

Elsewhere (Russo) Study Guide

Elsewhere (Russo) by Richard Russo

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Summary

NOTE: All citations in this Study Guide refer to the Kindle version of *Elsewhere: A Memoir*, published Oct. 30, 2012.

Elsewhere is a memoir by Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist, short story writer, and screenwriter Richard Russo. Focusing on his high-strung mother and her quest for escape from her deteriorating hometown of Gloversville, New York, Russo explores themes of independence, mental illness, guilt, and family in *Elsewhere*.

More than anything else, Richard Russo's mother wanted him to find a life for himself outside of their hometown of Gloversville, New York. She strove to find an identity for herself outside the small town but never completely escaped the hold her home had on her. In his memoir, Russo discusses the impact his mother had on his life with the unbalanced combination of her emotional neediness and desire for independence.

Russo begins his book by describing a recurring dream he had about his mother in which he had carried her endlessly through a network of unfamiliar streets. He had the dream frequently in the months between his mother's death and the time the family scattered her ashes in Menemsha Pond on Martha's Vineyard.

After this description, Russo's story moves backward in time to his boyhood when he and his mother, Jean, lived in an upstairs flat in the home of Jean's parents. Even though she was dependent on her parents, Jean tried to put forth the image that she was independent because she had a job, paid her rent and bought her clothes. She was a good mother who took an interest in Russo's schooling and made a point to keep in contact with his teachers. No one was more surprised than Russo when he decided to go to college in Arizona and his mother announced she was going with him. She wanted to break out of the cage in which she felt she had been forced to live in while in Gloversville.

Although their trip to Arizona was one that seemed as if it should fail — they had an old car, not enough money, and Russo was an inexperienced driver — the two made the journey. Jean had only one major meltdown in Arizona when she learned the GE facility where she had thought she could get a job was not hiring. After that she found a job elsewhere, rented an apartment, and even learned to drive. Russo began college believing that he and his mother's paths in life were diverging.

That was not to be the case because shortly after they were married, Russo and his new wife, Barbara, took Jean in when she discovered she could no longer live with her parents. She had moved back home after a failed marriage with the cover that she was doing so to help her mother. For the rest of Jean's life, Russo and Barbara struggled to support Jean, who was emotionally dependent on Russo. They found suitable apartments near where they lived, even when Jean's list of requirements for an apartment seemed impossible. Several moves occurred, some because Jean decided she could not stand the place she had decided to live and some because of Russo's job



took their toll on Jean. She seemed to become more stressed and panicky each time they moved. Jean was finally diagnosed with congestive heart failure. Her last year was stressful for Russo because he struggled to keep his mother cared for even though she fought against the home health care workers.

It was after Jean died that Kate, Russo's daughter, began to recognize that certain sounds drove her crazy. She was diagnosed as having obsessive compulsive disorder. When Russo read a book about the disorder, he recognized his mother in the symptoms that were described. For years the family had talked about Jean's condition, which they defined as "nerves." Russo's father had gone so far as to tell Russo his mother was crazy. When Russo realized his mother had suffered from a real disorder that could have been treated, he felt guilty and frustrated with himself because he had never thought to try anything different when it came to his mother's treatment. He had allowed her to govern the way he dealt with her.

In connection with trying to find closure after his mother's death, Russo also describes his struggle of coming to terms with the downfall of Gloversville. The town had depended on a tannery to employ its people and support its businesses. The tannery had polluted and poisoned the river and had caused the deaths of many workers because of unsafe chemicals and working conditions. Although his mother had a fantasy belief that Gloversville was where she had been happiest, she also believed the town had gotten what it deserved. Russo discovered that he agreed with her.



“Independence”

Summary

Author Richard Russo remembers a dream he had regularly up until the night before he and his family scattered his mother's ashes at Menemsha Pond on Martha's Vineyard. He wondered if he was having the dream because he was neglecting her. Although she had died in July, the family had not been able to schedule the scattering until December. He felt as if he had a long list of obligations to his mother he had failed to fulfill during his life. In the dream he and his mother were walking to an unknown destination. His mother was weak and tired, and finally Russo had to carry her. The dream went on that way until he woke. The dream recurred from after his mother's death until she was laid to rest.

Russo looks back in time to the point he was a child and remembers that his mother valued her independence but it was more perceived than real. She was separated from Russo's father but he contributed no child support. She paid rent to her parents for an apartment she rented in their house. She worked for GE where she had a good paying job. With her money she bought stylish clothes, paid to ride with coworkers to and from work, and paid for food. Because she paid rent she let it be known she did not appreciate advice from her parents about how to raise Russo. Russo credits his mother with making sure he had done his homework, providing him with clean clothes, and meeting with his teachers even if she had to miss dinner to do so.

Even though his mother tried to make herself believe she was truly independent, Russo notes that the truth of her situation sometimes made its way through her defenses. If she had not rented from her parents, she would have had to pay higher rent. She also did not have to pay childcare because her mother took care of Russo for free.

The only information Russo reveals about his father is contradictory. His mother had told him that his father was war hero who had been awarded a Bronze Star for his bravery on D-Day. However, he was gambler who often blew his checks at the pool halls. Even though his mother told him not to resent his father because he was sick, she also often mentioned that if he paid the money he was supposed to that they would be in good financial shape.

When his mother was eighty years old and living in Megunticook House, just a few blocks from Russo and his wife, Barbara, she still claimed to be living independently even though she depended a good deal on Russo and Barbara. Russo writes that his mother did receive little financial help from them, so in that way she did live independently. As she got older, Russo often helped fill in the gaps in her budget. His mother often told him that if anything ever happened to him, she would have to give up her independence.



Even though his mother could not drive, she believed that did not keep her from being independent because she had the ability to get people to take her wherever she wanted. Russo remembers when they had visited Martha's Vineyard when he was ten. When his mother learned the only ocean beach was across the island, she lamented their situation so loudly that other guests felt sorry for them and gave them rides to various attractions. When they went home from that vacation, his mother had commented how friendly and punctual the people there had been. At home, they were generally forced to accept rides from Russo's aunt and uncle who would sometimes arrive as much as an hour late to pick them up. Russo's mother also did not like the beach that the aunt and uncle liked. She preferred a sandy beach as opposed to the grassy one they preferred.

After his mother died, Russo and Barbara found a picture of his mother in front of one of GE's prized computers. He describes her as looking like a game show hostess from the '50s with her stylish clothes and high heels. Russo knew that his mother had tried to be stylish and attractive because she was also looking for a companion. She wanted a man of the world who had manners. Although she did believe it was wrong for her to date even though she was only legally separated from her husband, her parents did not like her dating. Russo's father also would cause a scene and sometimes try to ambush Jean's dates.

Russo realizes that although his mother bragged of her independence, she was held captive by the boundaries of her independence almost as if she were in a cage. Russo wonders what kept his mother going through this time. He realizes fear was at the foundation of her motivation to feel independent. She had told him a story about how her father had been able to buy his daughters new dresses for Easter but had not been able to buy one for his wife. Jean seemed haunted by that memory even as an old woman. Russo could see that it had two conflicting morals, symbolizing that love is more important than material goods, but also that during the Depression, there was never enough to go around. Who knew if there was really enough love to go around?

Russo also knew his mother kept going because the times were optimistic. She was determined that Russo would do better in life than she had. She wanted him to get out of Gloversville. When he graduated from high school, he got a scholarship to attend college in New York but he decided to go to a university out west because they were cheaper. He was surprised that his mother did not put up more of a fuss when he told her what he had planned. Soon, he realized she was not fussing because she planned to go with him.

Analysis

Elsewhere is a memoir—a true story about Russo's life. Russo writes from the present tense about things that have happened in the past so the narrative is largely in past tense, written from the first person point of view. His purpose in this first chapter is to give his readers an overview of his mother, who is now dead.



Independence and the fact that independence does not guarantee total freedom is one of the major ideas in this first section. The main goal of Russo's mother was to be an independent woman. She prided herself in the fact she was able to support herself and her son with her salary. Lurking behind this perceived independence, however, were numerous ways in which Jean, Russo's mother, and her son were supported by her family. Even though she paid rent to live in the apartment in her parent's house, this rent was less than she would have paid elsewhere. Elsewhere she would not have been able to afford the rent. In that way she depended on her parents although she did not want to admit it. Because she was only legally separated and not divorced, Jean also was not free to date as she wished. Her parents and husband interfered with her dating life. Because she did not have a car she did not have the freedom to come and go as she pleased. She was dependent upon her sister and her husband to take her places. Even though she thought her willingness to help pay for gas should give her some say in their destination, she most often had to go to the places the preferred, the grassy beach instead of the sandy one, for instance.

