

# **The Cold Song Study Guide**

## **The Cold Song by Linn Ullmann**

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# Plot Summary

The Book "The Cold Song" by Linn Ullmann, is a fictional piece that surrounds the lives of an ordinary family and the death of their nanny, Milla.

The story begins with an older woman getting dressed for her 75th birthday party. Her name is Jenny. She doesn't care for her daughter, Siri, and hates that this party is being done at all. Her daughter owns a restaurant and is a highly acclaimed chef, but Jenny doesn't care. Her daughter annoys her.

The reader isn't given an indication to show what the time period is, but only offers an event. Several boys, who come to the area each summer on holiday, have determined to seal their friendship by each contributing some 'treasure' which they will bury. The secret will bind them, they declare. The action fast forwards to the next summer when they are, once again, reunited. They go to dig up the treasure, but instead, find the body of a two-years-missing girl named, Milla. The boys are upset because they had known Milla, though she had been older than they were.

The action shifts to the past to show John and Siri, and their two daughters, Liv and Alma. Siri owned a business so the couple hired a nanny to watch the children. The nanny's name was Milla. Milla cared for them and began to discover that she had feelings for Jon. Milla was the daughter of a renowned photographer and couldn't seem to stop taking pictures, herself. She liked to take pictures of people when they least suspected it, as if to capture their 'secret selves'. Milla didn't like that she took photographs because a good deal of her childhood was spent seeing a camera lens in front of her mother's face. She resented that her mother used the camera as a way to separate herself from Milla.

The day of the party Milla overheard Siri and her mother arguing in the kitchen. Jenny (Siri's mother) argued bitterly about not wanting a party and not wanting any special foods being made for her. Milla felt badly for Siri and for a moment wished she had her camera so that she could capture the raw emotion on Siri's face. However, she was still upset with Siri for yelling at her for picking a flower in the garden to place in her hair for the party. Deciding that she's going to blow off the party, since Jon wasn't paying any attention to her, Milla changed and decided to go into town to find some fun. That took a turn when she met a boy named KB. After they spent the evening together in town, they went on a walk into the woods and KB raped Milla. He left her there, but returned later to find her walking along the road. He told her at the time to get into the car, that he would at least take her home. She agreed and got in. This was the last time anyone saw Milla alive.

When Milla came up missing, both Siri and Jon were barraged by Amanda (Milla's mother) with text messages about her daughter. Alma, the older daughter of Siri, started to act out in school due to Milla's death and was expelled. This is when the reader learns that Alma knew more than they originally thought about the murder, as does Jenny.



Jon and Siri's marriage continues to slide downhill at a rapid pace and the reader learns that Jon has been having affairs for decades, and that Siri has known about many of them. Finally fed up with Jon, Siri confronts him with all of the hurt and anger she's bottled up for years and makes plans to divorce him. Forensics come back on Milla's body and KB is arrested on suspicion of murder.

Jenny slips on a patch of ice, breaks her hip and ends up an invalid in her own home. She is looked after by her long time roommate, Irma. Irma is determined to keep Siri away from Jenny, but Siri pushes her aside. Siri sees that her mother has the early stages of dementia and is upset. Meanwhile Jon's publisher has had enough of his stalling and asks that he pay back his advances on the third book. He begins to have a nervous breakdown. Siri goes to see her mother and while she is taking care of her, Jenny explains that she never blamed Siri for her brother's death. This brings some comfort to Siri, who has felt the guilt of that moment for many years. Her mother also rambles and tells Siri that the car broke the girl by the road. Siri tries desperately to get her mother to tell her more, but Jenny slips back into her dementia.

It is another summer and Jenny has passed away. Jon and Siri are still together and have moved back into their bedroom together, though they are still distant towards one another. Milla's parents, who have continued to text Jon for many years, come by to visit. They are invited in, Alma confesses that she saw Milla that night, and the two families are able to begin a dialogue.



# Chapter 1

## Summary

Chapter one is in a constant state of flux between past and present. After a brief few pages in the present, where Jenny is getting ready for her 75th birthday, Chapter 1 begins.

The chapter opens up with Simen, Gunnar, and Christian, three boys, digging at dusk under a tree for a treasure pail they had all left there the previous summer. While digging they stumbled upon some bones. The authorities are contacted and it is discovered that the bones belong to a girl who had gone missing two years previously. Her name had been Milla.

From here the reader enters into a flashback of the boys the previous summer trying to decide how to cement their friendships even further, since they only saw each other when their families come to the coast for vacation months. One of the boys decided on a blood pact, where they would cut their hands and shake, making them blood brothers. Naturally, the others weren't into it. Simen, who had gotten a new bike and went everywhere on it, had decided that they needed to bury their most prized possessions together, or at least something of value, in the ground somewhere that they all would be able to locate it the next summer.

Thus, it would be the secret that would keep them together. Simen got his mother's diamond necklace to put in, Christian put in 200 kroner, and finally Gunnar put in his photo album of him and his brother outside the Liverpool stadium. After this flashback, the author fast forwards the action to the following summer where the boys are trying to decide where the pail is and where they should dig. This is prior to finding the bones and calling the authorities.

Simen didn't really see the point since buried treasure was 'buried' treasure. As they passed the green waters of the lake near them Simen had a memory of sitting with Alma, Jenny's granddaughter, and a weird older girl who'd babysat him from time to time. She used to tell him a tale of a boy that had died in the lake. The brother had drowned, and the sister had just watched. Then, as the story went, the mother, in her grief, drugged the daughter and drowned her. Simen recalled asking Alma to stop with the stories but she had just said that it was what real life was about.

A flash forward - but not the present yet - shows the boys trying to decide where to put their treasure and then deciding on a large tree near rocks that seem to make an "S". After this, the story is flash forwarded again to show the boys digging around nightfall, which is when they happened to discover Milla's body under their tree.



