

# **Dept. of Speculation Study Guide**

## **Dept. of Speculation by Jenny Offill**

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# Plot Summary

Dept. of Speculation begins with an unnamed female protagonist questioning the nature of relationships. She thinks about some of the people that she's met, and how she used to focus on her work. In the beginning she was a writer and a fact checker, first working for a scientific magazine. She thought if she focused solely on her career she wouldn't feel lonely in life, but that wasn't the case. Her friend whom she refers to as 'The Philosopher' introduces her to a man who creates something called soundscapes.

The man ends up calling her and the two are soon dating and getting to know each other. That year, the two end up traveling together and seeing more of the world. The couple eventually ends up moving in together, in a small apartment that has a problem with bugs and mice. They both seem to have their doubts about the relationship, as if they have rushed into things too quickly, but the protagonist hints that they dismiss these because neither wants to be alone.

The protagonist ends up getting pregnant with her lover's child. She adores the baby when it's born. Their child is very loud which is something that the protagonist initially worries about because it makes it hard to take the child out or have people over. Her husband is forced to take a new job. Instead of making his own soundtracks, he starts doing sound work for commercials. It isn't the job that he wanted to move to, but the pay is better and the family had been struggling financially. The protagonist ultimately ends up having to take on different work as well. She starts to ghostwrite for a client she calls 'Almost Astronaut', who is fascinated with space and trying to write a book about it. The protagonist works as a teacher as well.

As time goes on, the protagonist starts to think more about their lives. While she loves her daughter unconditionally, it seems like her life has become emptier ever since she decided to become a mother. The family starts to have greater problems with bugs in their apartment. Despite their best efforts, they are having trouble getting rid of them. After another year, the family is finally able to find a new apartment to move into. During this time though, the protagonist continues to think about all the other things that they could be doing to make their lives more exciting, clearly longing for something more.

The narrative shifts and for the rest of the book the protagonist stops referring to herself as "I" and instead starts to use the third person and calls herself 'The Wife'. It's clear that she's unhappy with where she is with her life. Not only that, but it's revealed that her husband is unhappy as well and has started having an affair. The two attend therapy, but things are still rough. The wife tries to confront the girl he was cheating with, realizing that her husband picked someone that looked like a younger version of her.

The wife repeatedly contemplates divorce, and despite the best efforts of her husband, it is clear that their relationship is shattered. To make matters worse, he starts to relapse. He claims that he hasn't been with the girl again, but his wife finds out that he's been sending messages to her. The wife is constantly thinking about her relationship



and the way that she's been living her life, how much she's changed since she was younger.

In an attempt to fix their relationship, the family moves out to the country. At first their daughter has trouble with it, but she ends up adjusting to the move. The husband and wife still occasionally fight after the move, but over time she starts to keep quiet, although she has fantasies about a secret life where she runs away. By the end of the book the wife has started referring to herself in the first person again. The book ends rather abruptly with the protagonist sending her child off to school during the winter with the protagonist seemingly feeling defeated in life, but having come to accept her fate.



# Chapters 1-2

## Summary

### Chapter 1

The book opens with the nameless protagonist musing to herself about some of her experiences traveling abroad. She reveals that she's very interested in philosophy, becoming fascinated with the way that a teacher speaks to her about the education process. The protagonist is also very self-conscious, recounts a time where at a restaurant she and her date didn't like the steak they ordered. She pretended to eat it anyway though because she was afraid that the restaurant staff would judge or make fun of her. The chapter ends with her feeling alone in her Brooklyn apartment; hiding under her blanket hoping that would make her feel less afraid, but it doesn't work.

### Chapter 2

The main character discusses her job as a writer. She started out as a fact checker for a scientific magazine, but went on to write her own book. After that, she discussed some of the books that she read. They talked about how mental pain and anguish was only temporary, but she worried that she was the exception to that rule. She used to try and focus solely on work and not worry about love or being in a relationship. She had a dream of being an art monster, someone who was obsessed with and focused solely on art. The chapter ends with the heartbroken protagonist leaving the state and a boyfriend that she loved.

## Analysis

### Chapter 1

The protagonist is introduced and readers get exposed to the erratic nature of her storytelling. Throughout the book the main character jumps around from event to event, seemingly without any connection, just like in the opening chapter. The main character gives the readers a look into her fearful nature as well as her love for philosophy. Both of these are two traits that are present throughout the rest of the book.

### Chapter 2

The main character reveals to the readers her profession as a writer, which comes up quite a while later when she starts working for Almost Astronaut. Through him and her writing career, she starts to explore the concept of space which has a lot of symbolic meaning to her and her life experiences. Her art-monster dreams are mentioned for the first time, which also comes up several times throughout the book.



The theme of being honest with what you want is demonstrated when the reader sees the main character, who right now wants to focus on her art, but in the following chapters the reader sees that focus being shifted onto her family, even though that dream is still very much a part of her life. She tries to bury it, but all it does is cause her pain, which is the driving force for the rest of the book. Her philosopher friend is also very briefly mentioned in a throwaway line, but in future chapters he will be introduced properly.

## **Discussion Question 1**

What does the scene in the restaurant in Chapter 1 tell readers about the main protagonist's character and personality?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Why does the protagonist feel that she has to choose her art over a relationship?

## **Discussion Question 3**

How does the protagonist avoid facing the truth about who she is and wants to be?

## **Vocabulary**

entities, druids, sloshing, arduous, anguish, delude, amends



# Chapters 3-4

## Summary

### Chapter 3

The protagonist thinks about more philosophical beliefs. She primarily focuses on religious philosophies. One is the Buddhist belief that there are 121 different states of consciousness. Three of those are negative, and those are the three that most people seem to shift between. The other thing she talks about is the idea that humans weren't meant to be in the city, and anyone who lives in the city is constantly on guard because of it. Her sister encourages her to leave the city. One of the protagonist's friends is introduced, a man she refers to as The Philosopher. She enjoys spending time with him because of how peaceful his apartment is. At the end of the chapter, he introduces her to a man who makes soundscapes of the city. The protagonist doesn't know what those are, but she's fascinated when she hears them and wants to meet the man.

### Chapter 4

The protagonist and her future husband start to date. She likes to stay up late in the evening just so she can listen to the soundscapes that he plays on the radio. He even makes one just for her that he plays. The two of them seem to hit it off immediately. That year, she decides to travel with him instead of going alone. They have an amazing time together, and the main character worries that she will never be in such a beautiful place again.

## Analysis

### Chapter 3

The Philosopher is properly introduced in this chapter, as well as the main character's husband-to-be. At the start of the chapter, the main character continues to explore different philosophical ideas. The theme of Denial starts to be emphasized in this chapter as the reader sees that the protagonist is so fixated on the meaning behind life and philosophy but ends up not living it, or almost missing out on it because of the need to dissect it all. This is especially clear to readers when they consider that just a few chapters ago the main character was talking about reasons she enjoyed the city, but now she seems to be questioning that belief simply because of a philosophical idea. The future husband's philosophical side is hinted at symbolically through his soundscapes that he makes, which influences their future relationship together.

The Philosopher serves as a catalyst to change, in this instance. Had the protagonist not met The Philosopher, challenged her previously held beliefs, then the chances are good that her life would have turned out differently. However, it can just as easily be argued that The Philosopher forced the protagonist to view her life with a closer myopic





lens, and in doing so, finds herself lacking. Either way, the Philosopher serves as an agent of change.

#### Chapter 4

At the end of the chapter, the protagonist expresses her fears that they won't get to travel again and she won't be able to see such a beautiful place. This could be seen as foreshadowing for her pregnancy and the direction of her life. Because the book uses such an abstract sense of timing, it is possible that the main character is saying this because she is already pregnant and knows that when they start a family they'll be too busy being parents to live out their dreams and keep taking trips around the world to see beautiful locations. The two characters get the chance to show how happy they are with one another. This is important because with all of the bad things that later happen between the two, it's easy to forget that they were at one point a genuinely happy couple. Their unhappiness doesn't come from the fact that they aren't compatible, but because they are in denial about what they want and need to make them happy, which demonstrates the theme of Denial once again.

Throughout the book, both characters opt to sacrifice or deny the things that would make them happy, would lead to a healing of the relationship, as if they are denying that there is a problem. What the author is showing through this is the devastating effects of denying oneself happiness, of taking risks in order to live a better life, of being a slave to convention, duty, or culture, instead of being genuinely happy.

It's also interesting to note that starting here and continuing on for a good part of the book, the main character refers to the husband by "you" as though the book is directly written for him. This eventually stops at the same time the main character stops referring to herself in the first person.

### **Discussion Question 1**

What function does The Philosopher serve in Chapter 3?

### **Discussion Question 2**

Why do you think it bothers the protagonist so much that she may not be able to travel and share wonderful experiences with her husband after this?

### **Discussion Question 3**

What does it indicate about the protagonist's view toward her husband when she begins referring to him only as the pronoun, 'you'?

## Vocabulary

overlaid, juttred, funicular, flinching, adjuncting, soundscapes



# Chapters 5-6

## Summary

### Chapter 5

The protagonist is surprised by her boyfriend who is acting strangely. He eventually gets down on one knee and proposes to her. The two make love and then her husband-to-be takes her outside where their friends and family have gathered to celebrate the proposal. The main character goes on to reflect on a cough she had when she was younger and when she first started dating her fiancé. Once they were married the cough went away, making her wonder if it was caused by her loneliness. They move into an apartment together that has a terrible mice problem.

### Chapter 6

The main character thinks back to when she first moved in with her husband. The apartment had a jungle gym outside which excited them at the time because she was pregnant. She had a miscarriage though, so it just hurt whenever they had to see it. After her miscarriage, she reflects on how sparrows were brought in to get rid of insects, but struggled to remain in the new environment. Later, she and her husband are expecting a child again. Whenever she goes to the store to get antacids, there's a woman complaining to a clerk about how even though she went to an Ivy League school she isn't happy in life.

## Analysis

### Chapter 5

The two characters getting married is an important event since the rest of the book focuses on them building a family together. The previous chapters are still important because the readers need to see what they used to be like to understand the difficulties they face as a family. The main character once again focuses on loneliness and believes that her cough came from the stress of being alone. The protagonist frequently tries to associate her problems with loneliness. Instead of following her own goals, she just convinces herself that everything is caused by being lonely, so she tries to throw her attention into her family. She continues to be unhappy because that doesn't address the source of her problem.

### Chapter 6

The lady in the store complains about not being happy despite having gone to an Ivy League college. This demonstrates the themes of Money Can't Buy Happiness. It's hard to say without knowing more about her situation, but just from what she says it sounds like she went to a good college simply because of the reputation it had. It might not



have necessarily been what she wanted, and now after college she isn't happy because she didn't pursue something she wanted. This parallels the main character's journey later with her family, and acts as a bit of foreshadowing. The women in the store had done the 'proper' thing in attending a prestigious school, but deep down, it wasn't what she wanted for herself, but rather what everyone expected of her. The main character is trapped in this self deceit because she thinks pursuing a family will make her happy because she won't be lonely. But she's abandoning her dreams of traveling and being an artist, which she still wants. Because of that, she's unhappy, and now saddled with the responsibility of taking care of her family which makes it harder to pursue anything else.

## **Discussion Question 1**

From these two chapters, what regrets are evident for the protagonist?

## **Discussion Question 2**

How does the woman in the store foreshadow events that may happen for the main character?

## **Discussion Question 3**

What is the author stating about being true to oneself and following one's own inner direction as opposed to following convention and duty?