Several important places and symbols are introduced in this section of the memoir. The first of these is Menemsha Pond on Martha's Vineyard. It is in this pond that Jean told Russo she wanted her ashes spread even though she had only visited the pond once. Note that when Jean left Martha's Vineyard with her son during their only visit, she had commented about how nice the people there were. It will be seen later in Russo's book that it was more often his mother's habit to be happy to be leaving a place, and she often told Russo places to which they traveled were "awful, awful places" (47). This may be the only place she left with a positive attitude.

Green's, the beach that Jean's sister and her family preferred, is also an important place because it symbolizes one of the downfalls of Jean's independence. To Jean, driving was considered a man's task. She did not have or want a car. Because she was legally separated from her husband, a form of independence, she did not have the freedom to go where she wanted because she had no transportation. When she wanted to go someplace she had to depend on family members to take her. Even though she paid for gas, Jean was frustrated because she was not given the choice to go where she wanted.

Also symbolic is the picture of Jean in front of the computer at the GE office. The picture was published in a magazine printed by the company. The picture is significant to Russo because in it he sees the stylish, pulled together woman that his mother worked so hard to show to other people. Also in this picture, his daughters see a woman that they never knew existed in their grandmother. In the photo Russo sees both "stubborn confidence and acute anxiety" (31).

Jean shows a distaste for other women as Russo describes her in this section of the memoir. He indicates that she did not like and was even condescending of women who did not dress stylishly at work. For women who stayed at home, she had even less patience. She showed contempt for these women because she believed they had husbands to take care of all of their troubles. Jean went so far as to believe that these women who stayed at home and did not work should have no say in how their



husband's paychecks were spent. As she saw it, these women did not contribute to the household so they should not get input in spending the cash.

Already in this section the reader senses that Russo feels a good deal of guilt from his relationship with his mother. He recounts a dream in which he carries her through a town unable to find their destination. He worries the dream indicates he is ignoring his mother because he has not yet spread her ashes. It probably indicates he is unwilling to put down the burden that his mother once was to him during his life. At this point the reader is unsure what sort of burden Russo's mother was to him but it is indicated that he and his wife helped her out financially in her last days.

Notice the way that Russo incorporates humor into his story. This keeps his memories from becoming too serious and works to remind the reader that he and his mother did have good times during his childhood. For example, he remembers the film they watched at Martha's Vineyard where the projector "chewed up chunks of film, causing not just delays but gaps in the narrative, the last occurring in the final reel where, after the film was spliced, half the cast lay wounded or dead in the dirt at the O.K. Corral" (27). Note the personification where Russo indicates the projector "chewed" the film up.

Russo also ends his chapter with both a touch of humor as well as a bombshell. He times his announcement that his mother planned to go with him when he went to college so that the reader is probably as shocked by the announcement as he was when his mother told him she planned to tag along with him. It is amusing because Russo fell for the conniving and manipulating that his mother had been using on other people for years. He even writes about her manipulating the people at Martha's Vineyard into taking them where they wanted to go. Even though he recognizes this ability in his mother, he does not see it when she uses it on him.

Vocabulary

convened, vague, cribbing, predicament, negotiated, stipulated, collusion, ferociously, unsolicited, complacent, ethos, subsidized, lament, periodic, obligatory, ubiquitous, exponentially, incredulous, recede, punctual, miserly, contention, violated, vapid, reviled, demurely, ambush, parlayed, mantra



“A Good Talking-To”

Summary

Russo's friends christened his first car, a 1967 Ford Galaxie, the Gray Death. It had only a V-6 engine and was badly underpowered, especially for interstate driving. Russo and his mother planned to drive this car, pulling a U-Haul trailer, from Gloversville in New York State to Arizona. When Jean finally told her parents she planned to go to Arizona with Russo, they discouraged her, telling her they were not able to come rescue her as they had in the past. They could not afford the trip because her father was suffering with emphysema and could no longer work. Jean's father warned Jean their trip was underfunded and perhaps even dangerous. They fought as much as his emphysema and need for oxygen would allow. The house had once been a place of refuge for Russo but was suddenly full of fighting. Russo tried to stay away as much as possible.

One day Russo came in and found his mother and grandmother sitting at the kitchen table. He heard his grandmother tell his mother that she was in no shape for the trip; he felt something in his life changed when he heard what his grandmother said. At the same time, he wondered what his grandmother meant. He felt his mother was about to say something to her mother but changed her mind when she saw Russo was listening to them.

Russo describes his mother's condition, which had always been described as nerves. Russo lived in fear that he would cause his mother to have a nervous breakdown. As time went by, Russo lost his fear of his mother's condition because it never got any worse. He began to see the cycles in his mother's nervous behavior. Russo learned that while he had the ability to make the nervous cycles worse, he could not make them better. Her doctor eventually began giving her Valium for her nerves, a medication that caused her to develop a tremor in her hands.

Sometimes there was a trigger that tripped Jean's nervous conditions and caused them to peak. At that point she would be in pure panic. Even though she threatened that something would happen to her if something did not change, Russo eventually realized nothing was going to happen to her. The mornings after her panicked fits, she would be worn out but tell Russo that she “gave myself a good talking-to” (45), a phrase Russo never understood. He adds that his mother's self-imposed lectures worked, but the results did not last.

It was after only their first day on the road that Russo realized what a menace he was to interstate drivers with his poor driving skills. The badly underpowered car would barely make it up interstate exit ramps and Russo was unable to park anywhere he that would have to back up because he could not control the trailer. They often had to pull over and let the car cool down when the temperature gauge reached unsafe levels. The heat was even worse because they were making their trip in July. Russo kept expecting his



mother to ask him to take her back home. He had already decided he would go as well. She never asked.

They got a break when a gas station attendant sold them a bag to attach to the front of the car that would help keep the radiator cool. Russ was surprised that it worked as well as it did. He was even more surprised when someone in Texas stole the bag from the front of the car. They were never able to find another one.

It was not until Russo and his mother arrived in Phoenix that he learned she did not actually have a job yet. He had noticed she was getting more agitated the closer they got to their destination when he felt they should be relieved they had survived the trip. After she had learned that the GE plant in Phoenix was not hiring, his mother referred to Phoenix as an “awful, awful place” (57), just as she called Gloversville before they left. She swore to Russo she was determined to make things work in Phoenix and that she was not going back home.

When they called Russo’s grandmother and grandfather to let them know Russo had made it to the college and registered for classes, his mother commented on how good her parents had been to them. She said her father had always been her rock but that Russo was now that rock. He did not realize at the time how seriously she meant that statement.

Back in Phoenix, Jean was pleased with the new apartment she had rented. There were a good many single men living there as well as a communal grill and swimming pool where people would gather in the evenings. Jean found an advertisement for a job opening when they dropped off the U-Haul they had rented. She interviewed and got the job. Because of transportation issues, Jean had to keep Russo’s car. She also had to get her driver’s license, a task with which Russo helped her. When she went to take her test she took an extra half Valium. Russo was worried her examiner would know she was under the influence of medication but she passed.

They had a celebration lunch during which Russo commented to his mother that her driver’s license meant she was truly free. When she commented to him that they “did it” (68), Russo thought they would part ways. They would see each other only for holidays and short visits. He even considered going back to New York and working construction for the summer. He wanted to try to set things right with his grandparents.

Analysis

The first mention that his mother had any sort of mental illness is discussed in this section of the memoir. Russo was aware of her condition, referred to as “nerves,” a diagnosis that was often given to women suffering with what might have been a variety of mental illnesses in the '60s and '70s. Russo indicates that the one word diagnosis “was evidently deemed sufficient to describe, categorize, stigmatize, and dismiss” his mother’s condition. He remembers his grandmother trying to talk his mother out of going with Russo because she was in “no condition” (42) to do so. No real details of his



mother's condition are given. It is just described that Russo lived in fear he would cause his mother to have a nervous breakdown. He behaved well because he believed misbehavior would cause his mother to be pushed closer to having a breakdown.

The reader can tell from certain occurrences during their trip that if nothing else Jean suffered from poor planning skills. It is not until they actually reached Phoenix that Jean admitted to her son that she did not have a job. He had understood that she had a job waiting for her. He remembered that she had also told her father they had an emergency fund of money they could draw from if they ran short during their trip. It was not until they were actually on the road that Russo learned that his mother had designated his college fund as their emergency money.

