

Cat's Eye Study Guide

Cat's Eye by Margaret Atwood

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Plot Summary

Elaine's only playmate is her older brother Stephen, and she happily engages in games of war with him. When Elaine is eight years old, her father takes a position as a university professor and they settle down in Toronto. Elaine enrolls in public school for the first time, and is suddenly thrust into the world of girls. She makes friends with Carol Campbell, a girl her age who also rides the bus to school. Carol seems charmed by Elaine's primitive qualities. Carol has another friend, Grace Smeath, who is a year older. The three girls spend time together after school and on weekends, playing girl games.

Elaine's family still travels to the northern wilderness in the summer. When they return, Elaine discovers there is a new girl with Carol and Grace. Her name is Cordelia, and she immediately establishes herself as the dominant member of the group. At first, they play seemingly innocent games, but soon Cordelia begins to bully Elaine, and Carol and Grace join in. Under their almost-constant bullying and criticizing, Elaine becomes anxious and nervous, but their friendship is very important to her, so she tolerates the abuse without complaining. It is not until Cordelia causes her to almost be frozen to death that she gets the strength to break ties with the girls. Subconsciously, she erases all memory of what happened to her, and when Cordelia's mother wants them to walk to high school together, she does not see any reason to object.

Elaine and Cordelia consider themselves to be best friends in high school, even though they really have nothing in common. Elaine develops a mean mouth, and enjoys mocking Cordelia. As Elaine gets stronger in the relationship, Cordelia begins exhibiting signs that she might have some underlying problems of her own. When Elaine gets a fleeting glimpse of a disturbing memory, she begins putting more distance between them. While Elaine succeeds at school, Cordelia fails, and her changing appearance indicates that she, too, may be experiencing emotional turmoil. Cordelia and Elaine begin to see each other less and less frequently.

After high school, Elaine attends university classes as well as night classes of the local Art College. She develops her drawing skill in Life Drawing class and is drawn into an affair with the teacher, Josef Hrbik. There is also another girl from the class involved with Mr. Hrbik, Susie, but she does not know about Elaine. When Susie finds that she is pregnant, she terminates the pregnancy herself and endangers her life. She calls Elaine for help, and Elaine witnesses the horror of a botched abortion. At this point, Susie finds the courage to also terminate her relationship with Josef, leaving Elaine alone in a relationship with a broken man. She begins to treat Josef with contempt and a spirit of meanness, and Josef leaves Toronto in despair.

Now Elaine is left with Jon, who was one of her classmates in Life Drawing class. Their affair began when she was still with Josef. On Jon's part, it is an open relationship, which makes her uncomfortable. When Elaine discovers she is pregnant, she is afraid to tell Jon, but she won't try to end it because of what Susie went through. As it turns out, Jon marries her and they have their daughter Sarah. Unfortunately, neither of them is ready or willing to take on the burden of responsible adulthood, and their relationship



becomes tumultuous. Elaine is finally driven to attempt to take her own life. Although Jon saves her life, the quality of the relationship remains strained, and Elaine sinks deeper into depression. She leaves Jon and Toronto and takes Sarah with her to Vancouver.

In the meantime, Elaine has seen Cordelia again. She has been placed in a rest home for taking pills. She wants Elaine's help to leave, but Elaine says she can't. That is the last time she sees Cordelia, and she will later become obsessed about wondering what happened to her.

In Vancouver, Elaine eventually begins to feel normal again and establishes something of a reputation for herself in the world of art. When she eventually returns to Toronto for the retrospective, she is greeted as a celebrity. At the event, she keeps watching for Cordelia, and when she doesn't come, Elaine feels completely let down. The next day she misses her plane and takes one more walk—to the ravine where she had broken through the ice. There she sees a vision of Cordelia, and she feels the same dark sensations she felt when the girls were tormenting her. Now, however, she recognizes that the emotions are not in her, but in Cordelia. With new understanding, she reaches out to her old friend and bids her to get out of the cold.



Chapter 1-2

Summary

The novel opens with a scene from Elaine Risley's adolescent years, when her brother Stephen tries to explain time as a dimension that can be manipulated the same as space, if we knew enough. Elaine shares her version of the discussion with her friend Cordelia, who is not impressed. They are both around thirteen years old, people-watching on a streetcar.

In a transition to current times, a grown-up, middle-aged Elaine is walking around Toronto, feeling more sympathetic toward the women they used to mock. She wonders about Cordelia, and what might have become of her. As she walks, she notices how much the city has changed, and she begins to feel some signs of anxiety.

Analysis

The first two chapters of the novel give the reader a vague idea of what Elaine will be dealing with. The brief discussion she has with her brother influences her concept of time, which is something she dwells on throughout the novel. The reader is also introduced to the relationship between Elaine and Cordelia, but when the narrator says, "We think we are friends," there is some confusion as to what that relationship might be. At the end of chapter two, the reader gets the first impression that there may be some anxiety connected with Elaine's return to Toronto.

Vocabulary

nonchalance, festooned, resigned, tics, buffer zone, dewlaps, muted, wattles, repugnance, congealed, grotesqueries, dowdy, urbanity



Chapters 3-7

Summary

Elaine is back in Toronto for a retrospective of her art. To save money, she is staying in the art studio of her former husband Jon. She visits the gallery that will be the site of her retrospective. There is a poster with her picture on it, advertising the exhibit. Someone has drawn a mustache on her face, and she decides it is a good thing because having her picture in a place where it can be defaced means she has made something of herself after all. She wonders if Cordelia will see the poster and recognize her.

In another transition/flashback, the reader is taken back further in time to Elaine's childhood when her entomologist father takes his family for entire summers driving from one place to another in the northern Canadian forests. In winters they live in apartments in towns or cities, where she and Stephen play war games.

In another transition, World War II comes to an end, and it is Elaine's eighth birthday. At this point they have been staying in a motel for four months, which is unusual. Elaine has schoolbooks with her, and she is fascinated by the family in her school reader because they seem to be completely different from her own family. She wishes she had a girl friend, and she draws pictures of girls in dresses.

At the end of the summer, Elaine's father takes a position as a university professor, and the family moves into an unfinished house in Toronto. Elaine is particularly disappointed because it is not at all what she had been envisioning, based on her school reader. She has her own room, but she has to sleep on a cot, which she regularly falls out of. Gradually, her father and mother begin to make repairs themselves, and their furniture arrives from storage.

Their father takes Stephen and Elaine with him on Saturdays to visit the Zoology building, which they simply call "the building." The building has many specimens of animal life, living and dead. The building is on the route of the Santa Claus parade, and Elaine and Stephen can watch it from a window in the building.

Analysis

At the beginning of this section, the reader begins to suspect the mature Elaine has some issues with self-esteem, as she observes people around her and compares herself unfavorably to them. When she visits the gallery where her retrospective is to be held, she is at first disturbed to see her picture has been defaced, then takes it as a sign she may have accomplished more than she thought. She has more thoughts about Cordelia, which seems to indicate there is more than a casual nostalgic intent behind these thoughts.



Since her family spends the summers traveling around the forests of northern Canada, Elaine's childhood experiences are anything but typical. In her schoolbooks, she sees that her family is different, and she wishes for friends who are girls. She begins to draw girls in dresses, the first sign that her art tends to reflect her innermost feelings. The new house in Toronto is a disappointment because she has visualized an ideal life, and her circumstances do not live up to her expectations. The Santa Claus parade opens another new world for her, showing her there are going to be more and more new experiences in her new life.

Vocabulary

duvet, provincial, ethnic, flourish, ostentation, vindictive, implacable, oppressive, evasion, tawdry, retrospective, obsolescence, collusion, nomads, carapace, rebuke, lassitude, waning, daunting, truncated



Chapters 8-15

Summary

Mature Elaine wakes up feeling worthless, useless, and old. She has doubts about the black dress she brought for the opening of the retrospective and decides to look for a new one in bargain shops. While she is trying on dresses, a hand reaches under the dressing room partition and grabs her wallet out of her purse, which she has carelessly left on the floor. She steps on the hand, it drops the wallet, and Elaine hears the sound of school girl giggling. She leaves the dressing room in an attempt to apprehend the offenders, but they are gone. She curses Cordelia.

Stephen and Elaine finally begin to attend a public school. Stephen is happy to be among rowdy boys, but Elaine is unsure around the girls. Carol Campbell makes friends with her, and they start walking home together. Elaine she visits Carol's house; it is very elegant and full of fine furnishings, including a piano. When Carol visits Elaine's house, she is amazed at the crudeness of the unfinished house and its furnishings and tells people at school that Elaine's family is outlandish, but she says it in a way that is intended to create interest, not disdain.

On Saturdays, Elaine begins going to play at Carol's house instead of going to the building. Carol relishes introducing Elaine to new things; she cannot believe there is so much that Elaine does not know about. She says Elaine is her best friend. Another friend, Grace Smeath, joins their Saturday play group. She is one year older and takes the lead in deciding which games, all typical girl games, they will play. Elaine sees her relationship with the two girls as simpler as and less demanding than her games with her brother, and thinks it is "mostly a relief."