## **Vocabulary**

lease, unpasteurized, cured, diorama, incursions, cavorted



# Chapters 7-8

## Summary

### Chapter 7

The main character has her child and spends the first few months just taking care of her child. She instantly falls in love with the child and doesn't want to be apart from her. The child is very loud though and has trouble falling asleep, so much so that one of their friends refuses to come back after spending an evening with the child. She does miss her husband though when he leaves for work, and whenever he comes home she tries to find something to talk about when he asks about her day.

### Chapter 8

The protagonist expands on how she was taking care of her child. Her child seemed to calm down in the store. This let the main character focus more in the store, but she realized that all of the products seemed useless to her. She's starting to get worn out from taking care of her child, especially since she isn't getting enough sleep. She visits one of her friends who also has child, and the two just end up discussing their children. When people asked if she was a good child, the protagonist thought that no she wasn't because of the way she behaved. She also mentions taking thousands of pictures of her child's hair while it was growing.

## Analysis

### Chapter 7

The protagonist starts to focus entirely on taking care of her child. While this isn't necessarily a bad thing, it is notable that she never seems to talk about her husband taking care of the child. Again, the reader can see that the protagonist is trying to create happiness by making sure that she's never alone. While she does truly love her daughter, there are still other things that she wants from life. The fallacy, then, is that loneliness is what is causing her unhappiness, when in reality, the distance she feels is from her own inner self; who she was meant to be and longs to be. This makes her quite conflicted as she wants to be both things, and believes that she cannot be both an artist and a good mother/wife. The theme of Knowing Oneself, or Being True to Oneself is demonstrated in this chapter, and the next, as the protagonist feels as if she's somehow been shortchanged in life. But, when she feels this way, the cultural conditioning that says a mother is supposed to act and feel a certain way comes into play and she feels as if she is somehow less of a person. This denying of self, of not being honest about who she is and what she wants is what is making her lonely, and it is evident to the reader, if not the protagonist, that unless she stops allowing society to dictate the direction of her life, that she is going to continue to be miserable.



She might be able to keep herself distracted for a little, but by ignoring those wants and needs she ultimately makes herself, and those around her, unhappy. This is foreshadowed in the chapter when she talks about how she tries to come up with something to talk about when her husband asks about how her day went, and she realizes that another day has passed and she's unclear as to what she has actually accomplished. She's clearly unhappy with the fact that all she's doing throughout the day is caring for their child, but she doesn't give voice to that for fear that it would make her sound like a bad mother. This gives her a great sense of guilt, and anger, which in turn, begins to turn into depression.

## Chapter 8

It's starting to become clear that the protagonist is becoming stressed taking care of their child. The day-to-day routine is starting to take a toll. When she visits her friend, instead of talking about different things like they used to, all they seem to be able to talk about is their children. She's becoming consumed with how much care and attention her family needs. This means she has to push aside her own wants and desires, which is clearly taking its toll. When she thinks about the fact that her child isn't good, that doesn't mean she has stopped loving her child, it's simply a reflection of the child's behavior, as well as her growing frustration. The last comment about taking so many pictures of the child is just another example of how much being a caregiver has become part of the protagonist's life; a life that she secretly detests.

### **Discussion Question 1**

How is the theme of Being True to Oneself demonstrated in Chapter 7?

### **Discussion Question 2**

Why is the protagonist depressed about being a stay-at-home mom?

### **Discussion Question 3**

What is the protagonist's faulty thinking in regards to her feelings of loneliness?

### **Vocabulary**

telekinesis, existentialist, charismatic, unrequited, anecdote, deprivation, tedious, blithely



# Chapters 9-10

## Summary

### Chapter 9

The main character focuses on how different she is from her husband. Her husband is kind and likes to send money to different charities. She on the other hand considers herself to be bitter and hateful. She starts to get more paranoid about their child as well. She makes her husband promise that if something were to happen at work, he wouldn't try and save anyone. He should just come home because he needs to be there to take care of and protect their daughter. Her husband starts a new job. Instead of doing his own music, he starts making soundtracks for commercials. The parents plan a party for their child, which initially excites the little girl. She keeps asking when the party is going to be. Five minutes into the party though her excitement wanes and she insists that her parents end the party.

### Chapter 10

The protagonist begins to go through the changes in their life, although no specific time frame is given. She talks about how a while ago they had new neighbors move in who were into punk rock. The new neighbors had made a comment when they found out the two parents are married, on how punk it was to actually be married. The protagonist later reflects on this, bitterly noting there's nothing punk about their marriage. She starts to conduct interviews with herself, asking why she's unhappy, ultimately deciding she doesn't want to think about the answer to that question. She gets a job offer to ghost write a book about space with someone she refers to as Almost Astronaut. This is good because her husband reveals that they are having money problems. Throughout the chapter, her husband is fixing things around the house. She thinks about how useless this is, because things will always break down again.

In a reflective moment she talks about how she tried Yoga, but the only part she enjoyed was the final ten minutes where she could pretend she was dead. She mentions how people keep asking about her second book which she hasn't written. She talks about how they used to call their daughter, Little, but one day she asked them to stop declaring that as she was too big to be called Little. Throughout the chapter the protagonist also muses about the nature of souls and emotions.

## Analysis

### Chapter 9

Some of the main character's insecurities are display again, mirroring the way she reacted in the first chapter. Now she's expanded her worrying nature to her child and not just herself. More of her husband's character is revealed which is important because



readers have only learned a small amount about him. When he gets his new job, he comments that it is only vaguely soul crushing. This hints that not only is the mother doing things that she doesn't want to for her family, but so is the father. This comes into play later in the book when he has an affair.

This chapter truly shows how deteriorated the protagonist's interior landscape has become. Slowly eroding from the inside out, she feels unfulfilled, and is contemplating death as the great release, a freedom from the life she doesn't want and feels so guilty about living. It is also interesting to note that the husband has also given up some things for the life they now live, and that on some level, he, too, feels unfulfilled. However, as compared to his wife, it is evident that he continues to find other ways to bring fulfillment to himself, instead of turning inward angrily and becoming bitter about things.

## Chapter 10

The protagonist makes it very clear that she's unhappy with not only her marriage, but also with her life. When she's asked about her book, the person notes that she's running out of time, something that she seems to be becoming aware of. She's been spending all her time trying to take care of her family, but not any day doing things that she wanted or was interested in, like writing another book. It can be said that there is a direct parallel to the life that she wanted to live and the unfinished book. She's running out of time to finish the book, certainly, but more importantly, she feels that she's running out of time to live the life she wants to live. The most direct she is about her unhappiness is when she comments that her favorite part of Yoga was the part where she gets to pretend she is dead.

Her interviews with herself also are clear examples that she's unhappy with everything in her life, but she doesn't want to ask herself why. She is not able to move beyond the life she now leads because she refuses to be honest with herself and thus the theme of Being True to Oneself is demonstrated in this chapter, again. Additionally, the theme of Denial and its devastating effects can also be seen in that she continues to be unable to face her deepest thoughts about her life and what she is not getting from her current life. Her comments about her husband shows that she believes whatever her problem is it can't be fixed. This could also be seen as her being frustrated with her husband trying to fix things around the house, but not trying to fix whatever is wrong with her.

The character Almost Astronaut is introduced in this chapter. At first glance it would seem to be an inconsequential addition to the overall narrative. However, when one begins to view these nonsensically named characters Almost Astronaut, and The Philosopher, one begins to see them, not necessarily as real and living people, but as facets of herself that she's coming to terms with. Almost Astronaut is an astronaut that doesn't quite get to 'be' the astronaut, not ever quite reaching the stars. This is exactly how the protagonist feels. In much the same way, the protagonist is like 'The Philosopher' in the earlier chapters, thinking about life as an abstraction, rather than the often messy experience that it can be. This may be why the protagonist feels short changed when she actually engages in reality because it doesn't live up to the





daydreams and philosophical abstractions/musings that she had about what her life would be like with her lover/husband.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Compare and contrast the protagonist to her husband.

## **Discussion Question 2**

What are The Philosopher and Almost Astronaut as they are used by the author in relation to the protagonist?

## **Discussion Question 3**

How does the theme of Denial become evident in Chapter 10?

## **Vocabulary**

litany, entropy, admirable, infuriate, morbid, fraternal



# Chapters 11-12

## Summary

### Chapter 11

The main character reveals that more time has passed in her life. Her child has started school. She's one of the parents that are always late. She remarks that there are some parents that are always early and bring in whatever supplies are needed on time, sometimes even bringing extra for the other parents. She talks about a story involving a prisoner in Alcatraz. Every night in solitary he drops a button somewhere in the cell. Then he spends the rest of the night searching for it. She remarks that her nights are spent the same way, but she doesn't have a button. She wonders why her heart feels so crooked, even though she has two people in her life she loves.

She continues to reflect on different philosophical sayings, as well as thinking about her own personality and the things that her students have said about her. When she and her husband go out to a party, she comments about how empty it feels. When her daughter is impatient waiting for people to arrive, she wonders why everything has to happen so quickly.

### Chapter 12

The main character thinks on a quote from the late 80's that talks about how dangerous it is for women to read because it could distract them from doing their wifely duties. She notes that she has trouble being a good wife. Whenever she goes shopping, she struggles to remember what to bring home for her husband. She starts to have dreams of her husband leaving her, but he reassures her that he would never do such a thing. She runs into an old friend on the streets who asks about her second book. She says something came up and she never got the chance to write it. When she gets home and tells her husband, he simply responds that it's her road not taken.

## Analysis

### Chapter 11

The protagonist is frustrated that things can't slow down. While she hasn't specified exactly how much time has passed, it's clear that several years have gone by as evidenced by the fact that her child is now in school. She feels like she still hasn't accomplished anything in her life. This surprises her because she notes that she loves two people. The theme of Regret is demonstrated heavily in this chapter as she reflects on the time that has blown past her, and the book she hasn't finished.

The anecdote about the button that the prisoner drops in Alcatraz is telling in that it is evident that she sees herself as a prisoner of the life that she somehow didn't really



choose for herself, but was thrust into. She's still searching for something to make her happy, to give her life meaning. She thought it would be love, but that isn't the case. She still wants to write and travel and become an artist, but she doesn't feel that she can do that while being a mother. Even in that regard she's getting tired, which is why she can't become one of those mothers who is always there early at school.

## Chapter 12

The protagonist starts to come to the realization that she's unhappy just being a wife and mother. Because of that, she's afraid that her husband is going to leave her. She's focusing once again on what her family wants, but not what she wants. She still feels empty, but she acts like if she can be better for her family she'll be complete. She runs into someone else who asks about her book, and she implies that her family kept her from writing it, which demonstrates the theme of Denial. It is as evident in this chapter in a discussion about her book, as it was in the previous chapter, that she doesn't want to face the truth about why her book isn't finished. She wants to put the blame on society, her family, her child, bad luck, anything but where it truly lies....with her. As her husband remarks, it's just the road that she didn't take. This also hints at the fact that the husband might not be happy with where their lives have gone, as he could be considering his own roads that he never took.

### **Discussion Question 1**

What is it that is truly making the protagonist unhappy?

### **Discussion Question 2**

From the reader's perspective, what would make the protagonist happiest and what would it take for her to acquire it?

### **Discussion Question 3**

Why does the protagonist choose denial rather than the truth of her life situation?

### **Vocabulary**

indiscriminate, feeble-minded, peevish, catastrophe, banal, anecdotal, impermanence



# Chapters 13-14

## Summary

### Chapter 13

The protagonist and her family are plagued with bed bugs and lice. She reads an article about a woman who is unhappy because she's been alone for so long and has no husband to help her out. She shows it to her own husband, who remarks that they are both lucky. The protagonist is still having trouble sleeping, even though she has been taking sleeping pills. She wonders if it's because she's a genius, implying that she's staying awake because she can't stop thinking.