There is an image of Russo walking back to his college dorm after his mother had taken his car and headed back to her job and apartment in Phoenix. He believed at that time that his life and his mother's lives would split and follow different tracks. There is foreshadowing here that this will not be the case. Not only has Russo already written about him and his wife taking care of his mother in her old age, he had also mentioned that his mother had always told him that as long as they were together, everything would be all right. He did not realize how seriously she took this pledge. While at one time she considered her father her rock, she told Russo in this section that he was now her rock. Again, Russo did not understand the significance of what his mother was trying to tell him.

Again, several important symbols are introduced in this section of the memoir, the first of which is the 1960 Ford Galaxie that Russo bought himself to drive to Arizona. This car is a symbol of freedom for both Russo and his mother. It was also a symbol of the foolishness of their trip. Consider his description of the car: "you could slam the accelerator to the floor and nothing, absolutely nothing, would happen. You simply couldn't express urgency to the fucking thing" (39). He follows up with an example, perhaps using some hyperbole or exaggeration, that it would take the car seven miles to get up to the speed limit on the thruway. Remember that it was in the '70s when Russo was headed for college. The speed limit was probably only 55 at that time.

Another important symbol is the temporary driver's license that Jean got in Arizona. Russo was happy for and proud of his mother. Because he was also a recent recipient of his driver's license, he realized that the card is a symbol of freedom. At the same time that he told his mother she now truly had her freedom, she referred to him as her rock, a statement that indicates she would not allow him to get too far from her.

Notice also Russo's reference to the "talking to's" that his mother said she gave herself. These seem to indicate the strict determination that she had to keep herself in line and try to maintain a normal life. She had to buck herself up in order to bring herself back to right. Before she got to the point she decided to give herself a talking-to, she generally worked herself up into an anxiety that wore her out, causing her to have to sleep much of the next day. Notice Russo's description of his mother's panics. "Most of the time her condition was part and parcel of our lives, a subtext that under the right circumstances



might become a text. / And, on occasion, a screeching ALL CAPS hypertext, a gale of fury and paranoia and accusation and heartbreaking despair” (44).

Because he is a writer Russo describes his mother’s fits in the language he knows best, that of the printed text and aspects of writing. He compares her condition to an underlying theme in their lives that is always there even though it is not always referred to directly. Sometimes the right circumstances would cause this underlying text to become an obvious theme. At its worst, her condition is compared to all caps hypertext, a point Russo makes by capitalizing a portion of this sentence. The idea of all caps is that it gets one’s attention—the text version of shouting.

Vocabulary

urgency, dissuade, sanctuary, recrimination, sentry, concede, stigmatize, pervasive, asymptomatic, cyclical, inexorable, alleviate, ensue, equilibrium, analogous, tenure, dubious, novice, benign, imperiled, inviolable, extricate, forlorn, unobtrusively, congenital, conjecture, semantics, garrulously, nadir, moot, derision, virulently, menace, contingency, complicit



“A Diagnosis”

Summary

When the father of Russo's new wife discovered they were considering letting Russo's mother move in with them he warned them not to do so. He had noticed how dependent Jean was on her son and believed that if she moved in they would never get her to move out. She was living in her parents' apartment in Gloversville again after she was divorced from Russ, a man she had met in Phoenix and remained married to for a couple of years. Russo felt his mother had married the man because she did not want to return to Gloversville. When the relationship fell apart, his mother had no choice but to return.

Instead of admitting defeat, Jean told everyone she was returning to help her parents because she knew they needed her. The situation worked out well until Jean's father died, leaving Jean and her mother alone. They argued about everything including what type of person Jean's father was. To make matters worse, Jean had gotten laid off from her job. It was at this point she called Russo lamenting that she lived in a cage.

At that time, Russo and Barbara were living in a two-bedroom trailer in Tucson, Arizona, struggling to make ends meet. Before Jean came to live with them, Barbara asked Russo good questions about how the arrangement with his mother would work out. Russo did not have good answers to her questions. He had not seen his mother in more than a year and he did not recognize her when she got off the plane. She was so nervous at first she could not even hold the phone to make appointments for job interviews. She improved while living with Russo and Barbara, but their marriage deteriorated. Russo noticed his mother acted as if Barbara was not there at dinner and during conversations.

Russo notes that even though times were desperate, he and Barbara did manage to stay together despite his mother's influence. Jean finally moved into an apartment of her own even though she had sworn off driving and Russo had to take her wherever she needed to go. Her life in Tucson eventually fell apart because she was not close enough to Russo. He did not have enough money or time to pay her the attention she wanted. Russo felt the only way his mother could be happy was if he were a part of her everyday life routine because she depended on him so much emotionally. In was in a span of emotional sanity that Jean decided the best option for her would be to go back to Gloversville. She would live in the spare bedroom in her mother's house so the upstairs apartment could still be used for rental income.

Russo realized that moving back to Gloversville would be a mistake for his mother. He remembers the fear in his grandfather's eyes as he watched them pack for their first trip west and realizes he was concerned about how his daughter would adjust. Even though most of the family said Jean had “nerves,” Russo's father had confronted him during one of their visits with the information that Jean was crazy. Russo was first angry but



then relived because he believed he had known that about his mother all along. Later, Russo felt guilty because he believed he had betrayed his mother by agreeing with his father. He realized that many of his actions throughout his life — like agreeing to let his mother live with him and his new wife — were because of this guilt.

Meanwhile, the financial situation of Russo and his family went from bad to worse because his goal was to find more time to write. He was not interested in pay or tenure, but just in getting less time in the classroom. From his phone calls to his mother, he knew she and her mother were not getting along. They did not like the same foods or the same television shows and were unwilling to compromise on anything. While Russo's grandmother knew the way they were behaving was crazy, she knew it would be worse if she confronted Jean. When Jimmy, Jean's ex-husband, stopped by for a visit and saw the arrangement, he asked Jean what was wrong with her. Later when Russo visited his father in the hospital after Jimmy was diagnosed with lung cancer, he mentioned to Russo there was some "crazy shit" (89) taking place at the house on Helwig Street.

When Russo's job took him to Carbondale, a three day trip from his mother in Gloversville, he began to get calls from her again telling him she was in a cage and believed she deserved some sort of life. Russo called his aunt and learned things were worse than his mother was telling him. The scariest part was that his grandmother had a new medicine that Jean believed had to be ground up in her food. Phyllis and her mother believed the grinding up of the capsules might hurt Jean's mother but Jean refused to understand she was mistaken. She screamed at her sister when she tried to explain to her the real way the pills were supposed to be taken. When Russo asked if he should move his mother to Carbondale, his aunt told him it would probably be for the best.

On the drive from Gloversville to Carbondale, Russo's mother had persistent panic attacks. Although it was August, they had to drive with the windows open so she could breathe. During the drive she told him that her sister and mother had been mean to her but she had kept their cruelty a secret. She made Russo's job of finding her an apartment difficult because she insisted that her new apartment not be in a housing complex that allowed Section 8 people. She told him she could not stand living with people who were crazy.

After four years in Carbondale, Russo was offered a part time teaching position in Maine. They decided to all make the move together hoping it would be less stressful on Jean. Because the real estate market was so tight in Maine, they rented a large camp on a lake where they could stay together until a suitable apartment and house could be found. Even though Russo had hired workers to do all of his mother's packing and moving, she still grew anxious when the time to move came. She had a meltdown with the movers, accusing them of treating her furniture too roughly. Even though she claimed to Russo she was trying hard, he could not see any evidence she was trying at all.



The drive to Maine was tortuous. When they finally arrived and settled into the lake camp, Barbara had as little luck finding them a house as Russo did finding his mother an apartment. Her requirements limited the apartment search drastically. They found one that would have worked but his mother said she did not like it. She believed it was dirty and near an apartment complex for families.

Finally Barbara found a house she liked and one they could afford. They were in negotiations with the sellers when a camp near the one where they were staying caught fire. It seemed to be the final straw for Jean. She told Russo the next morning over breakfast she wanted to take the apartment she had at first turned down as long as it was professionally cleaned first.

Analysis

Even though it went against his better judgment, Russo allowed his mother to live with him and his new wife. This habit of giving in to his mother's wants despite the troubles he knew it would cause is one of the things that he is ashamed of himself for later in the memoir. Not only did Russo's father-in-law tell him straightforwardly that having Jean live with them would be a bad idea, his wife also questioned his intentions. She pointed out in question form all of the problems they might face once his mother moved in with them. Even though Russo did not have answers for her concerns, he allowed his mother to live with them anyway.