At Christmas, Elaine opens her presents from Carol and Grace before she opens any others. Elaine is spending more time at Grace's house. Carol is not invited because Grace says only one friend can visit because of her mother's bad heart, which requires she rest on the couch every afternoon.

As weather gets warmer with the arrival of spring, they start playing marbles at school; Elaine is not a very good shooter and loses a lot of her marbles except for a blue cat's eye, her favorite, which she keeps in her purse. Stephen, on the other hand, is an excellent shooter and accumulates a huge collection he lines up in jars. He takes the best marbles and puts them in one jar, then buries the jar in the ravine. He makes a treasure map of the location, and buries that, too.

Before school is out for the year, the family leaves to go up north for the summer. Elaine is unhappy about being taken away from "the life of girls," but she becomes adjusted to the idea as she sees all the familiar places she has visited. Elaine is back to playing games with Stephen: games that he chooses and wins. In September they come back



down from the north, and there is a new house next door. Grace and Carol are with a girl that Elaine has never seen before.

The new girl is Cordelia, who lives with her parents and two older sisters in a new neighborhood east of Elaine's house. Cordelia has lots of clothes for playing dress-up, and the girls act out plays in the dining room. The four of them walk home from school together, and Cordelia talks about how the stream is made of dissolved dead people because it flows out of the cemetery; if you drink from it or step into it or get too close to it, dead people will come out and take you with them. Elaine knows it is just a game, but she half-believes it.

At school, Elaine's teacher is Miss Lumley, who is rumored to take off her navy woolen bloomers in the back of the class in warm weather. She is a harsh teacher, and handles the strap herself instead of sending students to the principal. Elaine is uncomfortably aware they are members of the same gender, so would likely have some things in common.

Analysis

In this section, the reader gets a stronger impression of mature Elaine's lack of self-esteem and her seeming fixation on Cordelia. Flashing back to her first experience with public school, she is introduced to many new concepts, and establishes her first friendship with another girl, Carol. When Elaine visits Carol's house, she is aware of the many ways their households are different from each other. Carol's description of Elaine's family as outlandish is not intended to offend Elaine, but it does draw attention to her dissimilarity. When Grace Smeath begins joining them on Saturdays, Elaine begins to learn a little about the politics of childhood. Grace is a year older, and tends to get her way, just because the younger girls consider it a privilege to be able to play with her.

When she opens Carol's and Grace's Christmas presents before any others, Elaine is demonstrating the importance of her friends to her. As Elaine visits Grace's house without Carol, a new dynamic in the relationship of the three is developing, as one is being left out. Stephen enjoys winning the marbles at school and collecting them in jars, but he reaches a point where he does not need to play with them anymore, so he buries them. Elaine wants to keep her favorite marble as well, but she prefers to keep it close to her.

When her parents take them away before the end of school, Elaine feels resentful, at first, but quickly adapts to the rhythms that have defined her early life. Once again, Stephen is her only playmate, they play his games, and she loses gracefully. When she sees the new girl with Carol and Grace, she is mildly curious, but not alarmed. Cordelia's outlandish stories are told in such a persuasive manner that Cordelia half-believes them, even though they cannot be true. This shows that Cordelia has a flair for drama.



Vocabulary

futilely, stealthily, reproachful, wheedling, coagulated, compelling, antimacassar, phosphorescent, pungent, reverential, avarice, smelters, slag, sheathes, infestation, implausible, gelid, murky, premonition, skewed, gingerly, culverts, appeasement, superimposed, sacrosanct



Chapters 16-20

Summary

Elaine walks to the gallery and watches her paintings being unpacked. She feels self-conscious in a powder blue jogging suit, critical of her own work, not wanting to look at it very long. She meets Charna, the gallery director, and two other women helping with the exhibit. Another woman, Andrea, comes into the gallery and Elaine is surprised to find out that they have arranged an interview without consulting her. She goes through with the interview, but she remains mostly uncooperative, on the defensive, imagining that Andrea is thinking negative thoughts about her. The interview process makes her very agitated, and she seems to be having some kind of psychotic episode, but she comes back quickly.

One day, Mrs. Smeath invites Elaine to go to church with them. She dresses carefully in her best clothes, but when she gets to Grace's house, she has to borrow a hat from Grace. Elaine is left with a good feeling about the experience, a feeling that, even though she is not sure who he is, God loves her. They go back to Grace's house for Sunday dinner, and Elaine learns more things about the family, and about saying grace over dinner. After dinner they read their Sunday school papers, and she learns more about Jesus with little children. She feels her parents have been keeping an important aspect of life hidden from her, and this is another area where she is behind everyone else. She reads the psalm she has been given to memorize and thinks that heaven and the stars appear different.

Stephen has a secret girlfriend, and Elaine is the only one who knows. She notices her brother has turned into a "stupider, more nervous identical twin of himself," and she has mixed feelings about the situation. She wants to support her brother, but on the other hand, she does not want him to change. In the meantime, she no longer takes boys for granted, and notices how different they are from girls. Stephen's crush does not last long, and soon they are back to their old relationship. He gets a chemistry set and does experiments in the basement. He divides his attention between the chemistry set and a star map.

In November, Cordelia begins digging a big hole in her garden. In one of their acting games, Elaine is dressed up as Mary Queen of Scots and put in the hole. The other girls cover her with scrap wood, shovel soil on top of that, and leave her alone. While she is waiting for them to let her out, her emotions shift from enjoyment of the game, to sadness when it seems as if it is not a game at all, to a sense of betrayal, to terror. The others finally come back and let her out, but she cannot remember if she was crying. Shortly after that, she turns nine; from that point on, she does not remember anything for about two years.



Analysis

Elaine's experience at the gallery spotlights her insecurity and her difficulty in seemingly non-threatening situations. During the interview, as she picks at her fingers and has what seems to be some sort of out-of-body experience, there is a hint of mental dysfunction.

Elaine's first encounter with formal religion is a bit awkward for her, but a positive experience overall. She is fascinated with the concepts she learns about God and Jesus, and she feels included in a universe that is watched over.

Stephen's first crush makes Elaine aware of another dynamic between boys and girls. But his crush seems to have been just one of his interests, and his feelings quickly fade, just as his interest in playing marbles and reading his comic books faded. He moves on to new interests, a chemistry set and star-gazing.

The girls' game-playing takes a sinister turn and leaves Elaine emotionally scarred to the point that her memory is affected. This is the beginning of her fears and insecurities.

Vocabulary

Sanctimoniousness, genuflecting, vicarious, iconoclasm, resonate, circumvent, coda, surreptitiously, crocheted, repudiation, wry, ovipositors, suffused, indeterminate, lethargic, ponderous, conspiratorial, appeased, bereft, derision, invincible, obliterating, mesmerizing, desolating, infused



Chapters 21-27

Summary

While shopping for food, Elaine gets confused and lost in a department store; items in the Girls' Department trigger memories of a string of events in her past. She remembers when Cordelia had so much power over her that she resorted to peeling the skin off of her feet. Her memory shifts to the time when her daughters were born, and how she had thought she should have had sons because she did not understand girls. She is startled back to reality by a saleslady and has no idea of how long she has been in that reflective state.

The next time the Santa Claus parade passes in front of the building, Cordelia, Grace, and Carol are invited to watch from the building, but Elaine has to watch from a separate window as punishment for something she has supposedly said. When Elaine's father comes in to check on them, Cordelia puts on an act so that he does not suspect that his daughter is being mistreated by her friends. Under the guise of "friendship" Cordelia gets more and more obsessed about improving Elaine. Consequently, Elaine worries more and more about herself, thinking there is something wrong with her. She continues to believe the girls are her friends and are only trying to help her, and she cannot tell anyone what is going on because she does not want to lose their friendship. The adult Elaine watches anxiously for signs of hypocrisy in her daughters' friends.

Even when Cordelia is acting normally, Elaine feels as if she is being watched. On Sundays she continues to attend church with the Smeaths, and earns perfect scores on her memorization quizzes. Grace reports this to Cordelia, and Elaine is criticized for being too good. The next week she is criticized for getting stupider because she intentionally misses half of the questions. In Sunday School she still wants to believe all the good things about God and Jesus, but it is beginning to seem more and more impossible.

At Christmas, Cordelia tells Elaine that there is no Santa Claus. For Christmas dinner, the family is joined by one of Elaine's father's students, a young Indian man named Mr. Banerji. Elaine notices the ragged skin around his nails, and senses he is also miserable. Both of them pick at their food.

One day a week, Elaine takes her neighbor's baby around the block in his baby carriage for about an hour. Mrs. Finestein pays her twenty five cents for this job. Cordelia and the other girls approach her and give her a hard time about taking this job. She begins to be afraid for the baby's safety. She gives up the job, telling Mrs. Finestein she has too much schoolwork. She cries about it, but Mrs. Finestein is very sympathetic and gives her an extra nickel. She takes all the money and buys treats for the girls. In the moment just before she gives them the treats, she feels as if she is loved.