### Chapter 14

The protagonist finds out that her husband has been looking into a group called The Long Now. She finds out that it's an organization that's dedicated to doing good in the world. One night, she surprises her husband with a piano that he greatly enjoys playing. Unfortunately for them, the bug problem continues to get worse. They have to start cooking their clothing just to get rid of them. When she's at the dentist, one of the assistants asks about her children. When she answers that she only has one, the assistant suggests that she should try and have another, surprised when the protagonist says that she wasn't thinking about having any more. She also speaks with another mother who has found the perfect home that they recently moved into. The problem is, the mother spends most of her time looking for something on one floor that happens to be on another.

## Analysis

### Chapter 13

The main character is having trouble sleeping because she can't stop thinking. As shown in previous chapters, she has been conducting interviews with herself at night, trying to figure out why she's unhappy and what might be missing from her life. She reads an article about someone who isn't married and is unhappy. This again shows that the protagonist believes happiness should come from having others in her life, but that isn't always the case. She tries to use this article as proof, but it doesn't change the fact that she's growing increasingly miserable with her life, even with her family loving her.

The symbolism of the bugs is evident in this chapter as they are not able to be ignored. This is representative of the protagonist's growing unrest with herself and her life. She envies the woman who speaks about just having moved into her dream house, and the protagonist thinks that if they move that they will get away from the bugs. The fact that they are having to boil their clothing just to get rid of the lice is indicative of how 'infested' her psyche is. And, just like lice, what started as a small disquiet in her soul,



has now become full blown and is literally sucking the life out of her. The things that they are trying are not working and instead, the bug problem, and conversely, their personal problems, are only getting worse.

## Chapter 14

The name of the organization that her husband is looking into, The Long Now, is interesting in that it indicates that while his wife lives in the world of her former life before becoming a mother, he is attempting to live in the present life, and make the most of it. This is in stark contrast to the wife who consistently compares her 'now' to her 'then' and finds it lacking.

The husband once again starts to show signs that he is unhappy with his life. He wants to do more in the world, which is why he's looking into The Long Now. The dental assistant asks the protagonist about having more children, as though this is just the natural progression for the family. This view is also shown with the mother that the protagonist speaks to. Neither one of these things would make the protagonist happy though. As the mother notes, she spends her time searching through the house. Just like the protagonist, she is looking for something in her life, something that pursuing the usual family path clearly isn't providing. Having more children and moving into a bigger house is the expected family path though. What the protagonist wants isn't something that's on the typical family path and she's unclear how to reconcile herself with the life she finds herself in.

## Discussion Question 1

Discuss the symbolism of the bugs and lice.

## Discussion Question 2

What does the organization's name, The Long Now, suggest about the husband?

## Discussion Question 3

Why is the protagonist so conflicted about motherhood?

## Vocabulary

inquiring, rifling, contaminated, uncompromising, promiscuous, sensation, pessimistic, optimistic, clarity



# Chapters 15-16

## Summary

### Chapter 15

The protagonist discusses some of the things she's learned about space since working as a ghostwriter for *Almost Astronaut*. She recalls a story about Vladimir Komarov, a famous astronaut who ultimately ended up dying on his return trip to Earth. Before he died, he got in a fight with his wife about affairs. The character *Almost Astronaut* doesn't seem to care about this though and instead wants the protagonist to come up with what he deems to be more interesting facts.

Meanwhile, the family continues to struggle with bugs. They take turns taking their daughter out while the other stays behind to spray the apartment with poison to get rid of the bugs. The family doesn't send out a Christmas letter, but the main character muses on what she would write if they were to send them out. She talks about the bugs, but also mentions that both her and her husband are getting older, and still haven't furthered their respective careers.

### Chapter 16

In this chapter, the protagonist reflects on her teaching job, which she's had for many years, but doesn't mention until this chapter. She notes that one of her teacher friends often chastises her students for not specifying where the story is taking place and listens to her colleague bemoan the fact that the students leave out the general timeframe of the story. The protagonist also thinks about art monsters, how they are hard to reach because they were constantly traveling. Her philosopher friend, *The Philosopher*, has written a new book and is now traveling the country.

The protagonist has to go and get glasses. She brings a friend with her because she wants to get something that is fashionable. She laments that she doesn't really have any fashion style of her own. Her daughter starts to confess about having bad thoughts, but the protagonist tells her that everyone has those and they just need to learn not to act on them. Her husband remarks how strange she can be as a wife because she encourages him to do odd things, like quit his job. She knows they need the money though and notes that she has expensive tastes and sometimes finds herself reading magazines for people with much more money than she has. At the end of the chapter she meets up with one of her friends and tries to come up with various schemes to redeem her life.

## Analysis

### Chapter 15



The protagonist starts to go into more detail about space. Usually when she uses space in the future it is symbolic for something going on in her life. In this instance, the story is more to foreshadow the troubles that she ends up having with her husband. She begins the chapter saying that 'space' is a challenging endeavor, however the same could be said of marriage. She also goes on to talk about modern warfare and points out that it is evidence that mankind was not meant to live and work together in such close proximity for great lengths of time. It is evident from her musings about her interactions with Almost Astronaut, that she longs for the oblivion that would come if an astronaut were to die in space. It is clear that while the protagonist isn't completely suicidal, she does not like who she is and wants to somehow hit the 'reset' button, if she could.

When she thinks about what she would write in her Christmas letter, she highlights the main problems the family is going through. It is interesting to note that it is the husband that forbids her to write a Christmas letter, insisting instead that they send a photo of everyone smiling. She muses that it is just as well since she would title it: The Year of Wrong Living. Both parents haven't followed any of their dreams. She never wrote a second book, and he never got to do anything more with his music. All she has is the book she is ghostwriting, and all he has is the piano that was gifted to him. The fact that she mentions their age also makes it seem like she believes it's too late for them to change and they are going to be stuck like this for the rest of their lives. In a very telling sentence she says that her husband has fallen asleep on a deck chair, tired from having sprayed bug poison all morning. Symbolically, she seems to be saying that he is 'spraying' a metaphorical poison on the household, with no one being allowed to be themselves. This demonstrates the theme of Being Oneself, as well as the theme of Denial. In this instance, she is seeing the denial for its destructiveness, and while she doesn't seem to completely realize it, she is also understanding what it has cost them both to not be true to who they are artistically, as well as personally.

## Chapter 16

The chapter seems to start off with a meta message about how the book is written. As her teacher friend notes, stories are supposed to be clear about where the characters are in time and space. Dept. of Speculation doesn't follow these traditional rules as it is constantly jumping around from time and location, though each time it is written in the present tense. The protagonist hears about her philosopher friend traveling and writing a new book, noting how happy he seems to be because of it. He's living out the dreams that the protagonist has, but she is unable to act on hers.

Her comments to her daughter about bad thoughts could be seen as foreshadowing, as later on she struggles with her own bad thoughts about taking her life. As she advises her daughter though, she manages not to act on them. The protagonist also talks about how she has been trying to live a more expensive lifestyle, even though she knows that she shouldn't. She's tried several times to fill the void in her life with various things. First, it was her marriage, then her child, and now, things and material goods. This comes up a few times throughout the book, but is most prominent now. It is evident that she's trying to find her happiness, but it of course isn't working, fully demonstrating the theme that money can't buy happiness. The protagonist outright admits at the end of the



chapter that things are wrong as she tries to come up with schemes to redeem her life, which in and of itself is encouraging in that she's at least making the attempt to live in the 'now' instead of lamenting the past.

## **Discussion Question 1**

What could be the husband's motivation for not wanting the wife to send out a Christmas letter?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Give examples that show how both protagonist and her husband and not being true to who they truly are, and what it has cost them.

## **Discussion Question 3**

Discuss the metaphor of the bugs and the spraying of poison for the bugs.

## **Vocabulary**

refrain, confessions, beatnik, isolated, charred





# Chapters 17-18

## Summary

### Chapter 17

The chapter opens with the main character trying to buy a bungalow colony, which is sort of like a time share. She wants her and a bunch of her friends to get together over the summer and spend their time up there. Her husband notes that it doesn't matter, since he'd still have to go to work every day. The family finally finds a new bug free apartment to move in to. When the main character and her daughter are walking back from the store, her child asks her several questions. One of the questions is will her mother die before her. In response, the protagonist says that she hopes that she does.

### Chapter 18

The protagonist's daughter breaks her wrists when she jumps off a swing at the urging of one of her friends. Her mother recounts a previous time they had to take their daughter to the hospital when she had gotten something stuck up her nose. The protagonist had tried to remove it herself, but as her husband noted she couldn't remain calm. She struggles with getting x-rays, but they finally manage to get the little girl under control. This makes the protagonist think back to a Christian scientist she met who believed in idealism. He thought that only the soul was real, so he could ignore any damage to his body because the pain wasn't real. The main character is still having trouble sleeping at the end of the chapter.

## Analysis

### Chapter 17

Once again, the protagonist is trying to find happiness by surrounding herself with people, this time in the form of the bungalow colony. Her husband seems to be aware of the fact that it won't change anything though, as he notes he will still have to go to work every day at a job he doesn't enjoy. This is important to note because the readers rarely get to experience what the husband might be thinking. Him being unhappy is just as important as the main character, since it helps to explain his actions later on in the book, and even now foreshadows the affair that will happen. The bleak situation of the main character is made even more clear when she expresses the desire to die before her child. Under normal circumstances this could just be seen as a natural desire for a parent not to outlive their child. However, with everything else going on with the main character it's clear that it was just another way of her expressing her depression, and could even foreshadow her suicidal thoughts later in the book.

### Chapter 18



The idea of idealism demonstrates the theme Denial, in that once again, the protagonist is avoiding living and dealing with her life, instead opting to live only in the thoughts inside of her mind. She stays awake at nights analyzing herself but getting nowhere. It is simply an escape mechanism that occupies her mind, but does not feed her soul. She is in a complete state of denial about who she is, what she wants in life, and how to bring happiness to her own existence. She is, at this point of the book, depressed and bitter, and this bitterness begins to add poison of its own to her relationship with her family.

It is interesting to note that the protagonist says she had considered living an idealistic lifestyle. In this type of living, one did not have to view anything as being concrete or 'real'. Living like nothing is real though would ultimately lead to a very empty existence, something that the protagonist knows herself because she's already suffering in a world where she's not doing what she wants. If she tried to convince herself nothing was real, she would be in the same situation. The protagonist has a habit of over-thinking or over-complicating things in her life. She listens to the ideas and beliefs of other people, instead of following her own dreams. Essentially, she puts so much time and energy into thinking how she should be living life that she doesn't have enough time to actually live her life the way that she wants. It is clear that she and to some extent, her husband, labor under the belief that no one would support their preferred way of living, and so neither one discusses it or speaks about it.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Discuss the theme of Denial and how the protagonist engages in it again in Chapter 18.

## **Discussion Question 2**

Why doesn't the protagonist or her husband live the lives that they want to live? What is standing in their way?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Discuss the several instances of foreshadowing in Chapter 17.

## **Vocabulary**

idealism, musty, brimmed, orchestrated, ramshackle, commune



# Chapters 19-20

## Summary

### Chapter 19

The parents celebrate their seventh anniversary. Her husband writes a song about marriage, but she finds it sad to hear as it talks about how one of them will have to die first in the arms of the other. She talks about how when they first met one another they used to hide things they disliked about each other. For instance, she hated the glasses that he wore, and he hated her bangs.

### Chapter 20

The protagonist continues to work with Almost Astronaut. He starts to talk about what makes a successful business, remarking that efficiency is important. She begins to wonder what her life would have been like if she were more efficient, just like how astronauts have to be. When she gets home, her husband is at the computer updating her about a recent earthquake that happened in another country. She begins to do more research for her boss about some of the previous space flights. There is a famous love story, but after doing a bit more research she realizes that the timeline makes no sense and it must be an exaggerated story. Back home, the protagonist tries to clean up around the house because her husband complained about how much she had been working. She hopes that he will comment on it, but he doesn't acknowledge it.