## Analysis

Chapter 1 opens up in the present with the boys finding Milla's body. The author finds it necessary to jump back two summers previously to explain why the boys are even digging there in the first place. They have assumed that burying something of value and keeping the secret would serve as a way of keeping them together, of forming a bond. In this regard, then, the theme of Secrecy emerges. Additionally, Milla was killed and the secret of her body lying in the shallow grave has been kept for at least two years, though the reader does not know who killed Milla or the circumstances of her death. Secrecy is an overall theme in the book, as everyone seems to feel indirectly guilty about her death, but are shown to be just as equally innocent.

Each flashback after that is a small jump forward or a side-step in the timeline to add a fact or a story to present how the boys made their way toward finding the body. Another theme demonstrated here is Friendship. The boys are afraid of growing apart so they want to strengthen their bond with a secret only they know. It is seen again when they find the body and panic. They had known Milla, and it disturbed them to see her.

What is interesting to note is that all of the boys have selected items to place into their buried treasure which gives the reader insight into their personalities. As will be shown in a forthcoming chapter, each boy has offered something that, in their mind, signifies value. Simen brings his mother's expensive jewelry (effectively stealing it), and Christian has stolen 200 kroner (money) to put into the pail. Only Gunnar has placed something into the pail that was of sentimental value: a picture of him and his brother at a special event.

The use of flashbacks and flashforwards allows the reader to gain information to better ascertain the initial opening of the chapter in which the body is found. The 'treasure' is a major symbol here as it symbolizes their friendship and how they are willing to make sacrifices for each other, which will continue to happen throughout the book.

### Discussion Question 1

Why did the boys decide to bury 'treasure' in the first place?

### Discussion Question 2

How does each boy's contribution to the pail say something about them?

### Discussion Question 3

Discuss how the theme of Secrecy is introduced to the reader in Chapter 1.



## Vocabulary

trenches, tumbledown, scouring, lain, wispy, withered, fluttering, veil, cordite, eternal, complicated, concluding, mingling, sacrifice, veranda



## Chapter 2

### Summary

The chapter opens up with passages from Jon, Alma's father. Jon is a successful writer except he can't seem to write the third part to his trilogy. The first two had sold exceptionally well. Now, he is suffering from writer's block. He fixates on the dog, Leopold, and how uncontrollable and unreliable he is. Siri is his wife, and she is shown to be very strict and stoic towards many different things including her family. Alma is their daughter along with Liv. Alma is struggling to find her place in her family and life, because she is not like the other girls and has issues socializing.

The storyline flashes back to a time when Siri had enlisted Milla, the dead girl from the previous chapter, to watch her children during the day while she went to her restaurant to work. Jon had been having a sort of affair with a neighbor down the road and seemed to have an immediate attraction to Milla. Several instances happened where the sexual tension between the two were palpable. The reader finds out that the girl in Alma's story, from the previous chapter, was her mother, Siri, and that she was the sister who watched her brother die. But of course Siri's mother, Jenny, hadn't killed her daughter as the story suggested.

This chapter keeps jumping between Milla, Siri, and Jon, with each given a chronologically linear path to the 75th birthday of Siri's mother, a birthday she didn't want. The reader is shown Milla disappearing and Jon leaving about the same time, saying he is going to walk the dog, but ostensibly he is going to meet his lover. The reader learns that Milla was raped before she was killed.

### Analysis

In the chapter the theme of Family is demonstrated when Siri enlists Milla to help watch her kids. Milla becomes practically one of the family even though Siri often is a fine mix of hatred and envy in regards to Milla. Jon is trying to write his third book in his trilogy but can't seem to finish it, which is partially because he is afraid to start and another that he is afraid to end it all. This thinking parallels his failing marriage.

Also paralleling his failing marriage is the dog, Leopold. Leopold, as a symbol, represents Jon's base personality. The words that he uses to describe Leopold could just as easily apply to him. He calls the dog uncontrollable, embarrassing, and useless. He rants about how he hates being seen in public with the dog because he feels that people will judge him for having a dog that is so untrained.

There is a lot of inner turmoil for Siri when she realizes she has to hire someone to watch her children. She begins to feel as though she has been defeated and weak, both of which play into her hating Milla. Milla is a peppy pretty young girl that Siri sees as a threat to her and her family, but she needs her to watch her children. Milla and Jon hit it





off and it seems like they are going to begin a relationship but it never comes to more than awkward glances and touches. It is obvious that Jon is attracted to her.

Siri decides to throw her mother a grand birthday party, which her mother has said she wants no part of. Siri ignores this and feels that she needs to atone for her brother's death, which wasn't her fault but she still sees it as such. This chapter switches viewpoints often, and without warning, on more than one occasion.

The theme of Secrets is demonstrated heavily in this chapter where Siri is always hiding her actual feelings, Jon is cheating, and Alma sees a lot more than she should but keeps it to herself. It is ironic that Milla wanted to be a different person when she went home. She wanted people to look at her and remark about how different she looked and how she's changed. In essence, she got her wish - just not in the way she was hoping for.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Discuss Jon and Siri's relationship.

## **Discussion Question 2**

What is Milla like?

## **Discussion Question 3**

What does the reader learn about Alma's story that she told to Simen?

## **Vocabulary**

asymmetric, dilapidated, trilogy, frittered, interior, snatches, strict, recounted, fitfully, stone-masonry, gabardine, invisibility, silhouettes, inhabited, relish, demonstratively



# Chapter 3

## Summary

Still in the past, Chapter 3 opens up with an explanation of why Milla takes people's pictures when they are unaware. Milla eventually opened up about it to Jon. Jon and Milla were attracted to one another, and he told her to listen to a song titled 'A Sweetheart Like You' which she assumed was a message to her about his interest in her.