One day Elaine is relieved of being obliged to play with the girls when she vomits into the snow in front of them, and they send her home. Elaine feels as if the illness is a safe haven and begins to get sick more often.

This year the family waits until school is out to make the summer trip up north. Elaine feels relieved while she is away, and does not chew on her fingers or peel her feet any more. When she finds a dead raven in the woods, she pokes at it, and considers how it does not feel anything. She starts to have bad dreams, but Cordelia is not in them.

Analysis

When Elaine ends up temporarily lost in a store, everything she sees triggers a negative thought or memory. The girls' dresses take her back to her own school days when she was bullied by Cordelia to the point where she resorted to a form of self-mutilation. Her insecurities about girls continued into her adult life, when she was unsure of her ability to be a good mother to her two daughters.

Spearheaded by Cordelia, the girl's cruelty to Elaine causes her to feel more and more insecure about herself and creates a feeling of anxiety that stays with her through her adulthood and colors her perspective of her daughters and their friends. In spite of all this, she feels she needs to cooperate with them to sustain the "friendship." Since she has never had any other friends, it is possible she does not understand that the dynamics of this relationship are not normal.

Elaine is constantly worried that she is under continuous scrutiny. She finds she can never do anything right, and wonders what she has to do to be perfect. In her frustration, she finds it harder and harder to believe that God cares about her.

Cordelia continues to destroy Elaine's peace of mind by telling her there is no Santa Claus. At Christmas dinner, Elaine recognizes a kindred spirit in Mr. Banerji, who seems to be completely out of his element.

When the girls begin to taunt her as she is taking her neighbor's baby for walks, Elaine becomes anxious about how far their cruelty might go, and imagines that they could even do something to harm the baby. She quits her job because she fears the baby's association with her puts him in danger. Nevertheless, she spends all her money on treats to share with the girls, hoping to "buy" their love. When a stomach bug gives Elaine an indisputable excuse to avoid playing with the girls, she finds a safe haven in illness.

In summer, getting away from her tormentors relieves the tremendous anxiety Elaine feels when she is with them, and she stops her nervous, self-destructive habits. Her discovery of the dead raven makes her consider how the state of being dead makes it impossible for anyone to get to you. Her bad dreams indicate that her subconscious still retains a high level of anxiety, but the fact that Cordelia is never a part of the dreams could mean that her subconscious is making an effort to keep Cordelia out of Elaine's head.



Vocabulary

surly, unguent, evasively, lucidity, foreshortened, complicity, condescending, benign, scrutinized, flaccid, unrelenting, recant, subversive, neologism, effigies, appalled, apprehensive, sternum, elusive, vestiges, demented, atonements, sedately, gyrations, transience



Chapters 28-32

Summary

Elaine tries to help a drunken woman everyone else is avoiding. She helps the woman get up off of the sidewalk and gives her ten dollars, but she does not want to make any personal connections. The woman is delirious, and says Elaine is Our Lady and accuses her of not loving her, making Elaine feel guilty. The woman's green eyes remind her of Cordelia's.

A new school year begins, and Carol and Elaine are now in fifth grade. Their teacher, Miss Stuart is a refreshing change from Miss Lumley, and everyone loves her. Cordelia's behavior toward Elaine is becoming more malicious; Elaine begins to feel numb. She keeps her favorite cat's eye marble in her pocket, and she also thinks about ways of dying. When her mother suddenly tells her she does not have to play with those girls, Elaine wonders what she knows, and worries that she might tell the other girls' mothers.

A young Princess Elizabeth visits Toronto, and will be driving through Elaine's neighborhood. Elaine is excited about the visit, and expects something will change because of it. She climbs to the top of a pile of mud left by construction workers, and when she sees the Princess's car, she imagines herself running to the car and forcing it to stop so the Princess will find out about her difficulties and change things. But in reality, Elaine never moves from her position on the mud pile, and the Princess is driven away.

Miss Stuart assigns an art project where the students are to draw what they do after school. Elaine draws a dark picture of herself in her bed. She worries because no one else has drawn anything like it, and thinks Miss Stuart will not approve. But instead, Miss Stuart seems concerned about why it is so dark and gives her a touch on her shoulder that "glows briefly, like a blown out match." The class has a Valentine party and Elaine gets more valentines from boys than the other girls do, but she tells the girls that she did not get very many.

When Elaine's mother is taken away one night in an ambulance, her father tells her there was an accident; but Stephen tells her that their mother lost a baby. Elaine does not believe him. When their mother comes home, she is weak and frail, and takes a while to get back to her old self. Elaine starts having bad dreams again.

One Saturday, Elaine's father takes them to the building for a "Conversat," when the department opens its doors to the public. When Elaine gets stuck in a crowd, she faints, and Mr. Banerji carries her out into the cold air. She decides this is another way to get out of undesirable places and situations.



One day at school, when Cordelia forces her to stand by herself against the wall of the playground, Elaine faints again and gets a cut on her forehead, which subdues Cordelia temporarily. She finds that she can almost faint at will, and does it the next time Cordelia tells her to stand against the wall. Eventually, she arrives at a point where she can fill her head with music and “spend time outside her body without falling over.”

Analysis

Even when she helps a woman that no one else will help, Elaine still has the sense she is good, but not good enough. In these insecure moments, she continues to be reminded of Cordelia.

Although some aspects of the fifth grade are an improvement over the year before, Cordelia’s treatment of Elaine is only getting worse. Elaine’s emotional numbness is a defense mechanism against the torment, and her constant possession of the cat’s eye marble, something she loves that is all her own, is intended to reassure her. Elaine’s mother seems to know she is trapped in a bad situation, but she feels helpless to get her out of it.

Elaine sees Princess Elizabeth as someone who has the power to change things for the better, and she imagines that she can make the princess’s car stop and help her. In reality, she is powerless to carry out her plan.

When Elaine’s dark spirits spill into her art project, Miss Stuart responds with concern instead of the disappointment that Elaine had anticipated. Elaine feels she has found an ally. She chooses to hide the fact that she received more valentines from boys than the others; she is evidently trying to keep from starting any new trouble. Her mother’s miscarriage is a new cause for anxiety because she does not understand what has happened, and she does not believe Stephen when he tries to explain. She notices her mother has lost her vitality, and the bad dreams are brought on again by this new anxiety and confusion.

Elaine’s fainting spell at the Conversat represents another option for getting out of places and situations she does not want to be in. She sees it as a way of stepping out of her own body, “out of time or into another time.” When she is placed in an unpleasant situation, she is able to faint at will. As it occurs to her that she has discovered a way of finding peace, she is eventually able to mentally detach herself from reality without actually losing consciousness.

Vocabulary

resplendent, obsolescence, surfeit, inertia, triptych, bas-relief, surrogate, vengeful, undulating, incongruous, dollops, draggled, incomprehensible, enigmatic, brusque, boisterous, scoffed, solicitous, tremulous, reconciliation, superimposed



Chapters 33-36

Summary

At one of the Smeath Sunday dinners, Elaine overhears Mrs. Smeath and her sister, Aunt Mildred, talking about Elaine and calling her a heathen. She learns that Mrs. Smeath has known about the way she has been treated and has done nothing to stop it. She hears her say it is God's punishment and it serves her right. When Mrs. Smeath finally sees Elaine, she knows she has heard what they have said about her, but only gives a smug smile and says, "Little pitchers have big ears." Elaine knows she will never be able to forgive Mrs. Smeath for this, and believes this actually makes her a heathen. She cannot say the Lord's Prayer anymore because she cannot "forgive those who trespass against [her]."

When Elaine finds a picture of the Virgin Mary, she recognizes it as being from the Catholic school, Our Lady of Perpetual Help. She has seen pictures of the Virgin Mary at Sunday School, but they have portrayed the mother of Jesus more as human and less as a deity. She knows that the Smeaths do not approve of Catholics, so she decides to pray to the Virgin Mary instead of God.

One day in March, the girls are walking home from school and there is no tension because Cordelia is having a friendly day. When Cordelia falls down accidentally, the girls think she has done it intentionally, and they respond by laughing. The laughter enrages Cordelia, and she accuses Elaine of laughing at her, which Elaine denies. This only makes Cordelia more angry, and she says that Elaine is lying. She throws Elaine's hat over the bridge down into the ravine and tells Elaine to go get it. Elaine is too afraid to refuse, so she climbs down to get it, but she breaks through the ice on the creek. Instantly immobilized by the cold and the shock, she looks up at the bridge, and sees the other girls are gone. She feels herself beginning to lose consciousness and imagines that dead people from the cemetery are gathering around her. She sees a vision of the Virgin Mary floating down from the bridge, enveloping her in a shroud of warm air and encouraging her to climb out of the ravine. Then she sees her mother, who has been looking for her, and the warm feeling disappears as her mother embraces her and takes her the rest of the way home. She does not tell her mother what really happened; she only says that a lady helped her.

After this incident, Elaine is feverish and has to stay in bed for two days. Cordelia calls to apologize for not waiting, but Elaine knows she does not mean it. When she goes back to school, Grace and Cordelia are "polite but distant." Soon Cordelia tries to get back into the routine of torture by saying Elaine should be punished for telling on them. This time Elaine stands up to her and walks away. She compares the feeling to "stepping off a cliff, believing the air will hold you up. And it does."