## Analysis

### Chapter 19

The husband once again shows that he isn't exactly happy with the marriage either, which comes out in the form of his song. The song, itself, demonstrates the pervasive theme and tone of the book, which is that of Pessimism. This helps to set up his future actions for when he has an affair. The protagonist discusses things they disliked about one another, which also serves as a bit of foreshadowing. As she later finds out, he has an affair with someone who has bangs, likely because it reminds him of a time when he was younger.

### Chapter 20

The protagonist is starting to realize that being in love doesn't necessarily create happiness. People like to build up love stories and make them out to be grand things. In the beginning, the protagonist was looking for love simply because she thought it was right and it would make her happy. While she was happy for a time, she kept trying to pursue this idea of love and create a family, something she wasn't actually ready for. As a result, both she and her husband are now unhappy. Her husband shows this in the



chapter by following the earthquake. His good Samaritan nature is shining through once again, and if it wasn't for his family he might be out there trying to do more to help. He starts to act colder and more dismissive towards his wife, ignoring the fact that she was making an effort to appease him for all the extra work she had been doing.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Discuss the importance of the anniversary song to the overall tone of the book.

## **Discussion Question 2**

Consider how both the protagonist and her husband would have been different had they been able to live the lives that they wanted.

## **Discussion Question 3**

What does the discussion of the earthquake show the reader about the husband?

## **Vocabulary**

acrimonious, cosmic, prudish, phonograph, astute, morbid, caustic



# Chapters 21-22

## Summary

### Chapter 21

The protagonist thinks back to some of the advice she learned from philosophers. One of them had commented how if a student isn't understanding it, they're wasting time on things like eating and sleeping. Another comments that when a writer finally finishes their work, they might realize they wasted their youth and wrecked their health for nothing. After that, the protagonist muses that they don't want their daughter to go to college if it means they have to go away from home. She wants her daughter to always be with her, even when she has a child of her own. She remembers a time when her daughter asked her to stop writing "I love you" in her lunch notes. The protagonist was devastated by this, but her husband just tried to comfort her. She then talks about how husbands sometimes have odd requirements of their wives. She considers herself lucky that her husband doesn't do this for her. She also thinks that wives have requirements to, for their husband to remain loyal and faithful.

### Chapter 22

The chapter opens up with the protagonist simply writing that she is scared over and over. After that, the point of view switches. Instead of using the first person, the protagonist is now referring to herself in the third person, calling herself 'the wife'. Her thoughts start to become more manic, jumping from different quotes to what's happening in her life. She talks about how she's not sure when she was ever happy in life. Her husband starts to spend more time at work, and the two of them seem to be fighting about something when he is there, but it isn't yet clear what they're fighting about. One evening, her sister has to come down to take the daughter away so she doesn't discover what they're fighting about.

## Analysis

### Chapter 21

The initial lines in this chapter, which continue onto the next page, are simply: I'm so scared. This indicates that on some level the character knows that she is reaching some sort of crossroads in her life, though she can't quite define it.

The final lines of the chapter help to once again foreshadow the upcoming affair from the main character's husband. The earlier parts in the chapter highlight the theme of Denial, and that it can be dangerous to spend too much time thinking about the meaning behind life and how to live it, as it can require such a great sacrifice that it's hard to make the time to both think about it on such a deep level and then actually live it. The protagonist is starting to cling to her daughter as a result of her husband getting



colder. She is once again making the mistake of trying to find happiness through the love of someone else instead of trying to figure out exactly what she needs in order to be happy. It is clear that the one person that she needs to love is herself, but she avoids this, ironically, which is the point of most philosophy...to understand oneself. This also demonstrates the theme of Being True to Oneself, and the fact that it is impossible to be true to oneself if a person doesn't take the time to actually know who they are...and then honor that.

## Chapter 22

Switching the point of view is a major change for the main character. She's calling herself 'the wife' now because she's become so detached from her life. She feels like she has no control over what's going on and is just an observer taking notes. A lot of problems are foreshadowed in this chapter, and it's very clear that things aren't good between the couple. Readers will later learn the specific reason behind the protagonist acting so manic, that she's panicking because she's found out that her husband has been having an affair.

### **Discussion Question 1**

What seems to be an overarching fear for the protagonist at this point?

### **Discussion Question 2**

What might be the crossroads that the protagonist is arriving at in her life?

### **Discussion Question 3**

Why does the daughter's insistence that her mother not place 'I love You' in her lunch box any longer act as a trigger that brings on this mania for the protagonist?

### **Vocabulary**

unswerving, ambition, mnemonic, astronomers, rhetorically



# Chapters 23-24

## Summary

### Chapter 23

The protagonist talks about how new couples are often much more passionate than married couples. Married couples make up for this by being more attached to one another. This attachment is what lets them have children together. She then goes on to talk about how there's nowhere in the city to cry. She realizes there is a cemetery nearby and hopes that she can go there to cry. She then reflects on how in tribal cultures children become self-sufficient at an early age. As such, men don't have to focus on protecting them which can lead to them having affairs. Later, she talks to The Philosopher who seems surprised about something regarding the husband being unkind. She agrees that he's one of the kindest people she knows, and starts to wonder if she made him unkind and broke the good parts of him.

### Chapter 24

The protagonist talks about how she's now attending yoga. She goes to the class with the sick and old because she doesn't have the energy to participate herself. She frequently breaks down crying during the classes. Her instructor gives her private lessons where the protagonist talks about how her husband is cheating on her and how she doesn't know if she should leave him. She notes that it has never been easier to be patient and kind to the daughter because she will never love anyone more than her. The protagonist and her husband start to attend therapy together, calling it the Theater of Hurt Feelings. The therapist asks if they're still communicating or sending music to one another. The husband says he's only sent her one video, one of guinea pigs eating a watermelon. At the end of the chapter, the protagonist reflects on how all the other woman had to say to her husband was that she really liked him.

## Analysis

### Chapter 23

It's made clear that the protagonist is suffering by the way she's trying to find a place to hide. Her talking about love and attachment in the beginning also foreshadows what the problem might be. By the end of the chapter it's made even clearer that the husband has clearly done something wrong. The protagonist is blaming herself though, since she can't imagine why else her kindly husband would act in such a way. As it has been hinted at before though, her husband was acting this way because, just like her, he was denying what he wanted in life. The theme of Denial is evident in this chapter, as is the destructiveness of denial. Like a slow poison, it has infiltrated their marriage, and in the protagonist's case, into the very core of her being. They both rushed into having a family while they still had dreams of their own. Much like she is breaking down now, he had his



own breakdown which caused him to try and find happiness with another. What seems to be illustrated by the author in this chapter is that both people labor under the misconception that one must give up their dreams when they become parents, that someone one's life must be over, that there can be no balance, no give and take. It is a very black and white mentality that they both adhere to, and it has cost them both, dearly.

#### Chapter 24

The main character continues to spiral out of control in her depression. She tries to latch onto her daughter, desperate to fill her life with some kind of love. Again, she's not trying to figure out what she needs in life and is instead hoping that by focusing on someone else she'll be able to get some sort of happiness. The nature of the affair is made more visible in the chapter instead of just being hinted at. She also finds out that the two are still communicating, even if it is just in a limited form. This is something that continues to plague her for nearly the entirety of the book, and ultimately forces them to move away just so he isn't around her.

At the start of the chapter, she also continues to ignore doing anything she wants to do. She only starts doing yoga because she wants to shut everyone up. She clearly doesn't want to be there and has a miserable time, frequently bursting into tears during the class.

### **Discussion Question 1**

Why might the protagonist call the therapy sessions, The Theater of Hurt Feelings?

### **Discussion Question 2**

What gross misconception do both the husband and wife labor under?

### **Discussion Question 3**

Discuss the destructive nature of Denial, especially in a married couple.

### **Vocabulary**

arrayed, theorized, resonance, unnerving, industrial





# Chapters 25-26

## Summary

### Chapter 25

The protagonist reflects on how she could have been more observant during their relationship. This is something that the husband mentions when they're in therapy together. At her college, they start to send out memos about recognizing when a student might be suicidal. She finds this infuriating because she thinks you should just be able to know by looking into the person's eyes. She reflects on how everyone is surprised she didn't know her husband was cheating. They try to come up with reasons, such as him being unhappy about losing the piano, or the fact that he's getting older. She feels like she wants to cry out for help, but nobody is there to come and rescue her.

She does research on something called the wayward fog. It's the idea that the one who has an affair becomes enveloped in their affair. Their old life and wife become irritating to them and they want their new life even more. She is clearly afraid that this is what her husband is going through, but she doesn't tell him that she's researching it.

### Chapter 26

The protagonist is noticing that she's been getting a lot more attention from other men when she's out. She wonders if it has always been like that and she just never noticed until now. She also finds herself drawn towards all the people that she's meeting. She considers calling up one of her ex-boyfriends so they can get together and make out at the park. She even considers doing drugs, but decides she's too old for that. She ultimately doesn't want to cheat herself because she's trying to be honorable. Other people are starting to notice how worn out she looks, and she tries to explain it away as allergies or other sicknesses that are causing her to look so physically worn.

## Analysis

### Chapter 25

It becomes clear that both characters are unhappy with their marriage as well as their lives. In their own way, both characters are still acting like their happiness can come from having loved ones in their lives. The protagonist tries to find love from her child, while the husband, instead, went with someone younger who reminds him of his youth. Neither character wants to admit that they gave up on their dreams long ago and that's why they're both miserable. The idea of suicide is introduced in this chapter, after having been foreshadowed some time ago. The fact that the students on campus are the ones talking about it is actually another form of foreshadowing. While it is never explicitly stated later in the book, it's most likely that this came up because of the main character's student, Lia, who attempted suicide, the night before.



## Chapter 26

The main character continues to search for happiness in others. She finds herself getting attracted to just about everyone she meets because she's looking for someone that can make her feel the way that her husband used to. The pervasive theme of Denial is still very present in this chapter, as the reader watches the protagonist search for meaning in all of the wrong places. This is again just a way for her to ignore the problems that are actually affecting her life. It could also be seen as a way of potentially wanting to get even with her husband, but this is never outright stated. The subject of age is brought up once again, with the protagonist feeling like she is too old to do anything self-destructive. Generally whenever age comes up, it's in reference to a character no longer being able to do the things that they previously wanted to do.

### **Discussion Question 1**

What event takes place in Chapter 25 that makes the protagonist think about death and her place on the earth?

### **Discussion Question 2**

What actions does the protagonist take when she finds out that her husband has cheated on her?

### **Discussion Question 3**

Why is the discussion or reminder of age a trigger for the protagonist?

### **Vocabulary**

besotted, infatuated, correlation, causation, wayward, gratitude



# Chapters 27-28

## Summary

### Chapter 27

The protagonist discovers that her husband had used the radio to send a love letter to the girl he went on to have an affair with. He did it one of the nights that she was out. She becomes sick when she discovers this and spends the night in the bathroom. She realizes how filthy the house has become, as well as herself. She thinks to one of her students, Lia, who was complaining about being alone. She thought that this didn't make any sense because Lia was so young and beautiful. She knew that people would come to adore her in the years to come. She then reflects that just like Lia, she wants to be adored as well.

### Chapter 28

It's revealed that Lia had tried to kill herself and ended up in the hospital. The protagonist goes to visit her and show her support. Lia is having trouble sleeping at night. She doesn't request medicine for it though, she just stays up during the evenings, just like the protagonist. The two of them sit together looking at the trees. The protagonist urges Lia to stay on this earth at the end of the chapter.