Jean's dislike of women is further discussed in this section as she accused her mother and sister of being mean to her. Notice first, outsiders seemed to assign most of the fault for the living arrangements between Jean and her mother not working out to Jean. When Jimmy, Jean's ex-husband, saw how things were going between the two he asked Jean what was wrong with her, implying that she was the cause of the problem. Phyllis told Russo that Jean was taking over her mother's medications and giving them to her incorrectly. Even in his presentation of the situation in his book, Russo indicates that Jean was the one at fault. He seems to understand that she was the one who refused to compromise on anything, forcing her mother to live by her rules. Jean was the only one who saw the situation differently. She admitted to Russo that her mother and Phyllis, her sister, had been cruel to her, she had just never told anyone. This irrational thinking would continue and would continue to get worse as Jean got older.

There are two references to mental illness in this section, to both of which Russo had a strong reaction. The first is his father's mention that his mother was crazy. Russo at first felt like he was betraying his mother, and then felt relief because he realized he had known something was not right for some time but would not let himself put it into words. This label of being "nuts" (85) or crazy is just about as bad and just about as vague as the diagnosis that Jean suffered with nerves. There was clearly more going on with her. Notice Russo's indication that he was unable to breathe, as if he was having his own panic attack, after his mother told him she refused to live with crazy people. She had been telling him her requirements for a suitable apartment all the while forcing him to drive with the windows of the car open in August because she believed she could not



breathe with the windows rolled up. It is at this point that Russo points out the direct irony of her situation. She refused to live with people who had the same disorder from which he had recently decided she suffered.

Jean showed evidence of a love/hate relationship with her home town. When she was away she often thought positively about it but when she was there she could see nothing but the bad. Russo writes: "Like she always did after leaving Gloversville, she now remembered it fondly as the home from which she'd been exiled" (93). Remember when she and Russo first arrived in Arizona she had commented how good her parents had been to her. While she was living with them in Gloversville, however, she had thought her parents were intrusive and she refused to accept the idea that they had helped her at all. In order to keep from going back to Gloversville, Jean married a man she did not love, an act that Russo felt was uncharacteristic of his mother. When she did have to return to Gloversville, she refused to admit she had been defeated on her first attempt to live away from the town. Instead she claimed to be going back home because she knew her parents needed her help.

Guilt in respect to his mother's situation is a feeling that Russo expresses often. If he and Barbara had a chance to go out they felt guilty if they left Jean behind, so they did not go out. Russo felt guilty, as if he had betrayed his mother when he discovered he agreed with his father's assessment that Jean was crazy. Russo indicates that it is guilt that made him decide to put his marriage in jeopardy in order to take in his mother.

Vocabulary

avert, laconic, articulate, evicted, stipend, pulverizing, ominously, apocalyptic, suffice, cordoning, stipulation, subsidy, lament, logistical, credenza, appease, expeditions, dispirited, onerous, ostensibly, virulent, exuberance, complicit



“Unsettled,” 109-131

Summary

In the first half of the section “Unsettled,” Russo describes helping his mother prepare for her fourth move since living in Maine. He realized he might have been wrong in hoping for a spell of mania so bad it would break her spirit. She had been listless since her last spell. Despite her lack of energy, she told him she wished that he would take the book *Hotel du Lac* by Anita Brookner back with him. He had loaned her the book but she had not liked it. He tried to provide her with books to take her mind off her physical ailments, including arthritis and frequent mini-strokes. She put the books that he brought her that she considered trash in Ziploc bags to return to him.

Russo described his mother’s collection of books a library since each book made a statement about her personality. Although he and his wife had significantly more books than Jean, he did not consider them a library because they consisted of a hodgepodge of different types and styles, some they had not even read.

The apartment Russo was about to move his mother into was in an assisted living facility. She already hated it but the apartment in Farmington had been too far away. The one they had rented in Waterville, in which she currently lived, was part of an old house. She soon complained it was hot, noisy, and there was no one to talk to because she was no longer in an apartment complex. They had better luck with an apartment in Winslow where Jean made friends with a woman named Dot. Because Dot spoke about moving to be closer to her children, Jean eventually decided to move because she was afraid Dot would leave her.

Russo planned for the move to go more easily because he hired movers to move the furniture and planned to take his mother out of her old apartment before moving started and not let her into the new one until the furniture was placed. He tried to convince her nothing was going to go wrong, but she seemed vindicated by reminding him that even he could forget things when he forgot the copy of the book she had asked him to take with him.

Russo changes the subject, writing that his mother was perplexed because people liked the kind of novels he was writing. Since many of them were set in a Gloversville-like setting, she felt it was unthinkable people would want to read them. She felt that if Russo quit his job to work full time, he was putting himself in a precarious position because it was uncertain what might happen if people stopped liking his work. She also seemed to think that she and Russo still had obligations to one another and that they had never really been separated from their initial obligation to one another when he was a child.

To make matters worse, Russo had told his mother that he and the family planned to move to the coast. They had bought a condo in Camden for a summer retreat and



decided to find a house and move to Camden full-time. The problem again was the timing in finding housing for his mother and a house for the family. Jean did not like to live with things unsettled, but Barbara told Russo that was the only choice they had. She could either choose to live unsettled or they would have to put their lives on hold. Russo was afraid if they did so with this dream, they would have to continue to put off their lives until they were too old to enjoy them. He bases his reasoning on the fact that his grandmother had lived into her nineties despite her medical issues.

Russo and Barbara finally bought a large, elegant, old house in Camden. There was a large apartment above the garage and also one on the second floor of the house. Neither was appropriate for Jean. They decided to turn the second floor apartment into a master bedroom while the apartment over the garage would be a writing studio for Russo. They did not think any more about Jean until she called them to say she was going back to Gloversville.

Analysis

The book that Russo loaned his mother is introduced as an important symbol in this section of the memoir. She did not like it. The reasons that she did not like it are not discussed in this section but the way that she treated it are. Instead of just setting the book aside, Jean put it in a Ziploc baggie. Russo indicates it is as if she were trying to keep that disliked book from contaminating the books that she did like.

Although it seems to offend Russo that his mother sequestered the books she did not like, he also points out that by carefully selecting the books that filled her shelves she had created what he considers a library. By his definition, a library is a collection of books, each of which makes a statement about its owner. To Russo the size of the collection of books does not matter in whether they constitute a library. In fact, he indicates that he and his wife had many more books that his mother did but believes that their collection did not constitute a personal library because the books were a scattered collection, some they had not even read.

Notice in this section that although Russo had hoped for an episode bad enough to break his mother's spirit he came to realize he should not wish for broken spiritedness. Several moves had left her weary and listless. He was more worried about her in this state than her previous ones of nervous anxiety. As he describes how calmly his mother went along with his plans to have movers pack her furniture in the old apartment and then unpack it in the new one without her being there, she was so cooperative that it almost appeared to be the calm before the storm.

Also important in Jean's life was Dot. Dot was the first woman with whom Russo had known his mother to really develop an emotional bond. Notice that Jean's decision to move seemed to come because she was afraid that she would be abandoned by Dot. Jean had heard her friend talk about her desire to be closer to her children. It almost seemed as if Jean did not trust the relationship to last and decided to leave Dot before Dot could have a chance to leave her.



Just as Russo likes to end his chapters with bombshells, he also ends the first half of the chapter “Unsettled” with a bombshell. Faced with a move to Camden, Maine, Jean decided that instead of following Russo and his family there, she wanted to go back home to Gloversville.

Vocabulary

fugue, contemplate, indomitable, malleable, compatible, regimented, provincial, pertinent, inconsolably, dubious, angst, hubris, tangible, temerity, conflagration, ambient, moribund, paradox, liturgical, articulate, persuasive, actuarial, reprieve, aphorisms, incarnation



“Unsettled,” 131-166

Summary

Russo came to realize that Gloversville was more attractive to his mother while she was away than when she was there. Her relationship with her sister also followed this way of thinking. When she told first Russo what a horrible place she had decided Maine was, he reminded her she had also thought Gloversville was a horrible place when she lived there. She was hoping her sister would evict the renters living in her upstairs apartment to let her live there. Even though she was not able to walk up stairs, Jean seemed to think she would be able to handle stairs in Gloversville. When Russo reminded his mother it was his job to take care of her and she should not ask her nephews to do so, she turned the tables on him by concluding she was a burden.

Years later, with the family moving to the coast, Jean decided again that she needed to go back to Gloversville. She planned for her sister, whose husband had died less than a year prior, to take her in. Phyllis and Jean had been talking regularly on the phone since the death. One day Phyllis called Russo to warn him Jean's moods were growing darker. Russo was already aware trouble was brewing. It was at this point that his mother told him she was going back to Gloversville. When Russo asked if she had an invitation to live with Phyllis, Jean got angry. She suggested that if given a chance she could help her sister. Russo retreated and told his mother to call Phyllis. He also called Phyllis to warn her about the nature of the coming call. He realized the truth when he called, that he did think that his mother was a burden and that she could not be a help to Phyllis. When he talked to Phyllis she was sympathetic and even asked about how Barbara was handling Jean.

