there to steer the conversation and watch her closely. Those months reduce Grace to barely-a-person as she forgets how to think and feel without the terror that her husband inflicts.

When she begins her Jack-controlled friendship with Esther, the woman's pointed comments and hard glances bring Grace back to life, in a manner of speaking, and she builds on her own strength and humanity until she is able to break free from Jack's reign of terror.





## Money/Influence

As Jack's true nature is slowly revealed, the author reminds the reader that money and influence do not make up good character. In fact, and this is a key claim, money and influence can often mask a bad and gruesome character.

There are several examples in the text of Jack using money or his name to gain his way through illegal or horrid dealings. One such example is the hotel in Thailand. In the first chapter, the author mentions that Jack travels to Thailand "several times a year" and that Grace has been many times. Early in the narrative this sounds glamorous and exciting. However, as the story goes on the reader learns that Jack goes to Thailand to engage in terrible sexual practices involving fear and control in Thailand's notorious sex trade. The hotel staff in Bangkok know him well, and know how he spends his time there, but they overlook this egregious practice because he is a wealthy English businessman.

This is repeated with the local police. Grace attempts to escape Jack's clutches one day in public, but she does not get far. The local police force knows Jack well, for all of his power and visible face in the court. His pleasing exterior and smooth talk win the the police so that they will not listen to Grace's cries for help.

Finally, although Jack brings a host of local couples over to their home for dinner, not one person suspects for a moment that there is anything amiss in their marriage because they are so overwhelmed with the display of wealth in Jack's home. The author describes it in great detail, displaying each ostentatious touch so that the reader can gain an idea of the level of money involved. Indeed, every dinner party the author describes comes with a host of comments on Jack's and Grace's wealth and beauty. Their friends are blinded by appearances and do not see what is actually going on.

## Hidden Value

The author uses Grace's sister Millie, who has Down's Syndrome, to demonstrate that each person has value. Each person has their own strengths and talents, however hidden, that make them special.

It is not by accident that the author gifted Grace's sister with Down's Syndrome. The chromosomal disease is very visual, so everybody can tell when a person has it. Furthermore, people assume that people with Down's are mentally disabled. The reader can assume that Jack is so intensely focused on Millie because when he first saw her, she was enjoying music with a beautiful, childlike simplicity, one that he assumed would also yield great terror if she was in his grasp. His control of Grace is only mildly satisfying, while he is certain that Millie, in her "retardation," will provide him a wealth of excitement when she is scared.

However, the author takes these very assumptions about Millie and turns them on their head. It is Millie, not the local housewife Diane, that first notices that Jack is bad. He



pushes Millie down the stairs at the wedding and assumes that, due to her condition, she either will not tell or will not understand that he hurt her. He underestimated her on both counts, and it is when Millie broaches the subject of Jack's true character that Grace feels she has someone in her corner.

Moreover, it is Millie, not Grace or Esther, who first hatches a plan to do away with Jack. Early in the novel the author foreshadows this when Millie's nurse mentions she is having trouble sleeping, so the staff administers sleeping pills. Jack, Grace, and the reader assume that Millie is just being childlike and dramatic; but later the author reveals that Millie is not only smart enough to fake insomnia and ask for the pills, she is able to hide them, smuggle them out of her care facility, and find a way to give them to Grace even while Jack watches them constantly. In a story filled with smart, wealthy, successful people, it is the 18-year-old girl with Down's Syndrome that sees the most clearly and finds a way to win.

# Styles

## Point of View

Behind Closed Doors is written from a first-person point of view, which lends itself well to a novel with this sort of plot. Because all of the tension is happening to Grace, the reader more acutely experiences it with her because it is told first-person. The reader cannot know what is going on in Jack's brain, which adds to the element of surprise and suspense for this narrative. Being completely inside Grace's brain also dovetails with the author's strong theme of isolation. For the reader, this is Grace's story. All of her fears, emotions, highs, and lows are only for the reader to see. This creates an intimate atmosphere, perfect for a story that is so riddled with suspense and terror.

## Language and Meaning

The language in this novel is more straightforward, because the plot is driven by the action rather than the author's words. With Grace's world being as small as it is, the author must rely on dialogue and action rather than a physical description of what is happening around Grace. Moreover, she spends a lot of time in Grace's mind, because Grace is a lonely, isolated character, who has nothing except a feverish dream of escape and revenge to keep her going.

## Structure

The structure of the novel is chapters alternating Grace's life in the present, when she is working on a means of escape, and the past, when she first meets Jack and is drawn in by his charm and kindness. This arrangement is very effective, especially at holding tension and keeping the reader in suspense, because the author will reveal something in the "Present" timeline that is only explained in the "Past" timeline. This becomes particularly important in the very end of the narrative, when the two timelines become just a few days apart, and a revelation in Present sends the reader racing to the next Past section to see what happened.