## Analysis

### Chapter 27

The protagonist mentions Lia for the first time. She relates to her because Lia is depressed and tries to take her own life, just like the protagonist considers doing. Both of them are depressed because they feel like nobody in the world cares about them. She also starts to notice how disheveled she's getting from her depression, but she also notes that she just doesn't have the energy to try and clean herself up. She can't get over what happened and still feels like she's unwanted, on top of all the other stress she has from not having realized any of her dreams.

### Chapter 28

Lia, the student that attempted suicide, did not die, as the reader learns. Soon, it becomes clear that Lia continues to be a parallel to the main character's situation. When the protagonist reaches out asking for Lia to stay at the end, this could easily be taken as a message to herself as well as to Lia. She finds out that they have even more in common when she learns that Lia is having trouble sleeping as well, and just spends her evenings staring out into the window. When she asks her how she gets through the long night, Lia tells the protagonist that she just waits for the first light. This is quite metaphorical and symbolic as the message is clear: she waits for the hope that will



eventually come. This indicates that the protagonist might also find some hope at the end of the tunnel.

## **Discussion Question 1**

What does the protagonist learn about herself as a result of visiting Lia?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Of all the characters in the novel, why do you think the author gives the student, Lia, an actual name?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Why does the protagonist feel understood when she's with Lia?

## **Vocabulary**

bile, heaves, adore, bilateral, conduit, functionality, probate, provost



# Chapters 29-30

## Summary

### Chapter 29

The protagonist is starting to notice how unhappy married couples seem. She was at a party with two people with brilliant, exciting careers. All they could talk about though were the small day-to-day things going on in their lives. Afterwards, she noted that the wife seemed to be incredibly angry with her husband. She starts to feel fear again because she thought that she was done until her husband died, but now she isn't sure what to do. She talks about how the two of them used to send each other letters, with the return address being the Dept. of Speculation. They both still keep these letters. She's developed a new habit of laughing manically whenever her husband says something, than repeating the word back incredulously at him, just like she's seen ex-wives do.

### Chapter 30

The protagonist notes that the undergrads seem to get suicide jokes, but never understand the ones that are about divorce. She goes out of her way to pick up a book about adultery. She hides the book around the house, not wanting anyone to know she was reading it. She finds it gross that the book refers to people as participating partners and hurt ones. She's amused by a footnote that says the participating partner usually spends 1,000 hours processing with the hurt partner. She muses that her husband was only about 515 hours in.

## Analysis

### Chapter 29

The titular Dept. of Speculation is brought up in this chapter. This is where the two characters used to write each other letters, speculating about their future together and what they wanted. These letters represented their actual desires. Instead of following the letters though, both characters decided they should start a family because they thought they were doing what was right, what was expected of them. The fact that they held onto the letters shows that they wanted to pursue those dreams but just never had the chance. The protagonist is starting to lash out more at her husband during therapy. Unlike in previous chapters, she's feeling angry enough to let him know exactly how she's feeling and how much he has hurt her.

This is actually critical to the main character's development. For so long she's been in denial about her life and her feelings, sublimating them at every turn. Now, she's facing them, perhaps having learned something from Lia. The fact that she's allowing her anger to show is shown to be a healing move on her part, and the reader learns about



the letters, as a way of indicating that something of their earlier dreams still survive, if they will only 'read' them again.

### Chapter 30

Age is once again brought up, with undergrad students not understanding divorce jokes because they are too young to have ever experienced such a thing. The protagonist recognizes that she is still far from ready to come to terms with what her husband did, noting at the end of the chapter that he still has about another 500 hours before she can fully process everything that happened. The fact that she's willing to consider this indicates that despite what she was thinking in earlier chapters, she won't end up leaving her husband.

## Discussion Question 1

What is the Dept. Of Speculation?

## Discussion Question 2

Why are the letters to each other of such value at this juncture in the protagonist and her husband's lives?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does age seem to be a trigger in Chapter 30?

## Vocabulary

fervor, titular, incredulously, illuminates, contrived, eccentric



# Chapters 31-32

## Summary

### Chapter 31

The protagonist reveals that her sister has a deal with her husband, that he can cheat on her as long as it's with someone at least in their fifties. He would never say a word about it, and it had to be someone he had no attachment to. She thinks back to when she was pregnant and having difficulties. Every time they heard the heartbeat of their child they'd stare into each other's eyes, and she couldn't imagine ever feeling closer to someone. She's getting ready to go to the office to visit her husband. She ends up buying a pair of heeled boots because she wants to be taller than the woman her husband was having the affair with. Instead she ends up going with a normal outfit.

### Chapter 32

The chapter is written in a much more coherent fashion than previous chapters. Instead of separate breaks like the other chapters, it's one flowing narrative. The protagonist treats it like she was editing a paper. She talks about how she angrily demanded that her husband call up the girl he was cheating with because she wants to talk to her. She shouts at him in public and makes a scene, something she has never done before. He agrees and convinces the girl to come. The protagonist is surprised to see that the girl has bangs, since her husband claimed to hate them. The conversation between the two is never shown, and the protagonist just walks away at the end, not saying another word to her husband until they reach the bus.

## Analysis

### Chapter 31

The protagonist continues to find out that not all marriages are happy, which seems to be a startling revelation to her. Just being with someone isn't necessarily enough to guarantee happiness in life. Even with how close she and her husband used to be, things still managed to fall apart between them. She's still very angry and bitter about the affair. When she goes to the office, she wants to really make an impression on both her husband as well as the girl that he was having the affair with. For the first time, though she may not realize it, she's fighting for the life she wants to have in the present and the future, instead of lamenting the relationship that she had in the past. The theme of Being True to Oneself is demonstrated in this desire to take back control of her life and its direction.

### Chapter 32



The writing style changes once again in this chapter. This reflects the extreme emotion that the protagonist is feeling in this moment. Unlike with other chapters, there are no breaks in this chapter. Everything that happens is one flowing piece. The protagonist clearly expresses her anger, even if the readers aren't able to see the dialogue. When she meets the other girl, she starts to realize how similar they are, except for the obvious age difference. The girl has red hair, just like she used to have. The girl also has her bangs grown out, something the protagonist used to do, but stopped because her husband said that he hated it. This shows that he's desperately trying to recapture his youth because he's unhappy with where they ended up in life, so he's trying to reach out to a time where he was actually happy. It is clear from this incident that he, too, wants to hit the reset button. What is important to note in this chapter is that both characters seem to be finished with being passive riders on the train of life. They are much more willing to fight, to be the one determining the course of their lives, and to make changes. They are more willing, it would seem, to take risks, instead of playing it safe and maintaining the status quo any longer.

## **Discussion Question 1**

What does the protagonist learn about the girl that her husband is having an affair with?

## **Discussion Question 2**

What indicates that both husband and wife are willing to now make changes?

## **Discussion Question 3**

How is the theme of Being True to Oneself demonstrated in Chapter 31?

## **Vocabulary**

drenched, rigidly, evolution, haphazard, frivolous, ensuing





# Chapters 33-34

## Summary

### Chapter 33

The next day, her husband angrily asks if the protagonist is done punishing them. At first she isn't sure who he means when he says us, but she realizes that he means him and the woman he was sleeping with. During therapy, he revealed that he met up with the girl the next day and walked with her. She was feeling hurt and ambushed. Later, she thinks about two jokes that essentially say a man will care more about his mistress because she's the one that ultimately acts understanding and caring, while the wife is the one that acts angry.

### Chapter 34

The protagonist continues to muse about different songs and other mediums that talk about love. In-between these musings, she thinks about how her and her husband's relationship has changed. They still hold hands when they're in bed together, but now she gives him the finger. She thinks back to some of their conversations, where he expressed that he was disappointed her happiest moment didn't involve him. She thinks to all of the little things she used to do for him when they were together. She realizes that the woman her husband slept with has red hair, just like she used to dye hers. Her married friends kept asking what she was going to do about her husband, but her single friends didn't because they think it's simpler. She isn't sure what she wants to do either, but she does mention the possibility of moving to the country.

## Analysis

### Chapter 33

The husband makes it clear that he still has feelings for the girl he cheated with. He's very protective of her, and refers to them as a couple instead of referring to his wife and the main character as a couple. This is ultimately what prompts the protagonist and her husband to move to the country so they can completely get away from the mistress. At the end of the chapter, the protagonist realizes that just like herself, her husband is seeking someone who adores him and understands him. That's why he's not trying to defend his wife, but instead choosing to defend his mistress.

### Chapter 34

The chapter is written in a very disjointed fashion, switching between different quotes and sayings and then jumping to another thought from the protagonist. Overall though, the thoughts are focused around how she was betrayed, and how she still hasn't gotten to the point where she can forgive her husband. She still feels incredibly lonely and is



considering moving to the country just to get away from people. She gives the impression that she doesn't want to necessarily leave her husband, but she's simply too tired and miserable to actually try and repair things anymore, so it would be easier to just try and run away somewhere else.

## **Discussion Question 1**

What faulty thinking is evident in Chapter 34 in regards to the move to the country?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Why does the husband defend the mistress to the wife?

## **Discussion Question 3**

What does the protagonist realize about her husband that is similar to her own inner monologue in Chapter 34?

## **Vocabulary**

enlightenment, cognitive, preconceptions, expedition, grievous



# Chapters 35-36

## Summary

### Chapter 35

The protagonist opens the chapter by saying even with everything that's happened, she's never wanted to end her marriage with her husband. She has thought about sleeping with other people, but never leaving him. After the affair, she started to live a secret life. She has her yoga, but she's also taken money from The Philosopher that she has stored away, along with uncashed royalty checks and music she has received from two boys. She tells her husband that she sometimes thinks about revenge, but she doesn't think she could ever act on those impulses.

She thinks about some of her research with the Almost Astronaut. How when ships or probes are launched into orbit they're light years away from ever actually coming in contact with a star or planet. She later sits with her philosopher friend and explains that she still considers herself lucky to have found her husband at all, and she wishes she had been able to go all in with their marriage. He advises her to take him to the country. Even if she leaves him, they should get away. She visits her sister and writes a letter to her husband, once again using the Dept. of Speculation address. She tells him that they should get away to the country together. Her sister asks what the worst thing has been that her husband has ever had to go through. She responds with nothing, that unlike her and her sister he had a happy childhood so he has no idea how to fix a problem like this. She guesses that the woman he cheated with must have had a difficult past too, and she wonders if in another life they could have been friends.

### Chapter 36

In therapy, her husband proposes that they try a separation. This catches her off guard as they hadn't discussed anything before. The therapist recommends against it, pointing out if they did that, they may as well get a divorce. The protagonist spends more time with The Philosopher. The two of them spend their mornings coming up with different theories. She feels energized and The Philosopher remarks that she seems very awake when she's with him.

## Analysis

### Chapter 35

The protagonist is starting to build a secret life, which could be seen as an attempt to follow her own dreams. She knows she won't actually follow through with it though, and as other chapters have indicated, she would feel too old to just drop everything to try and become an artist. Having the secret life though can provide her with some small measure of comfort, even though she knows she won't ever run off and leave her



husband. She mentions how lucky she was to meet her husband, which is important for readers to remember. With everything that's happened in the last few chapters, it's easy to forget that at one point the characters were genuinely happy with one another. It isn't a lack of love between the two that tore them apart, but instead them both being unhappy with their lives and the road not taken.

Space is brought up once again, acting as a parallel to how the protagonist feels. She imagines that she is in the same situation as one of the ships or probes, where she's alone in a vast emptiness with nobody even remotely close to her. Leaving for the country is once again brought up as well, a path that the family ultimately ends up taking.