As the chapter progresses Siri's life opened up a little more and the reader sees that she and Jon had been once close to each other before she became closed off emotionally. Siri's mother's party has started at this point.

Milla decided to leave the party early since Siri had been mean to her for picking a flower from her garden to put in her hair. Jon had defended Milla to Siri which made Siri upset. Jenny, Siri's mother, got drunk and started to remember the past. In this state she realized the need to let Siri know her brother's death wasn't her fault.

Milla slipped away and met a boy at a hot-dog stand and they went on a walk. He ended up beating her and raping her then leaving her to walk home. The reader is shown Milla walking home and the boy's car driving up to her, offering her a ride home. After this, Milla went missing.

## Analysis

During Chapter 3 Milla takes several pictures of Siri sleeping. Later the reader learns that Milla takes pictures of people who are unsuspecting of it. This type of thing is to be expected of a girl who is the daughter of a famous photographer. She is embarrassed about the scrapbook she's kept, since she doesn't want to be a photographer. However, she acknowledges that photography is in her blood. Milla opens up about this to Jon who tells her it is okay to have hobbies. However, Jon is missing the point. Milla doesn't want to be a photographer, but rather feels compelled to take the pictures. She doesn't want to become her mother, distant and consumed.

The reader follows Milla around the party that Siri throws for her mother and the reader sees that Milla is bored and was hopefully wanting to meet up with Jon. Jon is too busy at the party so Milla slips out. Had Milla just dealt with the boredom she might be alive still. The theme of Death and Innocence Lost is demonstrated in the rape scene as Milla loses her innocence to KB and is, most likely, killed by him, too.

The symbolism of photographs is significant in this chapter as it indicates that Milla likes to capture people as they truly are, and not who they present to the world when they think that people are watching. In many respects, she is capturing their 'secret selves'. However, Milla doesn't like that she feels compelled to take the pictures. She is very



aware that she could end up like her mother, who lived life through the end of a lens, instead of living life firsthand. Milla is determined to not end up like her mother.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Why does Milla take pictures of people when they aren't aware?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Why does Milla continue to hang around Jon and Siri's home, even when she is not working?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Why doesn't Milla want to be recognized as a photographer?

## **Vocabulary**

sketchbooks, unlined, lyrics, tuft, lopsided, moorish, lounging, shawl, chefs, suckling, skewers, clasp, bulged, exchange, fringed, adjusted, geriatric, festive



# Chapter 4

## Summary

Chapter 4 is all about the family dealing with Milla's disappearance. Milla's disappearance has affected Alma the most, and she has started acting out in school. Alma attacked her teacher and cut off her teacher's hair, which she had been growing for many years. Alma was expelled and had to stay home. The police and a psychologist are assigned to her and Alma was rude to all of them, not fully grasping how serious her situation was.

It is revealed to the reader that Alma has had some quirks since she was little that are almost OCD. Siri, meanwhile, had tried to contact her mother, Jenny, as Alma will only open up to her. Siri was worried about her mother because she hadn't been able to reach her and it seemed like she had started drinking heavily again.

Meanwhile, in a section from Jon's viewpoint, the reader learns that he has been involved with many women whom he's been having casual affairs with. One of them was his dentist's wife. Jon had felt trapped and considered all sorts of drastic actions, but realized that he would never act upon them. After everyone had gone to bed he went out to Milla's cottage to see if she'd made it home. She hadn't and he looked around her room, spying her diary, and taking it.

The next viewpoint is Alma's. She comments on the expulsion, where she reacted violently toward her teacher by cutting off her teacher's ponytail. But the underlying cause for her violent outburst was Milla's disappearance. The night of the party she and her grandmother (who was completely drunk) got into the car and went for a drive. Alma saw Milla that night sitting beside the road after KB raped her. Originally she'd asked her grandmother to stop, but then thought better of it and lied, saying she'd only thought she'd seen someone. She is haunted by the fact that she didn't stop to help.

The viewpoint switches to Siri who had been aware that Jon was a philanderer since before Milla came along. She discusses and remembers at least several women that Jon had been involved with. She wonders why he feels the need to desert her time and time again. She clearly despises him, but has decided not to confront him, yet.

Jon muses about the exact moment when he realized that he and Siri were ill suited to one another. They don't even sleep in the same room any longer. They talked about doing things together, but never did. He resents the fact that he has to live off of his wife's money, solely because he's not completed his book, yet. They converse through texts and Jon believes that maybe they are growing closer, but when he suggests that they have sex, she stops texting him, frustrating him. In a fit of anger he texts one of his mistresses and invites her to come away with him for the weekend. He drinks heavily and receives a text from an unknown number telling him that all of his actions have



consequences. A subsequent text reveals that the text was from Milla's mother, Amanda. She accuses him of knowing more than he's said about Milla's disappearance.

## Analysis

In this chapter it can be seen that Siri is acting nicer regarding Milla. Alma has become disruptive as a result of Milla disappearing, so she acts out to get attention, since she isn't getting it from home. Alma appears to have OCD or some other issue since a great amount of detail goes into describing her ritual for getting dressed. The theme of Innocence Lost is demonstrated in Alma's character in this chapter. She was not very popular or well liked at school but she wasn't a problem, either. She and Milla had formed a friendship and when Milla disappeared, Alma becomes wracked with guilt.

In an interesting parallel, Siri was the daughter, in the story that Simen listened to, that watched her brother drown and did nothing to help. Now, many years later, Siri's daughter, Alma, also chooses not to help someone she cares about, who is clearly in trouble. This inability to act in the face of trouble or danger, or to have empathy for someone in trouble can be seen to be something that links all of the generations of women in the family, including Siri's mother, Jenny.