## Quotes

Since joining our circle of friends a month ago, I'm sure she's been told over and over again that Grace Angel, wife of brilliant lawyer Jack Angel, is a perfect example of a woman that has it all—the perfect house, the perfect husband, the perfect life.

-- Grace (Present paragraph 2)

**Importance:** Jack's success hinges on the outward appearance of perfection, and he arranges Grace's life to fit this standard. Grace's sentiment here is also ironic, because her life is far from perfect, although the reader does not know that yet.

But, generally speaking, aren't cases of abuse usually easy to prove?"

-- Rufus (Present paragraph 1)

**Importance:** This quote is chilling and does a nice job of foreshadowing. At this stage in the story the reader does not know about Jack's true nature, and although Rufus is talking of another court case, it does remind the reader of the situation Grace is in.

Yet the face I present to Jack shows nothing of my inner turmoil.

-- Grace (Present paragraph 1)

**Importance:** From the midpoint of the novel on, Grace must live two lives: one in which she is lethargic, having given up on any hope of escape. The other life is one in which she plans and plots to kill him. To Jack, she must pretend that she is beyond his torment, and this quote demonstrates as much.

Do I detect a renewal of your fighting spirit? I'm so glad. To tell the truth, I've been getting quite bored."

-- Jack (Present paragraph 3)

**Importance:** Grace is so adept at pretending lethargy that Jack threatens to spice things up at home. He enjoys it when she fights back so he can punish her.

I spend my days suspended in time, a passive lump of humanity. At least, that is what Jack sees. In reality, I am biding my time, waiting for a tiny window of opportunity to open, as it surely will—because if I don't believe that it will, how could I carry on?

-- Grace (Present paragraph 2)

**Importance:** Grace's mental status changes throughout the novel based on how much hope she holds of survival, and this quote demonstrates this. If she has no hope, how can she survive?

I long for somebody to ask questions, to be suspicious. My thoughts turn immediately to Esther and I wonder if I should be more careful what I wish for. If Jack becomes suspicious of her constant questioning, he may decide that I've encouraged her in some way and my life will be even less worth living.



-- Grace (Present paragraph 3)

**Importance:** Grace's tentative friendship with Esther is also a very important aspect of the plot development. For most of the novel, Grace suspects Esther knows more than she is letting on, but is not sure; moreover, she does not want to jeopardize any advantage by reaching out to her new friend.

When I knelt down beside her and found her body cold and rigid, I thought about the terrible death she must have endured. It was then that I didn't only vow to kill Jack, but to make him suffer as he had made Molly suffer."

-- Grace (Past paragraph 2)

**Importance:** This quote is important because it foreshadows Jack's death. Molly's death from dehydration--because Jack locked her in a room with no care--is Grace's inspiration for how to kill her husband without having to lay a hand on him.

I cry even harder, thinking of how it could have been, of how I thought it would be. For the first time, I want to give up, to die, because suddenly everything is too much and there is no solution in sight."

-- Grace (Past paragraph 1)

**Importance:** This quote is another example of how Grace clings to any glimmer of hope that she will escape her situation.

It was easy to underestimate Millie, and presume that the way she spoke was a reflection of the way her mind worked, but she was a lot cleverer than people gave her credit for."

-- Grace (Past paragraph 1)

**Importance:** Another of the author's prevalent themes is how Jack underestimated all of the women around him, namely Grace and Millie. Here Grace expresses that people think Millie is stupid because she has Down's Syndrome, but that she is actually quite clever. In fact, she is the reason Grace is able to escape Jack.

But despite what I've just told Millie, I know I'll never be able to flush them down the toilet because they represent the first glimmer of hope I've had in a long time.

-- Grace (Present paragraph 2)

**Importance:** The pills are Grace's lifeline, a physical manifestation of the hope that she can best Jack and get out. This quote reflects that.

My mind races so far ahead that I have to remind myself of all the other times I've been disappointed. Even when I get into the car beside Jack, I still don't let myself believe that it might happen.

-- Grace (Present paragraph 2)

**Importance:** One of the ways Jack controls Grace is by metaphorically dangling carrots



in front of her--allowing her to think she can choose her own dress or have lunch with friends--only to take over at the last minute. He will ask her to change, or force her to call Diane and cancel, or call off a trip to see Millie. Eventually Grace deadens her senses until she never believes anything will happen.

What color was Millie's room, Grace?' I can barely get the word out. 'Red,' I tell her, my voice breaking. 'Millie's room was red.' 'That's what I thought,' she says softly."

-- Grace and Esther (Present paragraph 2)

**Importance:** This exchange makes up the last words of the novel. Esther confirms that, at least at Millie's birthday party, she knew something was amiss with Jack. Moreover, it reminds the reader that Jack's flamboyant way of torturing Grace in public--reminding her of Millie's basement bedroom--was his downfall.