What's especially interesting is how the protagonist talks to her sister. When asked, she says that her husband has never experienced anything bad in his life. As shown throughout the book though that isn't true, but it goes along with the fact that the main character has a habit of denying what her and her husband gave up when they rushed into starting a family together. The theme of Denial is evidenced in this dialogue.

Just like her, the main character's husband had hopes and dreams of his own. They weren't explored in as much depth, but it was clear that he enjoyed traveling like his wife, and he certainly enjoyed creating his music. When he had to take a more corporate job for his family, he remarked in a rather passive way that it wasn't what he wanted to do. His helpful nature has been stifled as well. Much earlier, his wife made him promise to never risk himself helping anyone because he has a child to take care of. He's been shown to follow disasters and look into groups that are dedicated to helping out others, but now he's never a participant. This shows that he too has his own unfulfilled dreams that are clearly hurting him, although his wife doesn't seem to realize them.

## Chapter 36

It's interesting that the husband is pushing for a separation because the reasons why are never explained. It could be that he's unhappy with his wife, but it seems more likely that he's just desperate to try and change his life. Given how much the main character loved her husband it seems unlikely that he didn't return the feelings. He's at the point though where he's so unhappy he wants to make a change and try to follow his dreams, which he believes he can't do while he's with his family.

At a first glance, the main character's relationship with The Philosopher could seem romantic in nature. She isn't getting happy and excited though because she has feelings for him. What's making her happy is she is able to recapture a part of her youth. They're acting like they were in college again. When she's with him, she doesn't have to worry about being a mother, or a wife who was cheated on, or even someone well past her college years. This is the closet she has found, one that will allow her to follow her dreams and do something for herself, which is why she's so happy and energetic.



## **Discussion Question 1**

What seems to be changing for the protagonist?

## **Discussion Question 2**

What role does the main character's continued relationship with The Philosopher fulfill?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Why is the protagonist shocked when her husband suggests they separate?

## **Vocabulary**

constellations, affirmations, magnanimously, compressed, inscrutable, self-deprecating



# Chapters 37-38

## Summary

### Chapter 37

The couple gets into a serious fight when the husband once again refers to himself and his mistress as a couple. She leaves in a huff and finds herself going to a Holiday Inn. She wanted to do something that would make an impact and hurt her husband, but he doesn't try to stop her or message her after the fact. She considers killing herself but decides against it and returns in the morning. She makes her husband leave and spend the night at her friend's house The Philosopher. She asks her husband if he plans on going back to see his mistress. In desperation, she brings up their daughter to try and get him to be reasonable. She tells The Philosopher to keep him there just for that night and stop him from seeing his mistress.

### Chapter 38

The main character notes that everyone has been saying she's looking more radiant lately. She decides to meet up with her ex-boyfriend at the park. The two are talking, but he starts to notice something is wrong with her. She realizes it too, then admits that she needs a sponsor. The two awkwardly go on their way at the end of the chapter.

## Analysis

### Chapter 37

The protagonist is at her darkest when she goes to the Holiday Inn. Once again, her husband has hurt her, not just with the affair, but by making it sound like he's with his mistress more than he is with the protagonist. The protagonist feels hurt and alone and wants him to feel the same pain. She later notes in the chapter that it's much easier for him to go to the mistress because all he has to do is show up at her place and he is forgiven. If he wants to get forgiveness from his wife, he has to put up with all the fighting and therapy. He's just trying to drown all of his problems by being with another person, which is ironic in that this is exactly what she has done for a large portion of her life. She is finally beginning to understand the very things that will hopefully put her back on the road to happiness.

### Chapter 38

The protagonist is still hurting from what her husband did. She not only wants to get revenge, but she also wants to capture those feelings of being wanted and adored again. Both she and her ex-boyfriend realize what is going on though, and neither character acts on their impulses. While this was a very brief encounter, it helps to reinforce the main character's decision to move to the country since she knows the city



isn't good for either her or her husband right now with so many people around. Like her husband, it could also be that she's trying to recapture more of her youth, attempting to go back to a time where it felt like she could still realize her hopes and dreams.

## **Discussion Question 1**

What is the protagonist's motivation for contemplating suicide?

## **Discussion Question 2**

What does the husband say and do that significantly hurts the protagonist, but also opens up her eyes?

## **Discussion Question 3**

What does the protagonist learn as a result of her encounter with her ex boyfriend?

## **Vocabulary**

croon, retrospect, scrim, portent, vivacious, croon



# Chapters 39-40

## Summary

### Chapter 39

The protagonist is still struggling with thoughts of hurting herself. At one point, her husband brings up the fact that she used to want to be an art monster, but she doesn't respond to it. She decides that the family is going to move out to the country, in the old house where her sister used to live. The family quickly moves out without making a big deal of the fact that they're leaving.

### Chapter 40

The protagonist continues to dream about a secret life where she sneaks out and gets to be an art monster. While she has been planning to run away before, it isn't revealed until now how detailed she's been with it. She's been hiding money inside of her books and is constantly scribbling notes on just about any surface she can. After moving to the country, she feels exhausted. Her child is having trouble adjusting as well. The protagonist and her husband drive past a Holiday Inn which makes her stiffen up because she spent the worst night of her life there.

## Analysis

### Chapter 39

In both the protagonist and the husband's eyes, escaping to the country will make their lives better. To some extent, this is true, but ultimately all the family is doing is trying to hide from their problems and not address them. Happiness isn't going to come just because they're in a new location and getting away from their problems, it just makes it easier for them to hide everything that happened under the guise of country living. The husband brings up her old desires, a clear indication that he has been thinking about their pasts and what they used to want. While a dialogue has begun, it is evident that there are many hurdles and discussions left to be had. The theme of Regret is demonstrated in this chapter as, in an attempt to reconnect with earlier feelings for each other, the couple are only reminded of roads not taken and dreams not realized, each blaming the other for the lack of fulfillment.

### Chapter 40

The protagonist is clearly thinking more and more about the road not taken. Like her husband, she's becoming desperate to follow the dreams that she had in her youth. Unlike her husband though, she doesn't act on them, save for scribbling out notes on receipts and whatever other paper she can get her hands on. The Holiday Inn comes up once again, and will continue to represent a moment of great despair for the main





character, as it serves as a reminder of how dark and bleak everything had gotten for her. The theme of Pessimism is demonstrated in this chapter, revolving around the mention of the Holiday Inn and what that moment represented for her. She seems to still hold on to returning to the Holiday Inn as a possibility.

## **Discussion Question 1**

What is the symbolism of the Holiday Inn?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Why won't the move to the country solve the main character and her husband's problems?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Compare and contrast the protagonist's character to her husband at this point in the novel.

## **Vocabulary**

aviation, grandiose, hysteria, listlessly, ruffled, scrawled, recede, immaculately



# Chapters 41-42

## Summary

### Chapter 41

Her husband seems to be taking well to the country life, and even thanks his wife for moving them out there. She, on the other hand, is still resentful towards her husband. She spends one of the nights sleeping in their daughter's room because she doesn't want to be around him.

### Chapter 42

The parents continue to worry about their daughter because she seems to be struggling with the move as well. They get her a puppy against the wishes of their therapist. As they point out, this seems to be the only thing that makes their daughter happy. The protagonist is still miserable. She's taking medication to keep her hands from shaking, and to stop the dark thoughts that she's having. There are still moments where she finds herself breaking down in tears though. There are also times where she thinks about her ex-boyfriend, but she never tries to get in touch with him. She notices that sometimes her husband goes out into the field to smoke alone.

## Analysis

### Chapter 41

Because the readers can't see what the husband is thinking, it's hard to tell if he's genuine with his happiness, or if he's just trying to convince himself that he's happy. Given that he comes from the country, he could genuinely be happy because part of his dreams might have included one day moving back to the country. If nothing else he certainly seems to like it because it lets him use his telescope again. This is significant, because of the space references earlier. In a metaphorical attempt, he's trying to 'find' things in space that he couldn't find before. This lets the reader know that now that he's in the country, he's much more willing to try and find what they once had....to find his way back to her.

The main character on the other hand, is still miserable and resentful towards him because living in the country was never something she wanted to do. As pointed out much earlier in the story, she did actually enjoy living in the city. At the very least, she was much more interested in traveling as opposed to settling down in the country. She still blames her husband for them having to move at all, and still doesn't want to forgive him for what he's done. The theme of Pessimism centers around the protagonist and her inability to see what is truly beginning to happen in front of her.

### Chapter 42



Both parents are very concerned with keeping their daughter happy and hiding the fact that they've been fighting. They don't want to see her end up miserable like they are. At this point the protagonist seems to have completely given up on her dreams. She's just trying to bury her pain in pills and moments of isolation where she can cry to herself. She is at least determined to make her daughter feel happy and taken care of. The theme of Denial makes a reprisal in this chapter as the protagonist tries to fall back on old habits, of burying herself in taking care of her daughter. She knows she can't find happiness in her own dreams, so she tries to take what comfort she can from taking care of her daughter. The husband is still struggling with things as well, as shown by the fact that he goes out alone to smoke in the field. The protagonist still comes up with backup plans, but these continue to just be nothing more than fantasies that she never outright acts on.

## Discussion Question 1

Discuss the significance of the husband's telescope.

## Discussion Question 2

What bad habits has the protagonist fallen back in to?

## Discussion Question 3

Discuss the theme of denial in Chapter 42.

## Vocabulary

buckling, composition, faulty, prognostication, ramification, grievous



# Chapters 43-44

## Summary

### Chapter 43

The protagonist has her own little room now where she can sit and watch the garden while she works on her writing. Her daughter is doing better and adapting to the country life, which pleases both parents. They still fight though and now their fighting has gotten much more intense. She describes it as them no longer wearing gloves when they verbally go at each other. Whenever she drives by the Holiday Inn, she no longer even notices it.

### Chapter 44

The family has fallen into a routine in the country. The wife is still unhappy, but she's simply resigned herself to that fact. Her husband buys a piano that he can play late into the evening since there's nobody else around to hear it. She tries to distract herself by going bird watching and learning the names of all the birds. She used to think that the mistress would write to her, and she even considers writing a letter to her but decides against it. She writes to the philosopher instead, who is living in the desert and met someone who makes him happy. She tells him to stay with her.

## Analysis

### Chapter 43

This chapter is all about the parents surrendering. They're still miserable and they fight every night, but they don't know what else to do to fix it. They've resigned themselves to living this lifestyle. In all likelihood this is probably because they don't know how to find happiness or believe it is too late, as well as the fact they want to be there for their daughter. Under normal circumstances it would be a good thing that the main character can drive by the Holiday Inn without feeling anything. It isn't that she's gotten over what happened though, but she's just surrendered and completely given up to the point where she's too exhausted to even acknowledge her despair anymore.

### Chapter 44

Both parents are trying to find things that they can distract themselves with so they aren't focused on how miserable they are. The husband seems to be doing a better job of it, but this could again just be because the readers aren't able to see his thoughts, and his wife hardly seems to be thinking about what he might be feeling. The wife implores The Philosopher to stay with the girl that he met. This could be taken a few different ways. The protagonist could again be using the logic that being with someone means you'll be happy. She could potentially be trying to live vicariously through the



Philosopher, since he found someone that adores him and she wants that feeling again. The other possibility is she realizes that the Philosopher is ready to settle down because he's been spending all of this time pursuing his own dreams. Unlike her, he didn't rush into a family and instead got to travel and write his books. Now that he's older though, he's at the point where he can settle down because he's already accomplished everything that he's wanted. It is unlikely that the main character realizes this given how much she's struggled to realize that particular message herself, but it is likely the message that the writer is trying to get across to the audience.

## Discussion Question 1

In Chapter 43 what makes the reader believe that both protagonist and her husband have given up on their relationship?