The following morning Jean called Russo to say she was not going anywhere. She did not say hello and hung up before he had a chance to reply. He thought about the conversation that must have transpired between Jean and Phyllis. Later, he wondered if Jean had called her sister at all.

When the family moved to Camden, Russo felt disjointed by the number of books they had. The books he had reminded him of the way his mother had always told him they were alike. He considered her relationship with her mother as a comparison, proof they were not alike. Although the two women were different in their ways of thinking, they had temperamental similarities. When he considered how those women were more similar than they wanted to admit, he wondered if he was more like his mother than he wanted to admit. He looked at the book she had rejected. When he read the first passages he realized why she did not like it. It was too much like her own life: gray and dreary. It was not the bright, colorful world that his mother wanted to escape into through books.

Russo did feel that one of the themes of the book, which explored women's cruelty to other women, had been recognized by his mother. He believed her appreciation of this



theme had initiated anger toward her mother and sister and the way she felt they had treated her. As he thought about his mother's relationship with her mother and sister, he remembered the way that Jean had preferred men to women in any dealings. She had never had any really close female friends. The novel he had loaned her had been too much about his mother's real life for her to really enjoy. Russo continues this section with a discussion of the types of novels that his mother did enjoy. He also credits her with giving him the gift of seeing reading as a reward instead of a chore.

In order to determine that he and his mother were different people, Russo decided he needed to find some core component of himself from his boyhood that his mother did not possess. He wondered if that component was found in the haphazard status of his bookshelves. He had not arranged the shelves yet because he knew that was not the most important chore he had to do, a characteristic of his ability to triage. His mother did not have that ability and would have arranged the shelves because she could not stand for them to be out of order. It had caused an increasing number of arguments that had become more severe as time passed. Russo believed this ability to triage could be the hardwired difference between the two of them.

Although he credits his ability to determine the most important tasks and do those first, Russo realizes he did not follow good domestic triage when he decided to move his family to the coast. Because of the rash decision, he was dealing with the consequences. When he considered his inability to admit he was wrong about the move, he realized although he did not have poorly organized patterns, like his mother, he had inherited her obsessions and rigidity.

Considering obsessions, Russo remembered his addiction to pinball during his freshman year in college. When that obsession passed he later began betting at the dog track. Soon, he traded his betting obsession for his love of writing. He realized he did not do anything actively to avoid his obsessions. He had simply waited for the obsessions to fade. He often wondered what he would do if he was faced with a real temptation.

Analysis

Magical thinking appears to be another of symptom of Jean's mental illness. It has already been discussed that when she was away from Gloversville she began the habit of reminiscing positively about her hometown. Now Russo adds the characteristic that she not only thought Gloversville was better than the place she was currently living, she also thought she would be better if she were back in Gloversville. Even though she was unable to climb stairs to a second floor apartment in Maine, she had the idea that she would be able to do so in Gloversville.

Russo does have a breakthrough about the reason why his mother did not like the Brockner book that he left her borrow. In this line of thinking he gives his mother a very significant compliment when he credits her with his love of reading. When he follows the idea that a writer must first be a reader, he more or less credits her with the love of his



career and his ability to write. Going back to the Brockner book, Russo comes to the realization that his mother read in order to transport herself from the real world in which she lived. The book with its gray landscape and cruelty by women was too much like Jean's idea of the world in which she lived for her to get any enjoyment out of it.

One of Russo's goals in this section is to find an aspect of himself that proves he is not like his mother. He comes to the conclusion that he has the ability to determine which task in a list is most important and complete that task first. His mother, he believes did not have this ability. Even while he is congratulating himself on his discovery of a way that he and his mother did not think alike, he realizes that his behavior is sometimes patterned after hers. He has the ability to be lured into obsession-like behavior in which he neglects the more important aspects of his life. Where his mother had always given herself a "talking to" in order to try to pull herself out of these ruts, Russo realized he had never done anything to try to pull himself away from his obsessions. He had simply waited for them to pass. He did not try to follow his mother's habits by giving himself a lecture. "That would have been pointless. I knew myself well enough to know I wasn't listening," (164). He notes he is glad that his obsession finally settled itself on writing but sometimes wonders what might have happened if he had ever faced a real life changing temptation. His father, whom his mother had divorced because he gambled away all their money, must have been in his mind at this point. Russo must have wondered if he would allow himself to lose his family as a result of his obsession.

Jean's relationship with her sister is another example of her failed relationships with women. Jean had twice told Russo she intended to move back home and live with her sister, her idea being that she could be a help to her sister and that her sister would be happy to have her. Russo points out that his mother's opinion of her sister paralleled her opinion of Gloversville. When they were together her sister was mean to her. When they were apart she was a missed companion. Even though Jean and her sister might not have been close through the years, even her sister recognized Jean's changing mental and emotional status. At one point when the two had taken to calling each other regularly, Phyllis called Russo to warn him that his mother's moods were turning dark and that trouble was likely on its way. This shows how in tune she was to her sister's moods. Phyllis also realized that she could not live with her sister, a sad statement about how well she knew her sister and could see what might be in the future for them.

Vocabulary

nostalgically, insular, uncouth, perverse, rudimentary, impediment, parlay, futile, reminiscing, bludgeoning, improvise, transpired, confidante, mutilated, taciturn, cynical, diatribes, camaraderie, longevity, dogmatic, peripheral, explicate, denizens, sated, furtively, abhorred, triage, obstinacy



“Real Time”

Summary

Russo was surprised when his usually prompt mother was still in her nightgown when he arrived at her new apartment to take her to her doctor’s appointment. She asked him what the real time was and seemed terrified at the thought she had missed her doctor’s appointment. Russo encouraged her to get dressed and he called Barbara, telling her that he needed her. This was the first time he had seen his mother so disoriented and confused.

Russo noticed all the clocks in his mother’s apartment were set at different times. He knew they had been set to the correct times the day before. When he went to check on his mother, instead of getting dressed she was sitting on her bed trying to make her the hands on her clock go backward.

Russo remembers how the move had gone well. He had learned, however, that his mother had not gone to dinner with Dot like she had planned. Dot thought she was worried about getting a new doctor. Dot told Russo she had liked Jean because she understood being one’s worst enemy.

When Russo and Jean finally arrived at the doctor’s office she was unable to remember a list of words the doctor gave her. She continued to worry about the time. She could not tell the doctor who the president was. Russo knew she knew who the president was and knew that her mother had strong opinions about his presidency. Mark, the doctor, diagnosed dementia but Russo pointed out it had come on overnight. Mark suggested the dementia might be related to the move. He said they should take her home with them for a few days—a suggestion that concerned Russo because he did not think they could handle her.

At Russo and Barbara’s home in Camden, Jean continued to be obsessed with the clock. Her actions upset Kate to the point of tears. Russo stayed with his mother that evening and noticed she grew more agitated as time passed. Russo contacted the doctor who suggested she go to the emergency room.

After four days in the hospital, Jean was back to her old self. It turned out she had an imbalance in her sodium levels. She was sent home to stay with Russo and Barbara while she withdrew from Paxil, a medicine her doctor had decided to take her off. Russo admits her withdrawal from Paxil was awful. He and Barbara were relieved when Jean was able to return to her apartment at the end of a week’s time.

Before Russo left his mother at her apartment, she apologized because she hated the apartment. She complimented Russo on getting her books all put away correctly and even noted the toll her sickness had taken on him. When he told her he wished that she could be happy, she replied that she was once, even though he might not believe it.



Analysis

When Russo describes the way his mother looked when she answered the door at her new apartment he compares her with the mad woman from the Charlotte Bronte novel *Jane Eyre*. Ironically, Jean was not suffering madness or craziness in this section but had a real medical issue—an imbalance of sodium.

Russo continues to lend a humorous touch in this chapter. In this story that could have come out as much more of a disaster, the humor is a welcome touch. Some of the humor is situational. It comes from the family's interaction with a doctor who was not yet familiar with Jean and her true personality. He had seen Jean docilely looking at Russo, expecting encouragement and help with the correct answers to the doctor's questions. When Russo insisted that his mother had been fine the day before, Russo got the feeling the man did not believe him. Again, when the doctor told Russo that his mother, who had appeared "docile as a lamb" (179), needed to stay with Russo for a few days, Russo says he "couldn't blame him for not understanding" (179). He saw the situation through the doctor's eyes, which he suspected saw a 90 pound, confused elderly woman with a selfish son unwilling to care for her for even a few days. Russo additionally describes the reaction of the hospital staff to his mother's return to her old self. "For the hospital staff it was unnerving to see an almost-eighty-year-old woman "wake up" from her sleepy doldrums so monumentally pissed off" (182).