She realizes that all the torture was part of Cordelia's twisted game, that she had never needed to be improved. She stops going to church, walks home a different way, and



refuses to play with them, wondering why she was never able to do this before. She spends her time reading her brother's comic books, and she identifies with the super heroes.

Analysis

Elaine feels betrayed by Mrs. Smeath, a grown-up who should know better, and she feels shame and hatred. She feels she probably is a heathen because she does not live up to the standards of her recent religious education. She thinks God only forgives people who are sorry for their sins, and Mrs. Smeath never gave a sign of being sorry.

When Elaine studies the picture of the Virgin Mary, she sees her in a different light than the way she has been portrayed at the protestant church. Elaine's decision to pray to the Virgin Mary instead of God seems dangerous to her because in her mind it is rebellious. But the decision may also indicate that, even though she has given up on God, she still has a need for some higher power she can reach out to.

Cordelia is mortified she has fallen in front of the other girls and takes it out on Elaine. Throwing Elaine's hat into the ravine is her way of re-establishing her position of power. When Elaine breaks through the ice, her "friends" disappear instead of helping her. Shock and cold prevent Elaine from trying to climb out of the ravine until her vision of the Virgin Mary brings a sense of warmth and caring and gives her the will to make the climb.

When she sees her mother, the warmth that has given Elaine the strength to climb out of the ravine disappears, and she puts herself in her mother's care. Even with all she has been through, she cannot make herself tell her mother about Cordelia and the other girls, so she fabricates what happened to her and how she was able to get out of the ravine.

After the incident, Cordelia does not wait very long before she tries to get back to bullying Elaine, but now Elaine has the strength to stand up to Cordelia and walk away. She feels that it is taking a terrible chance, but once it is done, it seems easy. She feels almost heroic for finally getting herself out of the situation.

Vocabulary

etiquette, festooning, compunction, rote, capillaries, incinerate, inexorable, insolent, blasphemous, euphoria, lethargy, unrepentant, contradict, indifferent, enticing, jeering, substantial



Chapters 37-40

Summary

As a mature woman, Elaine visits churches, supposedly to see the art. She pays particular attention to statues of the Virgin Mary in Catholic churches. She is disappointed in most of them until she visits a church when she is on a trip to Mexico with her second husband Ben. She sees a statue of the Virgin Mary that looks more like the vision that had saved her. This one has items pinned to her skirt, and she is called the Virgin of lost things. This statue seems more real to Elaine than the others, and Elaine thinks she could light a candle and pray to her, but she does not know what to pray for. When Ben finds her, she is on the floor of the church, cramped and stiff as if she has been there for a long time. She does not remember how she got there.

In the year Elaine is in the sixth grade, Cordelia and Grace have both skipped a grade. Elaine does not remember any of the things that happened to her, and she does not know what her mother is talking about when she refers to “that bad time.” Cordelia and Grace graduate and go to different schools. Cordelia is going to a private school for girls. Elaine skips seventh grade and goes to eighth, and gets her hair cut, tired of being a child. She cleans out some of her childhood things, including her cat’s eye marble, and stores them in the trunk in the cellar, even though she cannot remember their significance.

The day before the first day of high school, Cordelia’s mother phones to ask if Cordelia and Elaine can walk to high school together. Elaine does not object, but her mother seems anxious. They are now in the same grade at school because Cordelia failed a year. She was also expelled from the private girls’ school.

At Burnham High School, Elaine fakes her way through prayers but does not know why. In gym class, she is self-conscious; she feels small, compared to the other girls. She spends time with Cordelia, eating lunch with her in the cafeteria, and walking home with her after school. Cordelia is interested in typical teenage things, like boys and movie stars, but Elaine does not feel the same way. Cordelia’s older sisters Mirrie and Perdie seem ultra-sophisticated, and they tend to criticize Cordelia. Cordelia starts shoplifting, but Elaine does not participate.

Stephen gets a summer job at a boys’ camp, so he does not make the trip up north with his family. Elaine is on her own, fishing by herself and sending letters back and forth to Stephen and Cordelia. She feels that Cordelia’s letters have a false ring to them.

Analysis

Once Elaine discovers the statue of the Virgin Mary that seems to resemble the one in her childhood vision, it seems that her time spent in visiting random churches has actually been a search for this particular image of the Virgin Mary. This one seems more



real to Elaine than the others she has seen, and she thinks about praying to her, but does not think she can. When Ben finds her, though, she is in a position where she may have been praying, after all, but she does not remember.

Elaine skips to the eighth grade and seems to be settling into a new, calm routine, apparently having blocked out the memories of the things that went on with Cordelia and the other girls.

The request for Cordelia and Elaine to walk to high school together comes as a surprise, but of course Elaine does not remember that Cordelia is her mortal enemy. The reader has to wonder about Cordelia's motives in making this request: has her memory also failed? Or has she always believed that her games were just innocent play? It is also interesting to note she has been getting into trouble at school and failing a grade, when she had previously been able to skip a grade.

At their new high school, Cordelia and Elaine go back to spending time together. Elaine does not feel that she fits in with the other students because she is younger. At Cordelia's house, her sisters pick at her, almost in the same way that she used to criticize Elaine. She seems to be excited by taking risks, and "pinching" things from stores.

Without Stephen on the summer trip, Elaine is feeling surly. Now she stays in touch with Cordelia while she is away.

Vocabulary

clerestories, naves, foibles, biers, effigies, insipid, visceral, hedging, derisive, fraudulent, garishly, emanations, impervious, mortifying, chagrin, fanatical, devastating, claustrophobic, manic, soufflé, cerise, benign, imbecility, avuncular, discrete



Chapters 41-46

Summary

Charna is excited about the newspaper piece on Elaine's retrospective, but Elaine sees all the comments in a negative light. Again she imagines that Cordelia will see the article, come to the exhibit, and see herself. Elaine has only painted one picture of Cordelia by herself. "It was hard . . . to fix Cordelia in one time, at one age."

When Cordelia and Elaine enter tenth grade, Elaine is still younger and smaller. She is studious in school, but Cordelia does not put much effort into her studies.

Cordelia brings up the subject of Grace, but Elaine has only a vague memory of her. Cordelia starts making fun of the family, and Elaine joins in the mockery. She gets a savage enjoyment out of the game, which she does not understand, but does not question. They go into the cemetery, and Elaine makes up stories that make Cordelia uneasy. Elaine is surprised at how much pleasure this gives her, and it gives her a sense of power over Cordelia. She feels that she has suddenly become stronger than Cordelia. When Cordelia throws herself down on the ground, Elaine does not like seeing her spread out in the snow, but she does not know why.

By the time the girls have reached eleventh grade, Elaine is as tall as many of the other girls. She has developed a mean mouth, and her father warns her that her sharp tongue will lead to trouble someday, but she enjoys the risk. She begins to belittle Cordelia.

Elaine tries to help Cordelia get ready for a physics test, but Cordelia has trouble focusing because she is not interested. Elaine arranges double dates with only marginal success. Cordelia is not as comfortable with boys and she is too attentive, making them uneasy. A theatrical troupe visits the school to perform Macbeth; Cordelia joins the cast as a serving woman and a soldier, and she also acts as the props assistant. As the props assistant, she makes a decision that results in a comical effect instead of the intended tragic one. Cordelia is mortified, and Elaine makes fun of her the next day. She wonders how she can be so mean to her best friend. In Grade thirteen, they are lab partners in Biology. Cordelia is too squeamish to dissect worms, frogs, and crayfish, so Elaine does it for her. Cordelia fails the mid-year Zoology test but does not seem to care. Elaine is angry that Cordelia cannot learn.

Cordelia is frightened of not pleasing her father. She tells Elaine about getting in trouble with her father when she was little. She says she used to stand up to him and that he had an unpredictable temper. It becomes more evident that Cordelia has insecurities of her own. When Cordelia brings up something from their earlier friendship, Elaine has a flash of memory that gives her a feeling that she has just avoided danger. She begins to avoid Cordelia but she does not know why. Cordelia is failing more tests and Elaine has stopped helping her because she knows it is useless. When Cordelia changes schools, she continues to phone Elaine, but when the family moves to a larger house in a ritzier



neighborhood, Elaine thinks that will be the end of their communication. Elaine takes her grade 13 final exams, and she feels especially confident about her success in Biology. In the middle of the test, she suddenly realizes that she does not want to work in the field of Biology after all; she is going to be a painter.

Elaine goes to see Cordelia at her new house, although she does not really want to. Cordelia's appearance has changed drastically, and her attitude seems to be artificially cheerful, which frightens Elaine. Cordelia has failed the year and has a tutor, but she boasts about how she can manipulate her tutor and fool her parents. She tells Elaine that she sleeps a lot instead of studying, and that she has been getting into her father's whiskey. Elaine tries to encourage Cordelia, but Cordelia is very resistant. Instead, she brings up the past again, looking back "as if it was her golden age." Elaine does not want her to remember any more and wants to leave before Cordelia's mother comes home. She knows Cordelia is disappointed and feels a little dismayed that she is being cruel and indifferent to her friend, but she is also relieved to be able to get away.