## Discussion Question 2

Why would the protagonist encourage The Philosopher to get married, since she has been so miserable since being married?

## Discussion Question 3

What obstacles have the protagonist and her husband overcome and what still needs to be addressed?

## Vocabulary

hardpack, standardized, reflected, poignant, narcissistic, nostalgia



# Chapters 45-46

## Summary

### Chapter 45

The protagonist still watches her husband sleep like they used to when things were better between the two. The husband slips a paper into the others that she is grading that describes a family moment they shared earlier in the day. He wanted to see if she would notice. Throughout the chapter, she thinks back on different philosophers and their sayings, emphasizing the importance of attention, as well as the way the world changes after getting married.

### Chapter 46

The final chapter marks another change in point of view. The main character has reverted back to using the first person view and calling her husband “you.” The chapter is very short and just details the two parents sending their child off to school and then picking her up later in the day.

## Analysis

### Chapter 45

The protagonist is trying to capture some of the past intimacy she shared with her husband, but it’s clear that it isn’t the same. The husband is trying to do this as well, but it’s clear that after having surrendered to their despair in the previous chapter they aren’t going to be able to reignite that spark. They still try because they don’t know what else to do with themselves and are desperate to try and feel that old happiness without thinking about why they used to be happy. The protagonist still feels attention starved, but she also seems resigned to accepting the fact that life just changes after marriage, likely in an attempt to convince herself that what she’s experiencing is normal. This is again a way for her to try and deny the problems that they’re being faced with. She doesn’t have to try and change things if she thinks this is just how it is supposed to be. This makes it easier for her to just surrender and let any lingering dreams she once had fade away.

### Chapter 46

The change in point of view is a big deal for the protagonist. It’s the final nail in the coffin for her. She’s accepted that this is her life now, that she’s not just some outside observer. She’s given up on her dreams and doesn’t even have the strength to remain mad at her husband anymore. The fact that she just focuses on her daughter is telling. It’s like the main character is admitting that the only thing she cares about is her



daughter. Nothing happens during that time where the daughter leaves school and returns home, because her life only has meaning when her daughter is around.

In many respects, then, the daughter has become the protagonist's 'dreams'. Just like her own dreams, the daughter has promise and hope, is loved, and happy. The protagonist convinces herself that making life good for her daughter is a way of making life good for herself, and so, the reader sees that the protagonist has once again, embraced the theme of Denial and that the theme of Being True to Oneself, is a difficult thing to maintain in society. The book does not end on a positive or uplifting note. It is left unsaid as to whether they finally overcome their issues and are able to reconnect with one another. What is evident is that the author is plainly making a point of stating that two people cannot fill in the empty spaces in another's life with love, or duty, or philosophy. The author is stating that to truly be happy one must first know oneself before one can really truly be in a relationship, because then there is no chance of losing who you are. Both of these characters lost the best parts of themselves because they weren't whole to begin with.

## **Discussion Question 1**

What hope does the author give the reader as far as the potential for the protagonist and her husband to eventually find happiness?

## **Discussion Question 2**

What bad habits are both the protagonist and the husband falling back in to?

## **Discussion Question 3**

What overall pervasive message is the author trying to get across in Chapter 46?

## **Vocabulary**

uncanny, changeable, circumspect, maudlin, vacated



# Characters

## Wife/Protagonist

Just like with the majority of the characters, the protagonist is never given a name. She simply refers to herself in the first person until about halfway later through the book when she instead starts to call herself the wife. When she was younger she was fascinated with art and travel, but she ultimately had to give up on these things once she settled down and had a family. Throughout the course of the book though, she continues to be very philosophical. She frequently quotes various philosophers, using their words to reflect on where she is in life.

The protagonist is afraid of being alone, so much so that she ends up staying with her husband, even when he has an affair on her. She genuinely tries to love him even with what he did, but it's clear that she feels hurt and betrayed. She does have nothing but love for her child though. By her own admission, she can be a very bitter and judgmental person. The protagonist has very lofty dreams, and enjoys living a richer lifestyle, although this is often curbed by the fact that she has to worry about and take care of her family. She's shown to be very caring towards her students, although the book doesn't focus too much on this.

## Husband

The husband comes from a Midwestern family. Unlike his wife, he's much kinder and caring and seems to enjoy typical family values. At the beginning of the book, he's shown sending money to different groups that need help, although they never specifically say who or whether or not he stops doing this after having a child. Much like his wife, he has an artistic side. Before they had a child he was creating unique soundtracks, using things like the sounds of atoms smashing to create music. Although his thoughts are never explored, it's clear that he's unhappy with his life as well, which is why he ends up having an affair.

It is clear that between the two of them, the husband is one that may have the most hope of regaining a sense of who he was. This is clearest when they move to the country and he tells her thank you. He also purchases a telescope which he wasn't able to do in the city. Metaphorically he's looking for lost objects or faraway objects with the telescope, which in essence means that he's willing to also look for her, again. Between the two, he seems the most willing to let himself off of the hook for the choices that he's made. He regrets many things but he is also able to reach out and try to find things in his current life to give him a sense of purpose. This is clear in the many philanthropic and charity organizations that he assists.





## Child

As a baby, the child was very loud and had trouble sleeping. She enjoyed the sensation of going fast though, which helped to calm her down. As she grew up, she started to display the same intelligence that her parents shown. Her father was always trying to teach her new things, something that her mother wasn't always happy about.

## Sister

The sister is related to the main character. She only shows up a few times throughout the story when she talks to the main character over the phone. She ends up moving to England on the whims of her husband by the end of the story. She's very supportive of the main character, and encourages her to leave her husband when he cheats on her.

## Philosopher

The Philosopher is a mutual friend of both the husband as well as the main character. Most of his interactions though are just with the main character. He's the one that initially sets them up in the first place. As his name implies, he is a very philosophical person, and frequently listens to and gives his advice to the main character when she reaches out for him. Towards the end of the book, the main character notes that he's starting to get successful and becoming famous.

## Almost Astronaut

The Almost Astronaut is a character that the main character ends up ghost writing for. The Almost Astronaut is fascinated with space, which is what he's hiring her to write about. The protagonist notes that he's a very arrogant and egotistical man who just seems to want people that are willing to work with whatever he wants. The protagonist doesn't like working with him, but he pays her a great deal of money so she puts up with him and his demands.

## She

She refers to the woman that the protagonist's husband was having an affair with. She only shows up once in person when the main character goes to confront her. The main character realizes that she looks like a much younger version of herself. Little else is known about her, except for the fact that she's young. The main character at one point angrily refers to her as being little more than a child, suggesting that she's either in or just out of college.



## **Ex-Boyfriend**

The ex-boyfriend comes up a few times throughout the book. He used to date the main character, but their relationship ended. When they were together, he did drugs with her. He meets up with her at first to make amends. The two meet up a couple more times throughout the book and he even starts to send her music.

## **Lia**

Lia is unique for being one of the only characters to get a name. Despite having a name, Lia is actually a very minor character and only appears towards the end of the book. Lia is a student working under the main character. She's revealed to suffer from depression and ends up in the hospital after trying to kill herself. The main character visits her and is shown to care deeply for her.

## **Therapist**

The therapist is introduced later in the book when the protagonist and her husband start to deal with his affair. The therapist only appears a few times and mostly serves to give advice to the main character and her husband.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Philosophy quotes/books

Throughout the course of the book the main character is frequently referencing different quotes from books or from philosophers. The quotes frequently reflect what it means to live life. For the main character, she compares what the quotes are saying to her own position in life, where she ultimately feels like she isn't following their advice and is living an empty, unfulfilled life.

## Bugs

When the family is first living together their apartment is filled with bugs, a fact that they try to hide from the rest of their family as well as their daughter. The bugs are symbolic for all of the problems that both the main character and her husband are feeling. While they do genuinely love their daughter, neither one of them were prepared for the life changes that came with starting a family. However, they don't want anyone to see these problems, which they try to hide from everyone else, just like with the bugs.

## Rich Living

Finances are only brought up a few times throughout the course of the story, mostly towards the beginning and then once or twice in the middle. Whenever money is brought up, it usually references the fact that the main character wishes she had more. This again ties into her desires for a different kind of life, where she could use her money to travel the world and buy fine products instead of having to save and take care of her family.

## Space

Once the main character starts working for Almost Astronaut, she starts to occasionally muse about space. Specifically she tends to focus on the emptiness of space. To her, that lonely empty feeling associated with space is how she feels about her life.

## Astronauts

In contrast to space, the protagonist views astronauts as people who are consistently busy and always making something of their lives. She even outright says at one point that astronauts are the type of people that don't waste a minute. Both she and Almost Astronaut idolize this lifestyle and wish they had that much purpose in their lives.



## Third Person Reference

About halfway throughout the book, the main character stops referring to herself in the first person and instead switches over to a third person perspective. She refers to herself solely as The Wife. This represents how detached she has come from her life. She no longer sees herself as an active part of it, that she's lost any control over what she wants to do and is instead just a helpless observer.

## Dept. of Speculation (Letters)

Towards the end of the book, the protagonist reveals that she and her husband used to write each other letters when they first started going out. The letters were labeled and saved in a box that they both referred to as the Dept. of Speculation. For both characters, these letters were a direct representation of their hopes and dreams that they had. They would write about all of the things that they wanted to do with their lives. The protagonist notes later in the book that it had been years since they ever did something like this, reflecting how they have both given up on their ambitions.

## Lia

Lia only comes up a few times throughout the story. Lia is a depressed student who tries to commit suicide. Lia mirrors the same emotional state as the main character, who herself is considering ending her life.

## Bangs/Red Hair

While most of the symbolism focuses on the main character, there is an exception in the form of "She" the woman who is sleeping with the main character's husband. When the protagonist finally meets her, she realizes that the girl has bangs and red hair. When the protagonist was younger and first started dating her husband to be, she would dye her hair red and wore her hair in bangs. Once she got pregnant though she stopped because she was worried the dye would introduce chemicals in her body that could be bad for the child. The husband is clearly trying to pursue that happy past by having an affair with someone who reminds him of his wife at a younger and better time in their life, before they had become parents.

## Holiday Inn

When she's at her darkest, the main character leaves her home because she can't stand to be around her husband. She leaves her phone on, hoping that he will try and get in touch with her. He just ignores her, so she goes off to a Holiday Inn to spend the night. While she's at the hotel, she struggles with her depression and considers ending

her life. She later notes when they drive by a similar hotel how it was the worst night of her life, and the hotel clearly represents despair to her.



# Settings

## First Apartment

The first apartment is where the main character and her husband initially move in, and where they raise their child for the first few years of her life. The apartment is relatively small and infested with bugs. Both parents hate the location, but it takes them a long time to find another place to live.

## Second Apartment

The second apartment is where the characters spend the majority of their time. They live here up until the end of the book when the main character decides that the only way to save their family is to move to the country.

## New York

There are several times throughout the book where the main character is traveling throughout the city or visiting friends in an unspecified location. Usually she's visiting stores or going to a restaurant. Sometimes the characters will also visit unspecified parks, usually before their therapy.

## Philosopher's House

The main character visits her friend the Philosopher a few times, most notably at the beginning of the story where he first tells her about her husband to be. When the characters are fighting, she makes her husband spend some time here because she can't be around him.

## Therapy

After she finds out about the affair, the main character and her husband attend therapy. The sessions are usually only summarized afterwards by the main character.

## Holiday Inn

When the main character is at her lowest after fighting with her husband, she runs off to a Holiday Inn where she considers ending her life.

## The Country

Towards the end of the book, the family moves away from the city and retreats to the country to start over. For the most part, this setting focuses on the cabin and the immediate surroundings, but sometimes the main character talks about venturing further into the countryside.