The symbolism of Alma's teacher's ponytail should be mentioned here, because it represents something that has been held on to for a very long time; a symbol of the past. Alma's teacher was very proud of her ponytail as she had taken more than twenty years to grow it to its magnificent length. Therefore, attacking the teacher and cutting off her ponytail indicates that Alma meant to humiliate and upset the teacher, but it also represents Alma wanting to be done with the past.

Milla's disappearance seems to be affecting everyone, even if they had just barely met her, like Jenny. Even though she had started drinking before Milla vanished it is likely the reason that she has continued to drink. Jon in this chapter is becoming more self absorbed and gets mad at Siri for not having sex with him. Amanda, Milla's mother has been contacting them and being incredibly rude and harassing. She believes that Milla's disappearance is all their fault. The reader starts to see that most of the issue with Jon and Siri's marriage is all based on Jon's deceit.

The theme of Secrecy is demonstrated in this chapter as well. Siri knows about Jon's infidelity, and has known for a long time. She doesn't bring it up because she doesn't want to be one of 'those' couples, or one of 'those' wives. She tries to figure out what it is about herself that is driving him into the arms of other women, but comes up blank. She doesn't tell Jon how much what he is doing hurts her. Jon, on the other hand, is also keeping many secrets. He is not writing. He pretends to write, but in reality, he is just going through the motions to keep up appearances. He is highly resentful of his wife and the fact that she is successful when he is not. He despises the fact that he's growing older (he's 51) and that he's losing his looks and has gained weight. Neither tell the other what is really going on with them, though both obviously long for a return to the original relationship when both were open and honest with one another. Lastly, the



theme of Secrecy also applies to Alma. She saw Milla the night of Milla's disappearance and didn't stop her grandmother to pick up Milla. The message is clear: secrets can often have unintended consequences, and people can be hurt by them.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Why has Alma begun acting out in school?

## **Discussion Question 2**

How is the theme of Secrecy exemplified in the characters of Siri, Jon, and Alma?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Discuss Jon's character at this point in the novel.

## **Vocabulary**

humorless, unproblematic, interruptions, chirruped, consequences, peony, arisen, defining, ragged, explanations, overture, leering, trilled, supporter, cycling, instinctive



# Chapter 5

## Summary

Chapter 5 shows Jenny as an invalid. Most likely as a result of her alcoholism, she has fallen and broken her hip. Then dementia seems to have set in and she is incoherent most of the time. Siri, upon hearing about her mother, comes right away to see her, but Irma, Jenny's roommate bars the way. Siri, incensed, reminds Irma that she is Siri's daughter. Irma begrudgingly stands aside. Siri often returns to help care for her mother and each time must confront Irma, who continues to tell Siri that her mother doesn't want her there. During one of their visits Jenny tells Siri that she 'broke that girl with the car'. Thinking that she's talking about Milla, Siri attempts to get the truth out of her, but fails.

Oddly enough, it is the continual harassment by Milla's mother, Amanda, that brings Jon and Siri back together. After confronting him about all of the past mistresses, Jon realizes that he's not the man that he was. He confesses that the publishing agency has decided to stop funding him since he has produced nothing.

## Analysis

Chapter 5 demonstrates many of the novel's themes: Death, innocence lost, Secrecy, and Personal Responsibility. The theme of Death and Personal Responsibility can be seen through Jon neglecting to write a book he had been paid to write and now owes a lot of money for. He is also irresponsible in the way that he has spent many years cheating on his wife.

Innocence Lost is shown as Alma continues acting out again at school, where she bloodied a classmate's nose and got suspended, again. She has lost her innocence due to Milla's death and her belief that she could have prevented Milla's death if she'd made her grandmother stop.

Secrecy is demonstrated when Jon has to talk to Siri about his past transgressions with various women, and it is shown he has a lot to hide from Siri, including that Amanda had been calling him and texting him non-stop. Jenny seems to know more about Milla than she had told and now in her decrepit and weak state she has started to leak the info, unfortunately she can't talk so the words come out mumbled and half formed. Alma has kept the secret of seeing Milla, Jenny has kept the secret that she presumably may have hit Milla with the car, Jon has kept his affairs secret (or so he thinks), and Siri has kept her thoughts about Jon to herself. Lastly, there is the secret relationship between Irma and Jenny, as they appeared to have been lovers. None of the secrets that they've kept have been much of a 'treasure' and in the end, just like Simen, there's no point to digging up treasure....because it ceases to be a treasure any longer when it's out in the open.



The theme of Death is demonstrated in this chapter in that there are many deaths that occur. Jon's career dies, and Siri's silence dies too as she confronts Jon.

## **Discussion Question 1**

What evidence is there to support the idea that Jenny might have hit Milla with the car?

## **Discussion Question 2**

What does Alma feel about the night she saw Milla?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Discuss the themes of Secrecy and Innocence Lost in this chapter.

## **Vocabulary**

dementia, aneurism, giantess, appointed, rambling, endeavored, loony, monitor, crackling, specialties, strode, disjointed, indistinct, interfering, nuisance





# Chapter 6

## Summary

Chapter 6 is all about conclusions. Jenny dies and Siri and Jon are sleeping in the same bed now and their marriage seems to be on the mend. Miraculously, Leopold the dog, has begun to behave and is even an enjoyable companion now, though he has grown old and feeble.

Siri has really bad nightmares about her mother and her not doing more for her while she was frail. Siri and Jon still are receiving texts from Amanda, and Irma leaves to go to skiing country shortly after Jenny dies, saying her job is done. In the end Amanda and her husband head to Jon's house to talk out everything and they all attempt to come to some sort of reconciliation.