An object of importance in this section of the memoir is the gold plated clock that Russo had given his mother as a gift. In the height of her sickness Jean became obsessed with this clock. Russo had no trouble getting her to agree to go to the emergency room because he took the clock away from her and would not give it back until they were in the car. Jean was so obsessed with trying to make the hands of the clock go backward that she first bent the stem on the clock and then broke it entirely trying to force it backward. This obsession with the clock may demonstrate a desire to return to her younger days, days when Jean thought she was happy.

Although he never specifically says so, the reader gets the feeling that Russo is jealous of the way that the doctor, Mark, so efficiently dealt with his mother. Mark did not allow Jean to distract him from getting the information he wanted from her. If she tried to avoid his questions, he calmly told her "as soon as she gave him a clear, honest answer he'd be happy to move on to a new topic" (183). It is understandable that Russo would be unnerved by someone who summed up his mother's personality and dealt with her so efficiently. One aspect of the doctor/patient relationship and the mother/son relationship is that it is different that the doctor did not have to deal with Jean on a long term basis. Whereas Russo was responsible for his mother and had to deal with her 24 hours a day, seven days a week, the doctor's affiliation was over as soon as the appointment was.

Notice also that this is one of the few sections where Russo describes an episode with his mother that is different from her usual ups and downs. She was not complaining about disliking a place or wishing to go home to Gloversville, but was instead



completely out of touch with reality. Russo may dedicate an entire chapter to this incident because it is so different from those that have come before.

Vocabulary

lethargic, abject, renege, efficacy, brusque, dubious, docile, consigned, doldrums, paramount, inducement, ilk



“Here and There”

Summary

As Russo and his family drove to Menemsha Pond, the place his mother had chosen to have her ashes scattered, he wondered if his mother would have liked it as much in its winter landscape. He considered how his daughters must view his mother, not only in the light that they enjoyed their evenings alone with her when they were younger, but also the difficulties the family had with her when she got older. Both of Russo's daughters had been surprised by the woman they had seen in the GE photograph that Russo had found after his mother's death.

Russo read a Shakespeare poem after he had scattered his mother's ashes. He felt the part of him that had once dealt with his mother was on pause, wandering in a barren landscape like that of his recurring dream. He had been the one who had cried when Jean's doctor told them she had congestive heart failure and lined out what her next year or so of life would be like. She would have to be on oxygen at some point, an option she did not like because she remembered her father's oxygen tank. She refused to go out in public with a portable machine and would not allow any guests in her apartment. Her emotional cycles continued. She made life miserable for her home health care workers. When Russo and Barbara went to London to visit their daughter Kate, Jean went so far as to fire all of her aides.

After she had a heart attack, Jean refused to do physical therapy or the psychological therapy her doctors prescribed. Even though she required more care and often had trouble getting around, she continued to complain about her health care workers. Another heart attack put her in the hospital where the doctor began giving her morphine. Sometimes even the morphine did not calm the terror with which she lived. Even though she was not afraid of death, she told Russo her fear came from her thought that things “won't turn out right” (202).

After his mother's death, Russo admits that he still remembers his mother's words during one midnight phone call from the hospital: “It's you I need ... it's terrible here” (203). He came to realize that the “here” his mother referred to was the place in her mind where her fears played in an endless loop. “There” was a place she hoped to get to but never could do so. He writes he did not blame his mother for the way her mind worked. He also notes after her death that he did not remember if she had asked him if she could go to Phoenix with him. He was weighed down by the fact his mother needed him so much and that she considered him her rock. These were heavy claims because Russo knew he could make things worse for her but never better.

Now, Russo feels his mother made a mistake in trusting him. She intended her question “Don't I deserve a life?” (203) as a rhetorical question, while he had seen it as a puzzle he needed to solve. He is also haunted because he believes he gave up on someone who never gave up on him.



Analysis

In this chapter of his memoir, Russo returns to the emotional point he was during the introduction of "Independence," the first chapter of his book. Although his mother is dead, he still feels stuck emotionally, as if he is still carrying her around with him. This chapter comes from Russo's struggle to come to terms with his relationship with his mother and find some closure.

Notice in particular Russo's division over whether or not his mother asked to come to Phoenix with him. If she asked and he gave permission, it gives her actions a different intent than the idea that the reader has gotten so far, that she just invited herself along. Russo admits that he really cannot remember specifically how that decision came about.

Now that he has time to think about it, Russo also wonders what his daughters' opinion of his mother is. One telling aspect is how surprised both Kate and Emily were when they saw the GE picture of Jean. One of them commented how stylish she looked. Based on the crotchety old woman they had known of late, they must also have wondered how the woman in the picture, one who was able to hold down a job and raise a son as a single mother, became the woman who was so hard to get along with.

Even though Jean is no longer alive Russo still worries that she might not be happy with the place that she chose to have her ashes scattered. He knew she remembered it as a sunny, happy place and wonders if she saw the desolation of the area in the winter time that she would deem it "an awful, awful place" (189).

The idea that Russo would go so far as to scatter his mother's ashes in a place where that act is illegal shows not only Russo's dedication to his mother but also his humorous touch. Getting arrested for disposing of his mother the way she wanted would definitely be the icing on the cake that made up his relationship with her. Despite his sudden realization that what they were doing, disposing of human remains in a public pond, might be illegal, he continued to do so because he was so dedicated to putting her in a place he thought might make her happy.

It is also in this chapter of the memoir that the idea of "Elsewhere," the title of the book, comes into play. It has taken him his entire life, but Russo has finally come to realize that his mother will never be happy with her living arrangements. She will always believe that she was happier and life was better somewhere else.

Vocabulary

interment, caucus, edification, malleable, repartee, forbearance, spontaneity, sequestered, equanimity, accentuate, adamant, inedible, aversion, contingency, regimen, berate, vanquish, articulate, dispel, precipice, rhetorical



“High and Dry”

Summary

Russo and Barbara prepared for Emily’s wedding coming up in September. He began writing a new memoir that included two weddings—a more positive story than his last one. For the first time in their lives, Russo and Barbara were able to travel together. They decided to get an apartment in Boston to stay in during the winters.

Russo goes back in time to describe Kate’s wedding. After the wedding, Russo’s friend Nat Sobel had talked to Greg, Russo’s cousin, about growing up near a tannery. Greg detailed the miseries of dealing with the heavy wet hides, reactions to chemicals, and smells. As he listened to Greg’s stories, Russo got the feeling of being in the tannery and working there himself as a young man—even though he had never done such work. Because he had such a different job and life outcome, he felt as if he had somehow outwitted fate.

During the time that Barbara and Emily were planning the wedding, Russo got a padded envelope in the mail from Gloversville. Russo’s novel, *Bridge of Sighs*, was inside. It had been sent by Vincent DeSantis, a judge, who wanted an autograph. He had lived in Gloversville his entire life. Also in the envelope was a book by DeSantis entitled *Toward Civic Integrity: Re-establishing the Micropolis*. It was about Gloversville. At the time, Russo put the book, as well as the idea that Gloversville was being put back together, aside.

Meanwhile, Russo could not get his cousin’s stories about the tannery out of his head. The next time he saw Greg, Greg told Russo about deaths and maimings caused by that line of work. Families of the men who were killed were never compensated. Russo wondered why it was he that seemed called to care about those people. He thought it ironic that he, who had left Gloversville as quickly as he could, seemed to be the one called to write about the town and its predicament.

The first Christmas with both his married daughters was full of fun but also held some guilt for Russo. He knew they would never have been able to have such a celebration if his mother were there and wondered if she had ever realized it was she who put the damper on their lives.

Before Kate and Tom left to return to London after Christmas, she talked to her parents about some problems she was having. The sound of a keyboard filled her with terror. Barbara and Russo arranged for her to see a psychiatrist in America and learned that she was suffering from obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). Russo bought and began reading a book about OCD. He was horrified because he saw his mother described in the opening sections. He learned she had needed diagnosis and treatment for her anxieties and panic. It had never occurred to Russo that his mother did not have the ability to act rationally because her thoughts were holding her captive. The disorder



even explained why his mother had never liked anything that was the color yellow. She also claimed to have an extraordinary sense of smell and disliked the smell of olive oil, though her favorite foods were often made with olive oil.