Analysis

Even as an adult, Elaine still has insecurities that cause her to imagine that everything that is said about her is negative. In considering a way to paint Cordelia, she has had trouble deciding which Cordelia she should paint. In the incident when Cordelia throws herself down into the snow, the sight apparently stirs a buried memory in Elaine, but it is too deep for Elaine to know what bothers her about it. Elaine has only a vague memory of the Smeath family, but she gets irrational pleasure from creating brutal jokes about them. Although she does not understand why she enjoys it so much, she is unconsciously seeking vengeance for the injustices she suffered at their hands. When Elaine discovers she has the ability to make Cordelia uncomfortable, there is a shift in power, and she relishes the thought that she has become the stronger one.

When one of Cordelia's reminiscences triggers a brief flash of her nine-year-old face in Elaine's memory, she experiences an unpleasant feeling that she does not understand. Even though the flash is only momentary, it initiates a change in their relationship. Elaine gives up on trying to help Cordelia because she finds her lack of interest and inability to concentrate very frustrating.

Elaine is taken aback by the physical change in Cordelia when she goes to visit. Even though she has failed the current year and only has one more chance to get into university, Cordelia takes a nonchalant attitude toward her tutor and her studies. She seems to be suffering from depression, sleeping when she is supposed to be studying.

Cordelia's efforts to put the past in a good light only stir resistance in Elaine. She does not want Cordelia to keep remembering things; she wants to protect herself from the darker memories. She considers that the past is special to Cordelia because it was better than what she has now. When she leaves, she knows that Cordelia is aware she is just trying to get away, but they part politely.

Vocabulary

annunciation, eclectic, tentative, pragmatic, mausoleums, malevolent, modulated, repartee, annihilating, disdain, vertigo, shards, incarnation, seductive, cretin, subliminal, contingency, subverted, esoteric, collusion, impertinence, abject, pensive, explicate, squalid



Chapters 47-55

Summary

Back in the present, Elaine has a lunch date with Jon. She recalls the turbulence of their relationship and how they used to throw things at each other. Now that they are safe from each other, she can think about him with fondness. She realizes that for her, it is easier to forgive men than it is to forgive women. After their lunch, she feels good about their current relationship, and thinks about the painting she calls "Falling Women," which was really about the men who caused women to fall.

Elaine enrolls in a night class called "Life Drawing." Mr. Hrbik is very critical of everyone's work as they try to reproduce an image of a nude model; he tells Elaine she has drawn a corpse. During the day, Elaine attends a survey class at the Royal Ontario Museum. She is taking Art and Archaeology courses to reassure her parents, who are afraid she will not be able to make a living as an artist.

Elaine does not date in the old way anymore; instead she meets with other students from her Life Drawing class for beers at a local beer parlor. The boys make fun of Mr. Hrbik, calling him Uncle Joe. She does not like it, but she never speaks up. When Susie, the only other girl in the class who is close to Elaine's age, joins the group, she defends Mr. Hrbik, and Elaine is irritated because she never had the guts to do it. Susie knows some personal information about Mr. Hrbik, and Elaine wonders how she knows.

Elaine figures out that Susie and Mr. Hrbik are engaged in a love affair, and believes that Susie is toying with him. When Susie finds out that the affair is not a secret, she starts talking about "Josef" and her, which irritates the boys in the class. Elaine feels that Mr. Hrbik needs protecting, or even rescuing.

Elaine still lives at her parents' house, but she has moved into the cellar and created her own environment there. They find out that Stephen was arrested in California. He had trespassed onto military property while he was following butterflies, but the officials did not believe his story. Elaine's parents do not know whether to be amused or alarmed. Elaine muses that what she has always believed to be bravery in Stephen may only be an "ignorance of consequences."

Mr. Hrbik seduces Elaine when she comes to his office for a final evaluation of her work. When she asks about Susie, Josef acts as though he does not remember to whom she is referring. Elaine thinks they have broken up. The affair continues through the summer, and she sees Josef twice a week. Eventually she knows Josef is still seeing Susie after all, but he has not told Susie about Elaine. Josef has told Elaine that Susie wants to get married, and he acts resentful about it. Elaine does not want to put herself into the same category as Susie, having "come to think of marriage as dishonorable, a crass trade-off rather than a free gift." She will be dedicated to her painting. As they eat snails in a French restaurant, it occurs to Elaine that she is miserable.



The next time she sees Cordelia is when they meet for coffee. Cordelia looks greatly improved from their last meeting. Cordelia remembers the phase when she pinched things from shops and says she liked doing that because it was something she could have. Elaine is not sure what she means by that. She does not tell Cordelia about Josef.

As the relationship continues, Josef makes changes to Elaine's appearance, and she reminds herself of a pre-Raphaelite painting. Josef is getting tired of teaching drawing and wants to move to the U.S. to direct films. He does not say anything about taking Elaine with him, and she does not ask. He asks her if she would do anything for him, and she surprises herself by saying no. He responds sadly that he didn't think so. He rarely mentions Susie any more, and Elaine wonders if Josef and Susie are now discussing her. She has a low opinion of Susie, thinking of her as a weak woman made spineless by love, as Elaine herself is.

One day Jon invites Elaine to have a beer with him and she agrees, thinking back to the comfortable old days. But now, with just the two of them, it seems awkward. They drink several beers, and he offers to walk her home. Inexplicably, Elaine starts to cry. He takes her to his apartment where they make love.

Analysis

As Elaine and Jon talk over lunch about old times, it is evident there has been pain and turmoil in their past, but the wounds have healed since they have been apart. They seem to realize both of them were at fault for the problems in their relationship. Her association of her *Falling Women* with Jon may indicate she thinks of him as a man who is responsible for hurting women.

Elaine feels comfortable when she socializes with the students in the Life Drawing Class. When they treat her as just another one of the boys, she feels privileged rather than offended. Although she does not like the disrespect they show toward Mr. Hrbik, she does not try to upset the balance by saying anything about it. Still, when Susie speaks up for Mr. Hrbik, it irritates Elaine that she didn't have the guts to do it. She is curious about how Susie knows personal information about the teacher, possibly wondering if there is something between them. When she finds out they are having an affair, her reaction seems to have a personal aspect to it.

Although Elaine feels that living with her parents is humiliating, she is practical enough to understand the economy of not paying to live in a dorm in the same city. The incident with Stephen's arrest makes her wonder if Stephen is as invulnerable as she had always thought he was. Beneath his super intellect, there seems to be a childish innocence that remains unaware of potential jeopardy. This section foreshadows Stephen's tragic death.

Elaine jumps into an affair with her Life Drawing teacher thinking she is finally making the leap into the world of adults. Josef has her on a schedule, and she does not



question what he does when she is not with him. She arranges her life so that she can be at his disposal.

Elaine seems comfortable in with her scheduled liaisons with Josef. The news that Susie is also still in the picture does not seem to bother her. She feels superior to Susie because she does not share the need to be married. In spite of all her positive self-talk, Elaine realizes she actually feels miserable.

Meeting Cordelia for coffee, Elaine sees yet another version of Cordelia and realizes she is constantly reinventing herself and improvising life as she goes along. She talks about the past again, as if that is something she is determined to hold on to. When she refers to her shoplifting phase as “something she could have” she shows more of her own insecure feelings. Elaine chooses not to tell Cordelia about Josef, a secret that would normally be shared between friends, possibly out of some instinctive need to protect herself.

Josef seems to want to re-create Elaine, to design her like a piece of art. When he says he wants to move to the U.S. he does not mention taking her with him, but when he asks her if she would do anything for him, there is an indication that he might have asked her.

When Elaine and Jon get together, her willingness to submit to his advances seems to indicate she has had a void in her life that she needed to fill.

Vocabulary

Plaintive, fetish, transcended, ascribe, malevolent, recoil, beleaguered, tactility, ludicrous, austere, ingratiating, craven, ersatz, manqué, anomaly, prosaic, disreputable, inert, petulant, crass, baleful, jocular, deprecating, rudiments, ruminative



Chapters 56-63

Summary

As Elaine leaves the restaurant where she had lunch with Jon, she is pondering many things from an adult perspective. She feels that she would be frantic if one of her daughters fell in love with a man like Josef. A Middle Eastern woman approaches her and asks her for money to feed some war refugees that she has taken in. Elaine thinks that this is the war that killed Stephen.

In a flashback, Elaine returns to school after the summer. She feels treacherous because of the two affairs she has to hide. Last time Elaine had seen Susie she had looked terrible, asking Elaine if she knew of Josef's whereabouts. When Elaine lied and said she did not know, Susie left in a hopeless state.