## Analysis

This chapter is where all the loose ends are tied up and enemies make amends. Jon and Siri have started to have a better marriage since Milla's body was found and they all have the closure. Jon has acknowledged that he may never finish his book and has accepted a job as an editor for a company. Siri isn't as stressed. Leopold the dog, has turned out to be a wonderful companion, but his health has begun to fail, and he is not doing well. They end up putting him down.

Eventually Amanda even comes by to talk with them about everything and to tell them more about Milla. Siri is sure her mother was pretending to be mad (crazy) to cope with the fact they saw Milla that night but did not stop. She may have been faking her insanity to make it seem like it wasn't her fault. In the end, there is no way to tell. Siri has nightmares about not helping or doing more for her mother but in fact she couldn't, as Irma banned her from the house.

The theme of Family Ties is demonstrated in this chapter in that both Siri and Jon continue to go through the motions with their children, celebrating holidays, taking vacations and moving forward past Milla and Jenny's deaths. Their continuation of their family activities show that there is an inherent strength in having the support of one's family and that simply belonging to a group of people who share a similar history can be comforting, and eventually, even healing.

## Discussion Question 1

Discuss Jon's character at this point in the novel.



## Discussion Question 2

How is the theme of Family Ties exemplified in this chapter?

## Discussion Question 3

When Milla's parents visit, what is the reader assured will happen as a result?

## Vocabulary

jetties, invent, butcher, impersonal, acquaintance, reluctantly, impersonal, antipathy, disentangling, snuffling, engendered, kinked, expanse, status, altered



# Characters

## Siri

Siri is a main character in the story, *The Cold Song*. She is in a failing marriage to her husband, Jon. She is very pretty but has a kink in her spine towards her hips. The kink is not very noticeable but causes her pain. Siri is a professional chef and owns two restaurants, one of which is only open in the summer. Siri is the mother to Alma and Liv, and she hires Milla as a nanny. Later she sees Milla as a threat since Siri's husband is a known philanderer.

Siri's mother, Jenny, has become part of a local legend that describes a young brother and sister who sat by a lake. The brother, who was just four, fell into the lake, and the older sister, just sat there and watched it happen. In her grief, the mother drugged the daughter, took her to the lake, and drowned her, too. Siri knows the truth about the urban legend in that she is the sister who let her brother drown in the story. As she recalls the event, she had left her brother by the water to come back to the house, and he'd already been drowning when she ran back down to get him.

Siri has been haunted by that event, as she had always felt that her mother blamed her. Later, Jenny, her mother, tells her that she never blamed her for that and that she had wished for many years that she'd told her that. Jenny becomes an invalid later on in the book and Siri makes many trips in an attempt to help her.

Siri is a very conflicted character in that she does not feel in control of anything in her life, except maybe her career. Her restaurants are doing very well. However, her marriage is a shambles, her mother is insufferable, her daughter is troubled, and she knows that her husband has been cheating on her with many women for many years. Until later on in the novel, she keeps silent about what she knows about Jon. When she realizes that keeping the secret doesn't hurt anyone but the person keeping it, she confronts Jon. After that they begin to try and regain what they'd lost.

## Jon

Jon is a husband to Siri and father to Alma and Liv. Jon has successfully written two books and has yet to finish his trilogy even though he has been trying to all summer. He has cheated on his wife several times and eventually is caught. He had a passing thing for their nanny, Milla. Jon is Alma and Liv's father.

Jon is conflicted on many levels. As a writer he is blocked and is unable to complete the series. He shares at one point in the novel that he most likely doesn't complete it because it will be finished and then he will have to reinvent who he is. Later, he realizes the fallacy in this and takes a job as an editor for a company. He is asked by the publishing company to pay back his advance money, or produce the book.



Jon has cheated on Siri, his wife, for decades and has thought he was being discreet. He wasn't as discreet as he thought as Siri read many of the emails that Jon had written to his various mistresses. For the first part of the novel, Jon is dishonest to himself and to others, often pretending to write, when in fact he is only putting up a good front, looking as if he is writing. He does the same thing with his marriage, pretending to have a great relationship, when in fact, he does not. When he finally comes to the conclusion that he's got to make a change he becomes a person that he can like again.

Jon has a dog named Leopold that is, by extension, some facet of Jon. He remarks early on in the book that Leopold was out of control and not well behaved like other dogs. Jon is embarrassed to take Leopold out because the dog drags him everywhere making him look like someone who can't even train a dog properly. At the end of the novel, Leopold has settled down and is minding the family, especially Jon.

## Jenny

Jenny is the mother of Siri. Jenny has not been the kindest of mothers and lost a son to drowning when she was younger. Jenny was an alcoholic in her younger days but quit until she turned 75. She fell and became senile and eventually withered away. It seemed as though she knew what happened to Milla but dies before it can ascertain if she did or not. Jenny lived with a woman named, Irma, and it is suggested that they were more than just roommates.

## Alma

Alma is the chubby daughter of Siri and Jon. Alma is different than most kids and has social disabilities as well as OCD. Alma got very close to Milla and when she disappeared she started to act out including chopping her teacher's hair off and starting a fight with another student.

Alma also feels guilty because she saw Milla the night she died, sitting by the side of the road, and did nothing. She mirrors her own mother's childhood incident where her mother saw her brother drowning and did nothing to help him.

## Milla

Milla is the young teen babysitter who came to watch Jon and Siri's children. Somewhat of a free spirit, Milla took photographs of people when they least suspected it. She believed that it captured their true selves. However, Milla took photographs mainly because she felt compelled to do so, not because she enjoyed it. In fact, she dislikes that she is following in her mother's footsteps, since she highly resents her mother's photography career which seems to have kept them apart for so many years.

Milla and Jon are attracted to one another and is something that Milla encourages. Jon has a penchant for having affairs and has had a number of them with the women in the



neighborhood. To include Milla in the list seems to be something that doesn't not give him pause in the least. Milla does not know about his other affairs and in her innocence believes that he loves her more than his wife, Siri. As proof of this Milla cites the CD that Jon gives to her the night of Jenny's 75th birthday party.