As guilty as Russo felt discovering too late that his mother had an illness that could have been treated, he also realized that he had enabled her to continue her obsessions. He had allowed his mother to have control over him. When they had moved to Arizona, Russo had become the main person responsible for his mother's emotional well being. Because that was the way he had grown up, Russo did not really see anything wrong at that time with the relationship between him and his mother.

Even though Russo could not see his mother's emotional instability, his father-in-law had seen it. It was why he told Russo not to let Jean move in with him. Barbara had also tried to convince Russo he was only encouraging his mother, but he had not listened to her either.

Shortly after Christmas Russo got a letter from John Freeman, editor of *Granta*, asking if Russo would write a story about Groversville for a special edition of that magazine. Russo agreed to write the story only if he did not actually have to travel back to Groversville. Freeman agreed. During the time that Russo was working to put Greg's stories down on paper, he noticed the book *Toward Civic Integrity: Re-establishing the Micropolis*, a book he had never read. Fearing he had not read the book because of an underlying prejudice, he decided to give it a try. He was surprised to read that he and DeSantis agreed on some issues, like that the manufacturing jobs were gone from Groversville for good. DeSantis also suggested that cities be redesigned for people, not their cars.

One thing that Russo did notice about DeSantis' book was that his picture of the past was based on only certain memories. He particularly disliked DeSantis' use of the term "corporate suicide" (231) to describe what the tanneries would have done to themselves if they had stayed in America instead of going overseas. Russo reasons that if this term is proper, the deaths people suffered because of the tanneries could be termed "corporate murder" (231). Russo realized the tanneries had moved overseas to escape new safety standards. He compares DeSantis' book about Groversville to Margaret Mitchell's novel *Gone with the Wind*, his mother's favorite book.

While writing the article, Russo began to dream about his mother again. He dreamed he never moved from his grandfather's house on Helwig Street. He did not marry, had no children and had not achieved a career, but there was a sweetness because his family was together. Russo was unsettled by the dream because the house was decaying and falling down around them. He realized from the dream that he did not believe, as DeSantis did, that Groversville could be saved.

As an adult he drove by the house on Helwig Street after it had been sold and saw signs of neglect. It was after he saw the porches on the back of the house had been removed instead of being fixed that he discovered he no longer had the heart to drive past his old home. He admits having molded his fictional towns after Groversville. He



can see these fictional towns with his own eyes, but he realizes he still sees Gloversville through his mother's eyes, the reason he did not set his stories there. Although he knows his cousin Greg loves Gloversville and wishes it could be fixed, Russo believes the town got what it deserved.

Russo compares the new apartment he and his wife rented in the leather district with the vertical aspirations in Gloversville. Even though his grandfather had worked in the higher parts of the glove factory where it was "high and dry" (238), he had still died from his job because he had breathed in so much dust from the hides. He wonders what his grandfather would have thought of the idea that Russo's creative work was nourished by his memories of Gloversville. He realizes how much he still loves the house in Gloversville and the people who had lived there when he found himself crying as he watched reruns of the television shows they had watched as a family.

Russo admits to his reader that he is most distressed by the way he allowed his mother to change the way he normally handled his life. He believed he was the type person who would try something different if his first attempt to fix something that did not work. He had continued to try the same thing over and over when it came to dealing with his mother.

He goes on to describe that his mother feared most being poor because she believed that poor people did not matter. He wonders what he might have been able to do differently if he had recognized his mother's fear of poverty. His family tells him there is nothing he could have done differently. He feels, however, the answer to this question is close but he cannot ever grasp it. Because he is his mother's son, he wonders if the answer is really as close as he thinks it is.

Analysis

This chapter has a very different feel as Russo struggles to come to terms with his mother's death, her opinions of Gloversville, his own opinions of Gloversville, and the realities of the hide tanning business.

Russo was surprised by the way the tanning business suddenly became an interest to him since few he knew worked in that field. Suddenly, however, he was surrounded by reminders of what the tannery did to his town. Nat Sobel, Russo's literary agent, and Greg, Russo's cousin, shared stories about the days they worked in the tanneries. Russo and his wife rented an apartment on the seventh floor of an eight floor building in the leather district of Boston. He remembers his grandfather's reference to "high and dry" to describe the work done on the upper floors of the tanneries. The tanneries were a visual representation of America's idea of success being vertical. The dirty, wet, dangerous and lower paid jobs were done by those working in the lower floors of the tannery. The higher the floor on which a person worked, the more likely that had a better paying, relatively safer job. Russo notes that even though his grandfather worked on the top floor of the tannery, he still did not have enough money and retired poor. His job also



killed him. He died from emphysema because he spent so much time breathing in hide dust.

Russo seems to believe that he was able to join the truly upward mobility of American society only because he did move away from his hometown. The dream he had about himself if he had never left Gloversville shows the reality: he would never have his family or the career he enjoys.

The reader must wonder if Russo sees some of himself when he considers the act of the tanneries leaving town. Russo left his town as soon as he was able and did not look back. He was part of the younger generation a town depends upon to stay alive. Similarly, when the tanneries left Gloversville, they also took the bulk of jobs from the town. There was no younger generation of manufacturing to fall back on after the tannery jobs were gone. The town began to dry up and die.

The contrast between the way DeSantis sees Gloversville and the way Russo sees Gloversville helps Russo to come to terms with his mother's view of her hometown. When Russo finally read DeSantis' book he did not agree with the way that DeSantis put a positive spin on the good old days of Gloversville. Russo knows people were killed and maimed in the tanneries. The tanneries also left the lakes and lands polluted and poisonous when they left town. DeSantis mentioned none of this in his book. Russo compares the way DeSantis chose to see Gloversville to the way Margaret Mitchell portrays the old South in her novel *Gone with the Wind*. Russo recognizes that this novel was also his mother's favorite book, which he connects to her optimistic opinion of Gloversville every time she was away from her home town.

Russo makes a statement in his memoir that Gloversville "got what it deserved" (237). It is a belief that he inherited from his mother. It is as if he believes that because of the way the tanneries were allowed to operate, the way the workers in these tanneries were treated, and the way the people were kept in poverty despite the hard work they did—that all of these things are coming back full circle to haunt the town. It is also because of the things that happened to the people of Gloversville that Russo admits that he does not want to see the town reinvigorated.

Despite his feelings about his hometown, Russo admits it is ironic that he makes his livelihood writing about a place patterned so closely after Gloversville. There are enough differences between his fictional settings and the real Gloversville that Russo can see his settings through his own eyes. If he had to write about Gloversville itself, he fears he would not be able to see it through any eyes but his mother's.

Vocabulary

cleaved, longevity, contingent, prophylactic, impinges, contingent, tribulations, protagonist, loquacious, endorsement, esoteric, litany, asphyxiated, cacophony, euphemistic, semantic, incapacitating, pertinent, aversion, visceral, redolent,

diabolically, avatars, emphatically, embodiment, ambivalent, paradoxes, coerce, ineffable



Important People

Jean Russo

Jean Russo was Richard Russo's mother. Her relationship with her son is the focus of Russo's book. She was a single mother and was proud of her claim that she was independent. Russo realized his mother really was not as independent as she thought she was at any point in her life. She was dependent on others for rides to work or other places that she wanted to go. She was also dependent on her parents because they provided her with a relatively inexpensive apartment and free child care for Russo.

As long as Russo can remember, his mother suffered from what the family referred to as nerves. When he was a child he was careful to be well behaved and not add any stress to his mother's life because he did not want her to have a nervous breakdown because of him. As he got older and his mother did not have a nervous breakdown, he became less concerned about her condition.

When he was a child, Jean regularly told Russo that as long as they stayed together things would be all right. Later, when he was older, she told him that he was her rock. It was not until he was older that Russo really began to appreciate how serious his mother was about these claims she made about their relationship.

Through the course of her life Jean was highly dependent upon Russo for her emotional well being. She would not drive, so Russo had to make himself available to take her to her doctor's appointments and do her shopping. Jean additionally made unreasonable demands for the apartments in which she lived. She required frequent moves when she discovered she was unhappy in any particular apartment.

It was only after his mother's death that Russo learned about obsessive compulsive disorder and began to suspect that his mother might have suffered from that disorder. He was upset with himself not necessarily because he did not realize that his mother might have a treatable condition, but because he allowed her to change his normal way of attacking problems. Instead of finding a different way of solving a problem, what he generally did when his first attempt to solve that problem did not work, Russo continued to go at the problem that was his mother the same way.