Susie calls Elaine and asks her to come over, saying something is wrong. Elaine finds Susie's apartment is a bloody mess, and Susie is unconscious in her bed. Elaine has thoughts of sneaking away so that she will not be accused of murder, but she feels Susie's pulse and discovers that she is alive. At the hospital the attendants are scornful, asking if she had used a knitting needle to end the pregnancy. They say stupid kids should have more sense, and Elaine agrees. But she knows inside that she would have done the same thing in Susie's place. At the same time her inner mean voice tells her that it serves Susie right.

When Josef learns of the situation, he is devastated and says that he would have taken care of Susie. Susie has hardened against Josef and refuses to see him. In response, Josef becomes a self-pitying, inconsolable man, and Elaine is beginning to dislike him. The relationship begins to crumble, and Elaine begins to make excuses not to see him. When he approaches her at the university to tell her he is leaving Toronto in despair because of the way she has treated him, it is her mean side that responds.

Now that Jon is the only man in Elaine's life, she decides she is in love with him. He also cares about Elaine, but is far from faithful to her. He is open about his other relationships, which bothers Elaine, but he believes that sexual possessiveness is bourgeois.

Elaine attends university for her Art and Archaeology classes and she takes Advertising art in the evenings. Upon graduation, Elaine discovers there is not much she can do with her degree, so she uses her portfolio from her Commercial Art classes in her search for a job, and is placed in a menial position doing mockups. She gets a furnished apartment, and Jon starts going to her place more than she goes to his.

Stephen sends post cards from all over the world. When he arrives in Toronto to give a lecture, Elaine attends, but the topic is so esoteric that she does not understand anything beyond the introduction. During the reception they have a chance to chat, and



each of them remembers some things that the other does not. When he leaves, Elaine considers having a star named for him for his birthday, but she is not sure birthdays still have any meaning for him.

Elaine discovers she is pregnant, and she is afraid to tell Jon. She thinks about ways she has heard of ending a pregnancy, but when she remembers Susie, she decides she is too frightened to try anything and risk ending up the same way. She feels numb and disgusted with her body because she feels it has betrayed her. Her painting takes on a new dimension as she paints domestic objects that she associates with anxiety. She also begins to paint images of Mrs. Smeath. She feels that Mrs. Smeath knows what is wrong with her, but she is not telling.

Elaine and Jon get married at City Hall and their daughter Sarah is born. Jon loves Sarah, too, and Elaine considers this fact to be a surprise for which she has not finished being grateful. She thinks of Sarah not as a gift she has given Jon, but one he has allowed her.

Elaine and Jon have begun to have secret fights. They are not accepting the fact that they have to be grownups now. Elaine has not been able to spend any time on her own painting, and her hands and eyes have gotten out of practice. Once again, she has lost confidence and worries that all she will ever be is what she is.

As the feminist movement gains momentum, Elaine joins a group of female artists in meetings to discuss feminist issues. They believe that women are in a sorry situation because of men. Elaine feels as if she is on shaky ground because she lives with a man. The meetings do make her feel more powerful in some ways, but they also make her nervous. She does not feel worthy to be among the other women, many of whom have suffered greatly at the hands of men. But she goes to the meetings because she wants to please. She begins painting again, when Sarah is asleep. Jon does not like her to paint at night; he thinks that should be his time. The level of their fights escalates as they start throwing things at each other.

Elaine participates in a group art show, and wanders around drinking wine and looking at all the paintings she has done of Mrs. Smeath. She does not understand why she hates her so much. An angry woman approaches Elaine, accuses her of taking the Lord's name in vain, and throws a bottle of blue ink at one of the paintings of Mrs. Smeath. Elaine is shocked, but the other women gather round and comfort her. She thinks that maybe they do like her, after all, but with women it is hard for her to tell. The incident makes the papers, and Elaine senses that her paintings have some revolutionary power after all. Now she feels that she has achieved a new dimension of heroism.

Seven years have passed since Elaine and Cordelia last saw each other, and suddenly Cordelia calls Elaine asking her to come visit her. As it turns out, she is a patient in a "discreet private loony bin." Elaine is permitted to take Cordelia out for coffee and Danishes, and Cordelia fills her in on the situation. She tells Elaine that "things weren't working out very well," and she had taken some pills. She wants Elaine to come back



and help her run away from the place. Elaine refuses as gently as possible, but inside she is angry with Cordelia for placing her in such a position. Cordelia tells her, "I guess you've always hated me." But Elaine cannot remember ever hating Cordelia. After three months, she sends a cheerful message to Cordelia, saying she will come for a visit. The note comes back in the mail with "address unknown" written on it, and Elaine wonders if it is Cordelia's handwriting.

Analysis

After having lunch with Jon, Elaine is in a speculative mood. When the Middle Eastern woman approaches her and asks for money, she thinks about the war that should have ended when she was a child, but instead has fragmented into many different wars, one of which killed her brother.

As Elaine tries to juggle the two men in her life, it is evident her choices could not be further apart. Jon offers her some escape, a chance to get away from the grownups. On the other hand, she was originally attracted to Josef because he offered her a way into the grown up world.

Josef seems to be getting more possessive of Elaine, and it looks as though he and Susie are not together any more. Elaine has not had much respect for Susie up to this point, but when she sees what she went through because of Josef, her opinion changes, for the most part. Nonetheless, there still seems to always be a mean side of her that enjoys witnessing the suffering of others. It is an interesting coincidence that her thoughts concerning Susie are the same words that Mrs. Smeath once said concerning Elaine.

The crisis has given Susie the strength to break it off with Josef. Josef's grief irritates Elaine, and her mean side takes over. She treats Josef badly, compelling him to leave Toronto.

While Elaine believes she is in love with Jon, she is not completely comfortable in such an open relationship. When she graduates and gets her own place, it is very different from Jon's filthy place. It is clean, organized, and it does not have all kinds of people coming in and out at all hours. Although Jon teases her about it, he seems to prefer her new place over his.

Seeing Stephen again, all Elaine can think about is how brilliant he looks. When they try to relive old times, they do not remember the same things, and Stephen seems reluctant to recall the person he used to be. She realizes how detached he is from ordinary life, and decides he probably does not even observe his own birthday.

Elaine's pregnancy comes as a shock. She gives up her brief consideration of ending it when she remembers the horror of Susie's experience. She does not want to tell Jon because she is afraid of what his reaction might be. She feels that this pregnancy is just one more example of how she cannot do anything right, and becomes compelled to paint pictures of the judgmental Mrs. Smeath.



Initially, Elaine is grateful to Jon for accepting and loving their baby. However, with the added responsibility of a baby to care for, it is time for them both to be grown up, and this is something neither of them is willing to do. Their fights are selfish and childish. Under the new burden of motherhood, Elaine does not have the time or the inclination to keep up with her painting, and her old insecurities about herself come back in full force.

Joining other women artists in the feminist movement exposes Elaine to women who actually hate men. She does not feel that she is qualified to contribute to the discussion. She finds time to paint when Sarah is asleep, but this creates another problem in her relationship with Jon. Their fights have begun to border on violence, and Elaine realizes what a fine line there is between histrionics and murder.

At the combined art show, Elaine continues to feel insecure even as people compliment her on her work. She wonders about her hatred for Mrs. Smeath, and where it could have come from. When one of her pieces featuring Mrs. Smeath becomes the target of “some religious nut case,” Elaine is comforted by the others and considers the possibility that their concern for her is genuine. The incident has put her in a spotlight, and she feels vindicated.

When Cordelia calls her asking her to visit, Elaine is shocked to see the state that Cordelia is in and to know what she has done. She feels sympathetic, but when Cordelia asks for her help to run away, she declines. Elaine considers many possibilities of what may have happened to Cordelia when her note is returned unopened, and none of them have dark undertones for Cordelia. Her dreams about Cordelia, however, are very dark.

Vocabulary

maundering, duplicitous, doleful, waylays, nebulous, bourgeois, viscous, menial, taciturn, parameters, iconic, banality, concession, crux, capitulation, austere, histrionics, elitist, defunct, aesthetic, plebian, desecrated, audacious, abrasive, culpable



Chapters 64-66

Summary

Elaine wants to see the roof bar of the Plaza Hotel again, so she goes there for a drink with Jon, even though her memories of it are connected to Josef. Afterward, they go back to Jon's studio and make love. It is a different experience now, mature, solemn, and comfortable. She recognizes Jon's rhythm, which has not changed, and it is hard to remember what they used to fight about. They no longer feel the old anger; neither do they feel the jealous lust that drove their relationship. Now there is fondness, and regret. She does not feel that she is being disloyal to Ben, just loyal to something that has nothing to do with him. She knows it is something she will never do again.

Back in the days of Elaine and Jon's marriage, things begin spiraling out of control. Elaine has stopped painting, even though she has received a grant. She has stopped going to the meetings because they make her feel worse, and she avoids her friends. Once again her insecurities and anxieties are haunting her and she feels worthless. One night she does not think Jon will come back at all, and she hits bottom. She hears a voice telling her to "do it," and she cuts her wrist with an Exacto knife. Jon finds her and takes her to the emergency room, and they both say it was an accident. After she has been treated, Elaine thinks about the voice she heard. "It was not a frightening voice, in itself. Not menacing but excited, as if proposing an escapade, a prank, a treat. Something treasured, even secret. The voice of a nine-year-old child."