Siri, Jon's wife, suspects that something might be going on between Jon and Milla and is openly hostile towards her at her mother's party, yelling at her for picking a flower from the garden to put into her hair. Upset, Milla leaves the party and goes into town where she meets up with a rough young man named, KB. He lures her out into the woods and rapes her, then leaves her. Later, she was seen getting back into the car with him.

After a few days absence Siri and Jon contact the authorities, who cannot seem to locate her at all. It is thought that she ran away until the vacationing boys dig up Milla's bones the following summer.

## **Simen**

Simen is the youngest out of the three vacationing boys. He has long hair and it is really soft; many people like to touch it. Simen seems to be the rational one out of the group and also the kleptomaniac as well. When the boys decide to bury treasure he immediately thinks of a plan to steal his mother's diamond necklace. Simen was one of the last people to see Milla before she disappeared, because she helped him up after he fell off his bike. Simen loves to ride bikes and when he visits his friends they always are on or around their bikes.

## **Irma**

Irma is a huge housekeeper for Jenny and may quite likely be her lover. She is very close to Jenny and eventually has to take care of her when she starts going down hill.

## **Gunnar**

Gunnar is one of the boys who found Milla's body while digging. He is the dentist's son. Gunnar's mother is one of the women that Jon has been having an affair with.

## **Christian**

Christian was one of the boys who helped locate Milla's body while searching for their treasure pail.



## Leopold

Leopold is an old black lab who loves to go on walks with Jon. Jon originally didn't even want him. Jon holds imaginary conversations with him.

## Liv

Liv is the youngest daughter of Jon and Siri. Liv is shown to be completely innocent (and stays this way) throughout the novel. She is the only joyful one in the group.

## Amanda

Amanda is Milla's mother. After Milla goes missing she tirelessly pursues Jon, thinking that he had something to do with Milla's death. Later, when Milla's body is found, Amanda is convinced that Jon did it and she inundates Jon with text messages. At the end of the novel, she and her husband come to terms with the truth about Milla's death and come to Jon and Siri's home to begin to make amends.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Milla's body

Milla's body was found buried under a tree in the woods. The discovery of her body allows for all of those impacted by her disappearance to begin to heal and find closure.

## Leopold

Leopold is a dog but also a symbol depicting the interior thoughts of Jon. In fact, many times Jon reflects that the dog embarrasses him, and that he is uncontrollable. Jon sees other pet owners and wonders at the good manners of their pets when his own pet is so unruly and rude.

Later, when he has begun to patch things up with Siri Leopold 'miraculously' begins to mind and Jon finds a sort of peace in taking Leopold on morning walks with him. In the end, Leopold dies of old age, and Jon determines to be a better man, father, and husband.

## Teacher's ponytail

The teacher who grew the ponytail for 50 years had it as a symbol of perseverance. When Alma cuts it, she is effectively making light of someone's dedication and illustrates the ugliness of a secret that has been kept too long.

## Amanda's Photo Album

An undying memory to Milla and memories of her, Amanda (Milla's mother) brings this over to Jon and Siri's house to show to them.

## The Book's Title

The book title in and of itself is a symbol. A song is supposed to be warm and uplifting but a cold song depicts sorrow and death, much like the story that is told. Often Milla is depicted as singing, but when she dies, of course, there is no song and it has 'grown cold'.

## Milla's scrapbook

Milla had a scrapbook she had filled with pictures of unsuspecting people doing things. This demonstrates that she is just like her mother but has a different perspective with her art.



## **Jenny's car**

This is where Alma and Jenny are when they see Milla sitting beside of the road the night that she disappears.

## **Oslo House**

The old summer house the family uses to vacation in at the lake. It is older and white and the family continues to return there even after Milla's death.

## **Gunnar's Album**

Gunnar has a futbol album with a photo of his big brother in it. This is special to him since it reminds him of the day he said he was happy to have a younger brother like Gunnar.

## **Simen's bike**

This is the bike Simen is always on. He and the bike are almost inseparable, until the end of the novel, when Simen has given it up, indicating that he is growing up.

## **Photography**

Photographs are utilized in the novel quite a bit. First, there are the photographs that Milla takes and keeps in her scrapbook. Then, there are the photographs that Milla's mother, a professional photographer, takes. Pictures mean something different to them both, but both are compelled to continue to capture what they see through their lenses.





# Settings

## Siri's house

This is where the main part of the story takes place. This house is the summer home of Jon and Siri. It is old and rustic and rather expensive. This is where Milla comes to be a nanny for them and where Jon is writing, or trying to write, his third book for his trilogy.

## The Woods

This is where the boys found Milla's body after looking for a buried treasure they had. They were mistaken about where they'd buried the milk pail and locate, instead, Milla's body there. The woods are also where KB took Milla that night they walked off together.

## The Lake

This is a great source of anguish for many characters. Siri sees it as the place her brother died. Jenny sees it as the place where she lost her son. Alma, on the other hand, sees it as a place that she can be herself and sit with her grandmother.

## The Attic

This is where Jon spends a great deal of his days. Jon is cooped up in there trying to write his book. It is also a place Milla liked to visit to see Jon.

## Jenny's Car

This is where Alma and Jenny had seen Milla but kept driving since they weren't so sure it was her. Had they stopped she might still be alive.



# Themes and Motifs

## Family Ties

Initially, the book revolves around a single family: Jon, Siri, Liv, and Alma. They live in Norway where he is a writer and she is a restaurant owner/chef. Their daughters are very different in age, with almost 8 years separating them. The theme of family ties is illustrated in several instances.