# Themes and Motifs

## Regret

Even from the very start of the book, the main character is focusing on how alone she feels. She wants to get into a relationship because she thinks that it will get rid of her loneliness and make her feel complete. Initially it does work and she does genuinely seem to be happy when she's with her soon to be husband. Even this seems like a temporary band aid though. Both the husband and wife still have dreams of their own that they aren't choosing to pursue while they're together. They'll talk about it, and even write about it when they send letters to themselves through the dept. of speculation.

Once they have a child together, she comments about how she will love the child unconditionally forever and never wants the child to leave. She attaches herself to the child and is shown to only a few times ever go out without her. During this time though, she's contemplating all of the things that she wanted to do with her life, studying philosophy and looking at all the other ways to live in the world.

While both parents are shown to love their child, it's clear that they rushed into parenthood without any consideration for everything else they wanted in their lives. They make the mistake of first trying to focus on one another, and then focusing on their child. At the same time, they had all these other things that they wanted to do with their life, such as traveling and making art. Their lives feel empty and focusing on others was a distraction, but ultimately not what they wanted.

## Money Can't Buy Happiness

At a first glance, finances really don't play into the book too much. It's actually an underlying theme throughout the book though. It starts near the very beginning when the main character is talking about how much she wants to travel. At the time, she doesn't have a family so one of the only things holding her back is finances. When her and her husband to be do eventually go on a trip, she talks about how much fun they had.

Once they do start a family together, both parents end up getting different jobs. The husband has to get a job doing soundtracks for commercials. When asked how it is, he remarks that it's only slightly soul crushing. His wife ends up having to get a new job as well working for the Almost Astronaut. When the project starts to get more demanding she's ready to leave, but he offers much more money and she decides to stay.

At first it seems like they're just working because of their child, but throughout the book the main character hints at her expensive tastes. This could be seen as another way that she was trying to get happiness, by spending her money on expensive products, hoping they would give her life meaning. Ultimately though, she continued to feel empty.





## Denial

The majority of the problems that plague the characters in the book come from the fact that they are never honest with what they want. As previously mentioned, both of the parents tried to focus entirely on their family in an attempt to give their life meaning. They loved their daughter, but they weren't at the point where they wanted children because they still had so many other things that they wanted to do.

After having a child, the main character focuses on all of the things that she wanted to do with her life. She wanted to do more traveling, and do more with her art. Whenever the two do get the chance to go out or have a party, she comments on how it wasn't what she expected and ultimately seems disappointed. This is even a trait her child shows at time, although it makes far more sense for her because she's just a child and isn't expected to know better.

Even at the end of the book, the main character isn't shown to be happy. She clearly wants to leave her husband, and her sister is even encouraging her to do that. Instead, she moves out into the country. This ultimately makes her husband happy because he comes from the country, but it isn't where she wants to be. By the end of the book she's still unhappy and upset with what her husband had done for her, but she keeps ignoring what she really wants and essentially just resigns herself to living out her life in the country, even though it's blatantly not what she wants.

## Pessimism

Many of the characters in the book are focused on philosophy, so much so that a character is even simply referred to as the philosopher. The main character and her husband are very philosophical in nature, and even their daughter exhibits this behavior as she's growing up. Part of why the main character is always unhappy is because she very rarely tries to just enjoy what she has. The closest she comes to this is when she just has her daughter and when she's starting her relationship with her eventual husband.

Even during these times, she's still thinking about philosophy and the nature of life. All this does though is make her unhappy because she's never focusing on the good things that she has in life, and instead just thinks about all the other things that she wants or feels is lacking. This leads to her constantly feeling unhappy, even when things are going well in her life.

## Being True to Oneself

In the Dept. Of Speculation, the author indicates and illustrates through numerous means the need for an individual to be true to who they are, to pursue their dreams and find a way to live one's dreams while still having fulfilling relationships. The way that the



author does this is to show two people who are unable to be happy because they pursue happiness in all of the wrong places.

First, the protagonist pursues happiness by exploring philosophy. While a study of philosophy can lead to a discovery of oneself, the protagonist doesn't use it for that. She uses philosophy with surgical precision, dissecting her flaws, chastising herself for them, and then allowing herself to fall further into a state of pessimism. The fact that she lies awake at night analyzing herself is indicative of this destructive trait. She's seeking a 'reason' for her unhappiness, but continues to avoid the truth of the matter, which is that she needs to face who she is and what she wants. So aware and worried about how things will look to others, how she will be perceived by others, stymies her growth and forces her to avoid her own personal truths until the end of the novel.

Then the protagonist seeks to avoid knowing herself by throwing herself into her 'duties' as a wife and mother. She pours herself into this life and receives outward support for it from others, but on the inside of herself, she doesn't enjoy doing these activities, and thinks that there must be something inherently wrong with her that she wouldn't love baking cookies and becoming a teacher. This just further erodes her self esteem and distances her even further from who she really is.



# Styles

## Point of View

Dept. of Speculation is written with two different viewpoints, although both times it still follows the main character. The book starts out from the point of view perspective of the nameless protagonist. It follows her thoughts throughout the entirety of the book; however towards the middle of the book it shifts perspective. Instead of being written in the first person, the main character starts to refer to themselves in the third person. She no longer refers to herself as “I” or “me” but instead “she” or “the wife”. She also stops referring to her husband as “you” and instead with “he” and “the husband”. This is done to represent how unhappy she’s getting with her life and to represent her detachment. It feels like she isn’t living her life and is just an outside viewer.

## Language and Meaning

The language in the book is relatively straight forward. There isn’t too much spoken dialogue in the book, so the reader mostly just gets to hear the internal thoughts of the main character. Her language is somewhat sophisticated at times, especially when she’s recalling different philosophical quotes that she read about. Because the readers are seeing exactly what the main character is thinking, it makes it easier for her to naturally explain things to the audience, since they are directly seeing her thought pattern. One of the unique things about the book is almost no character is given a name. Because so much of it is just the thoughts of the main character, there’s little in the way of physical descriptions either.

## Structure

The structure of the book is all over the place. The main character is constantly jumping around. For the most part, she just skips ahead in time, but sometimes she’ll go back and talk about something from her past, or a conversation she had when she was younger. Usually each paragraph will represent a change in time. Sometimes it might just be a couple of hours, while other times it can be days, or even years. In the beginning of the book especially the main character jumps through most of her youth to get to where she’s with her husband and her child. This chaotic structure helps to show how the main character is struggling with life. At the start of the book, whenever the main character is talking about her husband, she’ll call him “you” as though the book was directly being written to him, treating it like one of the letters that would appear in their dept. of speculation. When she stops referring to herself in the first person, she also begins to call her husband by his title or gender.



## Quotes

My plan was to never get married. I was going to be an art monster instead. Women almost never become art monsters because art monsters only concern themselves with art, never mundane things. Nabokov didn't even fold his own umbrella. Vera licked his stamps for him.

-- Wife (Chapter 2 paragraph 11)

**Importance:** The main character expresses her dreams very early on in the book. This is important because the fact that she never follows her dreams is the main driving force for her depression later on in the book and addresses one of the main themes of the story.

He gave me a CD to take home. On the cover was an old yellow phone book, ruined by rain. I closed my eyes and listened to it. Who is this person? I wondered.

-- Wife (Chapter 3 paragraph 6)

**Importance:** The protagonist meeting her husband sets up the rest of the story, and the cd is what initially makes her interested in him.

We stayed at a cheap hotel that had a view out the window more beautiful than anything I'd ever seen. The water was wickedly blue. A cliff of dark rock jutted out of the sea. I wanted to cry because I was sure I would never get to be in such a place again.

-- Wife (Chapter 4 paragraph 8)

**Importance:** This quote once again shows how much the character enjoys traveling. It's important to see how happy she is in this moment because she's actively pursuing one of her dreams.

My love for her seemed doomed, hopelessly unrequited. There should be songs for this, I thought, but if there were I didn't know them.

-- Wife (Chapter 7 paragraph 6)

**Importance:** The main character frequently tries to find happiness through love. Instead of pursuing her dreams, she tries to bury herself in her family life. All this does though is serve to make her miserable because she isn't actually following any of her own dreams.

My best friend came to visit from far away. She took two planes and a train to get to Brooklyn. We met at a bar near my apartment and drank in a hurry as the babysitter's meter ticked. In the past, we'd talked about books and other people, but now we talked only of our respective babies, hers sweet-faced and docile, mine at war with the world.

-- Wife (Chapter 8 paragraph 5)

**Importance:** This quote goes to show how the main character is starting to lose the things that were previously important to her. Instead of being concerned with books and



art and the other people in her life, all she's doing is talking about her child, since that has become the main part of her life.

People keep telling me to do yoga. I tried it once at the place down the street. The only part I liked was the part at the end when the teacher covered you with a blanket and you got to pretend you were dead for ten minutes. "Where is that second novel?" the head of my department asks me. "Tick tock. Tick tock.

-- Wife (Chapter 10 paragraph 9)

**Importance:** Both parts of this quote highlight how miserable the main character is. She's starting to give up on her life, finding solace in getting to pretend to be dead. Her department head makes it clear that the protagonist is getting older and still hasn't written her second book, even though it was one of her dreams to complete it. Instead of focusing on her dreams though, she's tried to bury herself in her family life, which has started to make her miserable.

There is a story about a prisoner at Alcatraz who spent his nights in solitary confinement dropping a button on the floor then trying to find it again in the dark. Each night, in this manner, he passed the hours until dawn. I do not have a button. In all other respects, my nights are the same.

-- Wife (Chapter 11 paragraph 2)

**Importance:** The protagonist continues to sink deeper into depression. She feels like her life is without meaning, and she just spends her evenings trying to find something that could give her life meaning.

Some women make it look so easy, the way they cast ambition off like an expensive coat that no longer fits.

-- Wife (Chapter 21 paragraph 9)

**Importance:** The protagonist is openly admitting that they have given up on their own hopes and dreams. They aren't happy about it though and it's clearly something that is plaguing her and causing depression.

It is so easy now for the wife to be patient and kind to the daughter. She will never love anyone or anything more. Never. It is official.

-- Wife (Chapter 24 paragraph 4)

**Importance:** The main character is desperate for anything to potentially validate her life and make her feel appreciated. She no longer has her husband, so she turns to her daughter in desperation.

Evolution designed us to cry out if we are being abandoned. To make as much noise as possible so the tribe will come back for us.

-- Wife (Chapter 25 paragraph 11)

**Importance:** The protagonist is desperate for anyone to give her any sort of attention or



affection. She's miserable in her life and thinks that this will make her happy and she spends several chapters just trying to get people to notice her and give her some sort of affection.

When she tells people she might move to the country, they say, "But aren't you afraid you're going to get lonely?" Get?

-- Wife (Chapter 34 paragraph 3)

**Importance:** The protagonist continues to feel lonely, a fact that so many people seem to be unaware of. She doesn't care about moving to the country and being away from people because she already feels so alone even while living in a city filled with people.

She has noticed though that he seems to love her again. A little at least. He is always touching her now, brushing the hair back from her face. "Thank you," he says one night as they are sitting in the yard. He says it was as if they were all trapped under a car and in a burst of inexplicable strength, she moved it. He kisses her and there is something there, a flicker maybe, but then she hears the bug zapper going. Zzzft. Zzzft. Zzzft. "You shouldn't have driven us off of the cliff," she says.

-- Wife (Chapter 41 paragraph 4)

**Importance:** Throughout the book, the protagonist seems to shift between blaming her husband and blaming herself for not being more attentive to his needs. She's finally accepted the fact that her husband is the one that ruined their marriage. While she might have made an effort to fix it, she's still bitter towards him and makes it clear that she blames him for everything that has happened, and won't be able to forgive him.