Ultimately, Elaine decides to leave Jon and Toronto. She is afraid that if she stays she will try again to kill herself, and the city will provide the method. Her only certainty is that she does not want to leave Sarah motherless. Jon catches her trying to leave and will not stop her. She takes Sarah and they ride the train to Vancouver. It takes a while, but eventually she is able to start painting again and earns a minor reputation. In the world of art, there is a lot of focus being placed on the situation of women, and she is invited to take part in group showings. Jon comes to visit in a tentative effort to reconcile, but it does not work out and they get a long-distance divorce. She starts selling some of her paintings and making a name for herself. There are a few men in and out of her life, but she does not stay in relationships very long, not wanting to expose herself to rejection. When she meets Ben in a supermarket, they settle into an easy, comfortable relationship that makes her happy. They get married and have another daughter, Anne.

Analysis

Elaine and Jon both seem to sense that they are meant to have one final encounter. There is still a fondness for each other, but the passion and energy has dissipated along with the anger.



In flashback, Elaine becomes severely depressed by the almost-constant fighting with Jon. Under the encouragement of a disembodied voice, Elaine attempts to end the fighting for good. Jon supports her in her efforts to hide the truth of her injury from the people in the Emergency Room and everyone else. She does not want to be labeled as crazy. When she thinks about the voice, she does not have the impression of anything frightening; it had a quality of excitement about it. Could she have been the nine-year-old child she heard encouraging her to “do it”?

Elaine feels that living in Toronto has been a big part of all her problems. If she is to have any hope for happiness, she must leave not only Jon, but the city that seems to want to destroy her. She has to go through a healing process before she is able to feel normal again. Even then, she keeps close watch on herself, stepping back from situations that seem dangerous. She falls in love with Ben because of the small things he does to please her, something that no others have been able to do.

Vocabulary

inscrutably, thrall, invulnerable, conjuring, svelte, discretion, diminuendo, feigning, subterfuges, repudiated, ambiguous, ferment, fervor, conversion, archaic, purblind, Dogmas, quisling, camaraderie, rueful, amiable, gluttonous, mundane, apprehension, judicious



Chapters 67-70

Summary

On the day of the retrospective, Elaine thinks she should go to the gallery to be sure everything is in order. Instead, she is drawn to the cemetery. Some of the houses have carved pumpkins for Halloween, and she reflects on how the holiday is more dangerous now. She feels that the people in Mexico have a more appropriate celebration for All Souls' Eve, and that they have a better way of treating their dead.

It has been five years since Stephen was killed by terrorists during a hijacking. Elaine has some of the facts of his death from witnesses, but she fills in some of the gaps by imagining what Stephen would think and do, and how he would feel. When the hijackers single out Stephen from the other passengers and require him to go to the front of the plane, he is completely cooperative, even polite. When he gets to the door of the plane, they push him out. At some point, he is also shot, and Elaine hopes it was after they threw him out, so he could have experienced a brief moment of pretended flight. Although she doesn't want to, Elaine is the one who goes to identify Stephen's body.

Elaine's parents are devastated by Stephen's death, and they begin to decline. Her father dies, suddenly, and her mother dies a year later of a slow, painful disease. Elaine and her daughters go to visit, and Elaine stays on to help out and try to get her mother to rest and eat. Her mother brings up those girls that gave Elaine a bad time. Elaine does not remember what she is talking about. On a day when she is feeling stronger, Elaine's mother asks her to help sort through the things in the cellar. They start going through the old trunk, and find things from Elaine's and Stephen's childhood, including Elaine's old cat's eye marble. She looks into it, and sees her whole life.

Walking through Toronto again, Elaine discovers that her first elementary school has been torn down and replaced with a new school. She is shocked and bewildered by this discovery. She climbs the steps of the new school and hears children's voices that could belong to any time. She feels as if she is being surrounded by some malevolent force. Mentally, she calls out for Cordelia to get her out of this—she does not want to be nine years old forever.

Analysis

When Elaine goes out in Toronto, everything she sees reminds her of how much time has passed and how different things are.

Stephen's tragic death during a hijacking is presented in an oblique way; the nationality and motive of the hijackers are never mentioned. In this way, emphasis is placed on the way that random violence can strike anywhere, any time, and can happen to anybody. As Elaine contemplates Stephen's last few minutes, she imagines him eating a sandwich and theorizing possible outcomes of the situation. In her mind, he never



looked at the situation from a personal level, and was undoubtedly completely surprised at his ultimate fate. She is reluctant to identify Stephen's body because not doing so would make it easier to believe that he is not dead.

When Elaine stays with her mother to help her out during her illness, they have the opportunity to do a lot of talking. Elaine's traumatic childhood experiences are buried so deeply in her memory that even her mother's detailed description of the event does not mean anything to her. Ultimately, it is looking through the cat's eye marble that enables Elaine to "see" what happened to her.

Being at the site of her elementary school produces a surprising physical reaction in Elaine. Even though the original building is no longer there, she still feels the negative atmosphere that kept her emotionally paralyzed when she was a child. She feels that she cannot get out of this nine-year-old state of mind without Cordelia's help.

Vocabulary

desultory, doggedly, infinitesimal, dun, ptomaine, furtively, soporific, unfathomable, tremulous, repository, regalia, malevolent



Chapters 71-73

Summary

On the night of the retrospective, Elaine dresses in her new black dress and goes to the gallery early. She walks around the exhibit, studying her paintings. After her time of reflection she has come to believe that she may have misunderstood the motives of Mrs. Smeath, and has gone for vengeance instead of justice in painting her. Her newer paintings depict other significant events and people in her life.

During the event, Elaine keeps searching the crowd for Cordelia; she knows now what happened, but she wants to ask why. Talking to all the strangers makes her feel anxious, and she is so exhausted by the end of the event that she turns down a dinner invitation from Charna. She is disappointed, not in the retrospective, but in her failure to find Cordelia. She had prepared herself for almost anything. What she did not prepare herself for was the possibility she would not see Cordelia.

When Elaine gets back to the studio, she feels shaky. Seemingly random thoughts about Cordelia are going through her head. She has drunk too much wine at the retrospective, and now she is drinking coffee and crying. One of her random thoughts accuses Cordelia of being dead.

Analysis

As she views the paintings of her retrospective, Elaine realizes that they represent her own manipulation of time. She sees that every blank canvas she has ever put a paint brush to has been a vessel for a fragment of her life, both external and internal. Her five more recent paintings represent subject matter that has more to do with love and appreciation than anxiety.

While the retrospective appears to be a success, Elaine just goes through the motions of presiding at her showing. By the end of the evening, Elaine is emotionally exhausted and defeated. The level of her disappointment is an indication that her real purpose in allowing a retrospective of her work to be shown in Toronto was to give her an opportunity to find Cordelia and make sense of the past. After Cordelia does not show up at the retrospective, Elaine feels completely let down. Her expectations of seeing Cordelia somewhere on her return to Toronto have been so high that she has not allowed for any other possibilities. In her inebriated state, she mentally sends Cordelia some of the childish jabs that she and Stephen had exchanged when they were young. When she tells Cordelia to lie down because she is dead, she is conceding the game.

Vocabulary

Nonchalance, symbiosis, desecration, sadistic, feckless, pastiche, impasto, assuage, incipient, nebulae, incandescence, absolved, recalcitrant, dour, quizzical, soignée



Chapters 74-75

Summary

The day after the retrospective, Elaine misses her plane back home because she has fallen asleep in her clothes and overslept. She takes a walk to the bridge and sees that it has been cleaned up. She remembers the time she fell into the creek, thinking that no one really floated down to save her. She sees a vision of the school girl version of Cordelia on the path, looking at her with her closed, defiant expression. Elaine feels the presence of the same dark feelings she experienced during those times, the wish to be loved, the fear. But now she understands these are no longer her own emotions, but Cordelia's, as they always were. Feeling that she is the stronger one now, Elaine does not want Cordelia to stay out in the cold. She tells Cordelia it is all right and she can go home.

On the plane back to Vancouver, Elaine notices two older ladies enjoying each other's company. She watches the ladies with the same interest thirteen-year-old Elaine and Cordelia used to watch the old ladies on the subway. Mentally she tells Cordelia she misses having the chance to sit with her giggling over tea.

Analysis

Elaine tells herself that the Virgin Mary had never really come to save her, even though the image has come back to her now in vivid detail. She stays strong in her denial believing more in silence and darkness than in the possibility of miracles. When the image of Cordelia appears, she does believe in this image, and she feels the pain that had actually been Cordelia's all along. She finds strength in this sudden understanding, and, wanting to protect Cordelia from any more pain, she allows her to leave.

The two old women on the plane bring back memories when Elaine and Cordelia watched old ladies on the bus. Elaine misses those times, but when she knows she will never see Cordelia again what she thinks of is not the things that should have been, but the things that might have been.

Vocabulary

plausible, sinuous, desiccated



Characters

Elaine Risely

Elaine Risely is the narrator and main character. She is a successful painter who is troubled by insecurity and anxiety that stem from a traumatic childhood. She has a nervous habit of chewing her fingers.