First, there is the original family tie, when Siri was unable to save her brother from drowning, and her mother, Jenny, seemed to blame her for it all of those years. This event shows how family relationships can heal and they can damage and set into motion a course of actions that has ripples and ramifications for decades. It is only in the end that Jenny, nearing death, professes to Siri that she never blamed her for the death of her brother.

Then, there is the death of Milla and her family's anguish at not knowing what happened. Then, when the details of her death begin to surface, Milla's mother and father are tireless in their pursuit of the killer and information about the night she died.

Lastly, there is the relationship between Siri and Jon, and Alma with her parents. In both instances the relationships are not healthy and they cause each member to feel disconnected and out of control. Thus, the message about family ties is that they can literally be the ties that bind and anchor a person to who they are and their purpose in life, or they can be the very entity that causes a person's downfall. Secrets among family members is shown to be one of the most dangerous 'cancers' that can happen to a family unit.

## Secrecy

Secrecy begins the book as the reader sees several boys, who on vacation have decided to bury a treasure. Gunnar, one of the boys, demonstrates the theme as he steals his mother's necklace to place into the pail. Choosing to bury the treasure and not disclose its hiding place is another secret. However, these harmless secrets are paralleled with another darker secret....that of Milla's dead body.

Milla kept secrets as well. She captured 'secret moments' with her camera and placed them in her sketchbook/diary. She loved to find people being themselves, where they'd lowered their masks that they presented to the public. In this way, secrecy is shown to be a deception and that releasing the deception is how a person can truly be themselves.

Jon has been keeping many secrets. He demonstrates the theme of Secrecy in that he has been lying about completing his third book. He finds that he just can't bring himself to do it. He has also been involved with a number of women, and then, of course, lying



about it to his wife. The more he continues to engage in these affairs the more his creativity dies and suffers. He is unable to write, to do much of anything and his interactions with his family suffer.

Siri keeps a secret as well. She knows about Jon's affairs but doesn't confront him with them until the end of the novel. When she can stand it no longer she does confront him with the knowledge of the affairs, even quoting some of the emails to Jon. It is then that the reader sees that secrets that hurt (others or oneself) are detrimental to everyone.

Jenny keeps a secret in that she believes that she hit Milla with the car when she was driving while intoxicated. Whether she did or not is never explained. Jenny dies believing that she did and takes her secret with her to her grave.

Alma keeps a similar secret in that she was with her grandmother that night when they saw Milla. Alma comes unglued and becomes a problem at school because she can't overcome her feelings of guilt over driving off and not helping Milla. It is only when she shares her secret that things begin to get better for her.

All in all the author seems to be suggesting that secrets are not good things, that they don't protect anyone and that rationalizations that people give themselves in order to keep the secrets only lead to trouble and destruction.

## Innocence lost

There are many instances where Innocence is Lost in this novel. Initially, the boys who find Milla's body are reminded of life's often cruel truths, and thus their innocent belief in a kind and gentle world are destroyed. Likewise, Alma, who was Milla's friend and who looked up to Milla must come to terms with her lack of action on the night that Milla died. She plays the 'what if' game so many times that she must face some very adult truths about her decision to tell her grandmother to drive on that night.

Milla, herself, was an innocent who was lost...in a very real sense. At the beginning, the reader is treated to Milla as a girl who was full of life, and dreams, who wanted to travel, and was a romantic. She was enamored of the idea of Jon and his attention to her, even misconstruing many of the things he said and did in the home. When Jon takes her diary and reads it he learns that he wanted to travel and see the world.

When he takes the diary and rips it up and throws it into the lake, he is, in effect destroying her, all over again. Milla, was very much the romantic, and it seems as if the author has portrayed her as a girl who had not ever been sexual with a partner, yet. When she meets KB, who is very experienced, it has disastrous consequences.

There is also an innocence lost in Siri's memory. The summer that her brother drowned, Siri would learn the lesson that there are limits to a parent's love. From that point on, she did not view the world as she once had. Everything was capable of ending and for many years she felt guilty for things that she hadn't even done.



Innocence is lost when the boys go to dig up their treasure, expecting to find their precious memories and belongings, and instead find the bones of a friend. This forever bound them in ways that burying a treasure never could, but in the end, it also cost them a measure of their childhood.

## Death

The whole book's story revolves around death. Milla dies and her body is eventually found, though the events surrounding her death continue to haunt all of the characters. Most notably Milla's death affects Alma, Jenny, and Amanda who seem stuck in the moment of Milla's death. However, Milla's death ripples across all of the characters and causes another added strain on Jon and Siri's marriage...which experiences its own type of death.

Jon must face that his career as a writer has died, due to his inability to take action and do the right thing. His inability to do the right thing has caused the destruction of his marriage, his career, and even makes him begin to hate himself.

Jenny eventually dies, but it has to be said that she was already dying on the inside before she actually dies. Her guilt at possibly hitting Milla by the side of the road hastens her death.

A way of life is left behind as everyone eventually comes to terms with Milla's death, including her parents, who've grieved her disappearance and death for many years.

Additionally, there is the death of the family pet, Leopold. Symbolically, he's been an outward manifestation of Jon's personality. In his later years he was one of the best pets Jon can ever think of having. His death means that Jon has let go of his old way of life; it is dead to him, and he is looking forward to a new life.

## Personal Responsibility

The theme of Personal responsibility is mainly rested on the shoulders of Jon. It was his responsibility to write a book to make money for his family but instead he messed around and now is in a lot of trouble. He also was irresponsible toward his family and his wife, in that he had a number of affairs which took him away from home, and from keeping promises he'd made, both to his wife and his employer.

This theme with Jon is doubled in his dog, Leopold. At the beginning of the novel, Leopold is a nuisance. He doesn't listen. He does as he pleases, and is always causing problems for those around him. The same can be said of Jon. Jon even remarks at one point that he hates walking Leopold because other pet owners judge him for having such an irresponsible dog.

Jenny has been a neglectful mother and never takes responsibility for her actions towards her daughter who works hard to please her. In the end, her lack of responsibility



eats her up from the inside and she dies alone, bitter, and guilty. She had the responsibility to not get behind the wheel when she'd been driving, not to put her own granddaughter in the car with her, and to stop when she saw someone hurt beside of the road.

Alma doesn't exercise personal responsibility until the end of the novel. For many of the chapters she keeps quiet about what she saw the night Milla died and the fact that she told her grandmother to drive on when she quite clearly saw Milla is something she regrets.

# Styles

## Point of View

The point of view is third-person omniscient. The reader knows how and what the other characters think and feel, with the point of view shifting uncharacteristically within a chapter without any indication that someone else has begun talking or thinking. These multiple viewpoints are offered so that the reader can piece together the actual events of Milla's death and the actual events taking place between Jon and Siri.

## Language and Meaning

The language and content can get explicit from time to time. As for the language use, it is modern language but with foreign undertones in the way things are described. This book was originally produced in Norway and then translated into English. While the translation is quite good, there are still elements that remain to give it the feel of a European novel.

## Structure

With only six chapters, the story unfolds in a non-linear format, so that the reader has to do a close read to understand that the events that are unfolding are both ongoing, have happened in the past, and will happen in the future. Eventually, when one gets to Chapter 3, the events begin to come together and the reader is able to create an internal timeline and has enough of a reference to be able to understand, and create, their own linear understanding of the book.



## Quotes

Do you read and also write in order to become someone else?

-- Milla (Chapter 2 paragraph Page 31)

**Importance:** Milla asks Jon to find out if he writes to escape his reality. In many ways she is right. Jon writes to escape his boring life and sour wife. Try as he might he can't finish writing his book or even start. It is possibly because he knows after the book he will have to be only Jon.

Don't let go. Try to live a decent life. Hold on to my girls. Protect them. Don't let go.

-- Jon (Chapter 2 paragraph Page 39)

**Importance:** Jon is looking out the window of the attic and sees his children and realizes he has to hold on to them now and not let their childhood slip between his fingers. He doesn't want to not be there for his daughters' childhood but that is hard now since he is in the attic most days.

When she was a child her little brother drowned in a lake in the woods while she just stood there and watched.

-- Alma (Chapter 2 paragraph Page 54)

**Importance:** In the previous chapter Simen had told the other boys about Alma telling him the story of a girl watching her brother drown and their mother being so distraught she drugged and drowned the girl out of grief. Now it is revealed that Siri is that girl and Alma was lying about part of the story. Siri is obviously alive, but she did die a little that day and it changed her.

It had to do with her mother's anger.

-- Siri (Chapter 2 paragraph Page 71)

**Importance:** Siri's mother was so violent and angry from time to time, that Siri had to be able to mentally separate herself so it didn't hurt her as much.

Jenny's wrath was so vast and black and impossible to check once it began to build up that it was sometimes best to divide herself and become a whole army.

-- Siri (Chapter 2 paragraph Page 71)

**Importance:** Jenny's anger became, at times, indomitable. Siri had to make her self bigger and mentally sound in order to combat her abusive mother.

Siri was constantly on the verge of getting really angry with Milla — and then she would regret it and try to be particularly nice instead.

-- Narrator (Chapter 3 paragraph Page 126)

**Importance:** Siri felt threatened by the pretty Milla and would get mad out of jealousy,



and then she would realize it was a stupid reason to be angry and would then be overly nice to make up for it.

Siri bemoaned the lines on her face and what the years had done to her (as if the years had asked her to dance and then rudely stepped on her toes).

-- Jon (Chapter 3 paragraph Page 187)

**Importance:** Siri can't take a compliment because she doesn't see herself as pretty, Jon remarks to himself as he observes his wife.

What you'll discover when you get older is that the words disappear. And your memories, of course. And big parts of your body. I have to hold mine up with a cord.

-- Jenny (Chapter 5 paragraph Page 259)

**Importance:** Jenny was explaining how things get hard to do when you get older, words, memories, and even your body parts all fade. She's also referencing the fact that she's felt like she's had to hold herself together all of these years by a cord.

With age, you'll discover that everything disappears. Words, images, days, months, years of your life.

-- Jenny (Chapter 5 paragraph Page 160)

**Importance:** Jenny talks about how with age your mental sharpness suffers and you lose memories and even people.

Couldn't we just sit here for a while and have something to eat and talk about Milla?

-- Siri (Chapter 6 paragraph Page 327)

**Importance:** Jon and Siri with Amanda and her husband opt to talk about the good things about Milla instead of the bad, Jon and Siri both want to know more about the girl who was with them shortly.

I knew we were digging in the wrong place. I knew we were cycling in the wrong direction. And now I've no idea where to start looking.

-- Simen (Chapter 6 paragraph Page 320)

**Importance:** Simon was talking about how it was fate that he found her (Milla) since it wasn't the spot they were actually looking for. Had they gone to their spot they wouldn't have found Milla.

What I wanted to tell you is that I make books too. Not like you do, I don't mean like you. It's just something I do for myself. Secret scrapbooks. Secret because I don't show them to anyone, have never told anyone about them either. Only you, now. You're the only one who knows. I take pictures. I photograph everything I come across— people, animals, scenery. But mostly people. When they don't know they're being photographed. I glue all of the pictures into my book, and I put other things that have some meaning for me in there. Everything from tufts of grass to good quotations. And I





write a little bit too, but not much. Diary entries.  
-- Milla (Chapter 3 paragraph Page 132)

**Importance:** Milla is opening up (for the first time) to someone about her secret scrap books of unsuspecting people.