Jon

Jon is also an artist, and Elaine's first husband. He has explored many types of art and creates special props for horror movies. A free spirit in his youth, he has finally become a grownup in middle age.

Father

Father is an entomologist who researches infestations in the summer and teaches at the university the rest of the year. His favorite topic of discussion is the way humans will eventually destroy the world.

Mother

Mother is vital, good-natured, and domestic. She is comfortable with who she is and unconcerned about the opinions of others. She is a dedicated mother, but she is helpless at handling Elaine's problem.

Stephen

Stephen is Elaine's older brother. He has always enjoyed collecting things and exploring new interests. As a boy, he plays with Elaine and they are very close. As he grows older, he exhibits extraordinary intelligence, along with some decided eccentricities.

Carol Campbell

Carol Campbell is Elaine's first girl friend. She remains Elaine's friend until Cordelia influences her to join in the bullying. She's interested in boys and is in a hurry to grow up.



Mrs. Smeath

Mrs. Smeath is the subject of many of Elaine's paintings. She is the mother of Grace, another school friend, and she has a passion for saving souls. Her self-righteous attitude toward Elaine created the hatred that drove Elaine to feature her in so many disturbing paintings.

Cordelia

Cordelia is Elaine's friend, her enemy, and her ghost. Her childhood abuse of Elaine undoubtedly springs from an over-dramatic nature combined with her own emotional problems.

Mr. Banerji

Mr. Banerji is an Indian man who is a student of Elaine's father. Elaine recognizes him as someone who seems to be as miserable as she is. Ultimately, he is also treated unfairly when he is not promoted and has to go back to India.

Josef Hrbik

Josef Hrbik is the teacher of the Life Drawing class at the Art College. He is Hungarian and served in the war. He is Elaine's first lover in a rather strange love triangle.



Objects/Places

Toronto

Toronto is the place where Elaine lives and grows up. It becomes a place of stress and bad memories, and she leaves in order to survive.

The Onion Church

The Onion church is what Elaine names the Smeaths' church because of the onion-shaped ventilator on the roof. This church is where Elaine first discovered God, and then lost Him.

The Blue Cat's Eye Marble

The Blue Cat's eye marble is Elaine's favorite marble out of all her marbles, and it becomes her childhood treasure. She keeps it in her purse so that she can't lose it in a game and moves it to her pocket where she uses it to comfort her when Cordelia is bullying her. When she is an adult, it helps her regain her memory.

The Bridge

The Bridge is the site of Cordelia's most vicious attack on Elaine, and it is also the site of her vision of the Virgin Mary.

The Building

The building is what Elaine and Stephen call the Zoology building at the university where their father is a professor. It is a place of biological specimens, windows for watching the Santa Claus parade, and Mr. Banerji.

St. Mary's Public School

St Mary's Public School is the elementary school that Elaine and Stephen attend when they move to Toronto. It has separate entrances and playgrounds for girls and boys, and the windows are always decorated with seasonal designs made from construction paper.



The Ravine

The Ravine lies between Elaine's house and the school, and she has to go over the footbridge to get across it. Children have been instructed never to go down into the ravine, and Carol tells Elaine it's because bad men are lurking down there.

Eaton's Catalogue

Eaton's Catalogue is the catalogue the girls use for cutting out pictures to glue into scrapbooks. It introduces Elaine to the concept of materialism.

Sub-Versions

Sub-Versions is the art gallery that is holding Elaine's retrospective.

The Forests of Northern Canada

The forests of northern Canada are the sites of the family's summer activities. While Elaine's father pursued his research on the insects, the rest of the family camped, picnicked, fished, explored, and played.



Themes

Relationships

Cat's Eye is a study of many different kinds of relationships. Elaine's relationship with her family is happy, stable, and unlike any other family relationships she observes. She has a very close relationship with her older brother Stephen, who is her playmate and mentor. Her first friendships are typical and innocent, but then her relationships with her friends devolve into a twisted game that affects her on a level so deep that she blocks the relationships from her memory. There are several "love" relationships: the bizarre love triangle with Elaine, Josef, and Susie; the tumultuous relationship between Elaine and Jon; and the peaceful, happy relationship between Elaine and Ben. There is also the relationship that Elaine has with her own daughters, which is fraught with anxiety as they are growing up. Elaine's relationships with God, with women and other artists, and with art can also be included under the theme of relationships in the novel.

Memory

The theme of memory is represented on two different levels in the novel. On one level, Elaine's return to Toronto dredges up memories of people, places, and events that she has kept at a distance since she left. The memories of some of the events of her childhood are connected to pain and anxiety, but also with wonder and happiness. As she wanders through the familiar and unfamiliar places of the city, almost everything she sees sends her on a trip back through time.

On the second level, Elaine blocks her memory of the things that happened to her. When the abuse she suffers at the hands of her "friends" reaches critical mass, she subconsciously decides the only way to cope with the emotional pain is to shut down.

Art

The theme of art is prevalent throughout the novel. The first indication that it might become a theme is when Elaine draws little girls in dresses because she is wishing to have friends like the little girls she sees in her books. As she is taking her final Biology test, she has an epiphany that she does not want to study Biology after all; she wants to paint. Her paintings are based on finding expression of her inner feelings through her art, and every crisis has an artistic response, even when the response is the loss of the desire to paint.



Style

Point of View

The novel is told in first person from the perspective of Elaine Risley, the narrator, from her childhood to the present.

Setting

The novel takes place in modern times, with multiple flashbacks going as far back as the end of World War II. The setting is mainly in Toronto, with some excursions to the northern Canadian wilderness.

Language and Meaning

Atwood uses words in the same way that a painter uses paint, as she manipulates words to create vivid images and strong emotional responses. She is particularly adept at creating aphorisms that reveal great truths in few words. Although some of the vocabulary is somewhat specialized, the reader has no trouble following the thread of the novel as it weaves through the world of childhood, art, science, academia, and human nature.

Structure

The seventy-five chapters of the novel are divided into fifteen parts. The narrative is chronologically fragmented, so that at one point it is the present, and at another point it is five years, seven years, or twenty years before. Scenes and characters are splashed throughout the novel without a formal structure, almost like colors in an abstract painting.



Quotes

You do not look back along time but down through it, like water. (1, Part 1)

Cordelia is my friend. She likes me, she wants to help me, they all do. They are my friends, my girl friends, my best friends. I've never had any before and I'm terrified of losing them. I want to please. (21, Part 5)

Little girls are cute and small only to adults. To one another they are not cute. They are life-sized. (22, Part 5)

I begin to spend time outside my body without falling over. . . . My eyes are open but I'm not there. I'm off to the side. (32, Part 6)

I'm not sure, now, that it really was the Virgin Mary. I believe it but I no longer know it. (35, Part 7)

But I can't believe in my own sadness, I can't take it seriously, I watch myself crying in the mirror, intrigued by the sight of tears. (39, Part 8)

I'm not afraid of seeing Cordelia. I'm afraid of being Cordelia. Because in some way we changed places, and I've forgotten when. (41, Part 9)

Fallen women were women who had fallen onto men and hurt themselves. (47, Part 10)

I don't know yet that a man can be admirable in many ways but a jerk in others. Also I haven't yet learned that chivalry in men is idiocy in women: men can get out of a rescue a lot more easily, once they get into it. (51, Part 10)

Love blurs your vision; but after it recedes, you can see everything more clearly than ever. It's like the tide going out, revealing whatever's been thrown away and sunk: broken bottles, old gloves, rusting pop cans, nibbled fishbodies, bones. This is the kind of thing you see if you sit in the darkness with open eyes, not knowing the future. The ruin you've made. (65, Part 11)

An eye for an eye leads only to more blindness. (71, Part 14)



Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

When Elaine returns to Toronto, what is the force that compels her to keep looking for Cordelia?

Topic 2

Why does Elaine's lunch with Jon make her think of her painting Falling Women?

Topic 3

With all her insecurities, why does Elaine allow herself to be seduced by Josef, who is fifteen years older, and then remain in a love triangle with Susie?

Topic 4

Why does Elaine enter into a relationship with Jon while she is still seeing Josef?

Topic 5

Aside from the fact that they are in love with the same man, are there any other parallels between Susie and Elaine?

Topic 6

Why was one cat's eye marble such a significant part of Elaine's life, both as a child and as a grownup?

Topic 7

Considering Elaine's difficulty relating to women, why are the Virgin Mary and Princess Elizabeth so important to her?

Topic 8

As a child, why did Elaine continue in a friendship that caused her so much pain? Why didn't her mother step in?



Topic 9

What is behind Cordelia's desire to torment others? Why is Elaine her main target?

Topic 10

After so much time has passed, why is Elaine still anxious and insecure as an adult?

Topic 11

After so many difficult relationships, what is it about Elaine's relationship with Ben that makes it different?

Topic 12

Explain why Elaine does not accept the vision of the Virgin as real, but she thinks of the vision of Cordelia at the ravine as an opportunity to communicate.