Although a good deal of Jean's impact on her son's life appears to be negative, Russo does credit his mother with his love of books. He indicates it was she who helped him to realize that reading was a treat, not a chore.

Richard "Ricko Mio" Russo

Richard Russo is the author of *Elsewhere*. He is the son of Jean and Jimmy Russo. He is a novelist and screenwriter. Russo is married to Barbara. They have two children, Kate and Emily. His mother called him by the nickname Ricko-Mio.



Russo grew up in Gloversville, New York. He and his mother lived in an apartment above her parents' house. He was raised by a single mother. His father was a war hero but also had developed a habit of spending his entire paycheck gambling. Russo did not know his father well until he was older.

Russo did well enough in school that he was able to get scholarships to go to New York schools but instead decided to go to Arizona where college tuitions were not as expensive. His mother went with him to Arizona and he had to struggle to get her settled in a strange city in addition to getting himself accustomed to college. Russo felt that after he got his mother settled in Phoenix that their lives would diverge but that was not to be the case.

Through the course of his life Russo and his wife not only took his mother into their home but also had to find accommodations for her each time they moved because she was so emotionally dependent on him. Although she had gotten her driver's license in Arizona, she refused to drive any longer. Russo had to take her to her doctor's and hair appointments and also take her shopping.

After his mother died, Russo struggled to come to terms with the hold his mother had on his life. He additionally tried to find some way to differentiate himself from his mother. Even though he intended to prove he was different from his mother and he instead found more ways in which he was like her.

Jimmy Russo

Jimmy Russo was Richard Russo's father. While Russo was growing up his mother and father were legally separated but not divorced. Even though Jimmy was supposed to pay child support he never did so.

He was a war hero and had been awarded a Bronze Star for his part in the D-Day fighting. On the other hand, however, Jimmy had a gambling habit and often blew his paycheck in that way. Russo was never sure what to think of his father.

After he had begun college, Russo began to have a closer relationship with his father. During one conversation his father told him he had wanted to be a part of Russo's life but did not want to have to put up with his mother. He was the first person to make Russo acknowledge his realization that his mother was crazy.

Jimmy died of lung cancer. One day before he got sick he had visited Jean and her mother when they were attempting to live together in the same apartment. When he saw the arrangements in which they were living he asked Jean what was wrong with her.



Kate

Kate is the younger of Barbara and Russo's two daughters. When she saw the GE photo of her grandmother after her death Kate noted how stylish she was. During her grandmother's life, Russo noted that Kate had been sympathetic with her grandmother's sense of isolation but was not as patient with her unreasonable behavior as her sister was.

Kate was the first of Barbara and Russo's children to be married. She and her husband, Tom, lived in London.

When Kate came home for Christmas and to scatter her grandmother's ashes she admitted to her family she was having trouble dealing with certain noises, particularly the noise of a keyboard. She planned to see a therapist in London but her parents encouraged her to see a therapist right away. Kate was diagnosed as suffering with obsessive compulsive disorder.

Barbara Russo

Barbara Russo is Russo's wife. She understood the struggle her husband was facing because her mother had been an alcoholic. Because she had lived in a similar situation, she also saw the way that Russo was allowing his mother to manipulate him.

It is only after his mother's death that Russo realizes how unfair he has been to his wife. Even though he knew his mother could not live with them permanently because it would turn his wife into a nurse, he did not consider what his dedication to his mother was doing to his relationship with his wife.

Barbara and Russo do manage to make their marriage survive. Russo realizes at the end how difficult the life must have been for his wife because his mother largely ignored Barbara, as if she was not sure what her daughter-in-law's role was in her life.

Phyllis

Phyllis is Jean's sister and Russo's aunt. Phyllis knew Jean well enough to recognize her emotional cycles. She also realized it would not be a good idea for Jean to come live with her after Phyllis' husband died.

Phyllis often called Russo to let him know how things were really going with the living arrangements between Jean and her mother. She is the one who told him that Jean was crushing one of their mother's medicines up in her meals and refused to accept she had misunderstood the directions. She suggested to Russo it would be a good idea for him to come and get his mother.



Vincent DeSantis

Vincent DeSantis is the judge who sent Russo the book he had written about Gloversville. Although he agreed with some of the assertions that DeSantis made in his book, entitled *Toward Civic Integrity: Re-establishing the Micropolis*, he disagreed with others. He believed that DeSantis looked at what Gloverville had been with undue optimism, ignoring the fact that so many people had been killed and maimed by the tannery that had operated in the town.

Russ

Russ is the man that Russo's mother met in Phoenix and married. The two stayed married only two years. Russo had known from the beginning that the relationship was perhaps doomed because he sensed that his mother did not love Russ. Russo did think, however, that Russ was the kind of man who could perhaps be good for his mother if she could stand being in a relationship with a man she did not love.

Dot

Dot is the only woman with whom Russo can ever remember his mother having a deep friendship. Despite their friendship, Jean decided to move from the apartment complex in which Dot lived because she was afraid Dot would move to be closer to her children. Dot confessed to Russo she had liked Jean because she understood what it was like to be one's own worst enemy.

Emily

Emily is the oldest of Barbara and Russo's daughters. She was always the one who tried to make peace between her grandmother's demands and the rest of her family. Emily married Steve the September after her family scattered her grandmother's ashes on Martha's Vineyard.

Barbara's Father

Barbara's father, who is never named, warned Russo that he would be making a mistake if he lets his mother move in with him. The reader later learns that Barbara's father recognized Jean's neediness because he had dealt with his own wife, who was an alcoholic.



John Freeman

John Freeman is the editor of the magazine *Granta*. He asked Russo to write a coming home story about Russo's hometown of Gloversville. Russo agreed to do so only if he did not have to physically return home in order to write the story.

Greg

Greg is Russo's cousin. Unlike Russo, Greg stayed in Gloversville where he lived and raised his family. Russo was fascinated by Greg's stories of working in the tannery one summer.

Nat Sobel

Nat Sobel is Russo's literary agent. He was the one who got Russo's cousin, Greg, talking about the tannery. The two shared their experiences working in that profession.



Objects/Places

Menemsha Pond

Menemsha Pond is the place on Martha's Vineyard where Jean said she wanted her ashes spread after she died. The place was significant because it was the place where she had taken Russo on vacation when he was a boy.

Megunticook House

Megunticook House is the last place that Jean lived before her death. It was an apartment building for seniors located in Camden, Maine. The first time Russo took Jean to look at this apartment complex she had not liked it because she thought it was shabby. Later after it had been painted, she was taken to look at it again and swore that she had never seen it.

Green's

Green's is the beach that Russo's aunt and uncle preferred to go to when they took Russo, Jean and their children to the beach. Jean did not like that beach because it was mostly grass and not much sand.

GE Photograph

This photograph is one in which Jean appears both in control and also highly anxious. She is wearing stylish clothes and appears the picture of an independent woman. This is the woman whom Russo remembers his mother being when he was young. His girls, however, are surprised by the picture because they saw their grandmother as a person full of anxieties and worries.

House on Helwig Street

When he was growing up, Jean and Russo lived in the upstairs apartment of 36 Helwig Street in Gloversville, the house owned by her parents. Jean's parents continued to live there until after her father died and her mother had to sell the house to pay for medical bills. It was when Russo drove by the house and discovered the current residents of the house had removed the back porch without trying to fix it and had not even installed steps below the back door that he decided he could no longer visit the house.



1960 Ford Galaxie

The 1960 Ford Galaxie was Russo's first car. Even though it was badly underpowered he managed to drive it, pulling a U-Haul trailer to Arizona when he went to college and his mother went along intending to find a new life. Because she needed the car, Jean got a driver's license and kept the car so she could get around in Arizona. After her divorce she decided she was no longer interested in driving and gave the car back to Russo. He still had it even after he married his wife, Barbara.

Brown Canvas Water Bag

A man who worked at a gas station in the Ozarks sold Russo and his mother this water bag that the attendant said would keep the car's radiator from overheating. The bag did what it was supposed to do but was stolen from the car in Texas. They were never able to find another one or anyone who even knew what type of device they were talking about.

Jean's Temporary License

When Russo first saw his mother's temporary driver's license he told her that she had earned her freedom, an attribute that every 15-year-old associated with a driver's license.

Large Camp on Great Pond

Because they were unable to find a suitable house and apartment in Carbondale, Russo and his wife rented a camp on Great Pond where they could all stay together until they could find places to live.

Anita Brookner's Hotel du Lac

Russo gave his mother this book to read because he thought she would identify with the theme of women's cruelty to women found in the novel. His mother returned the book to him and said that she had not liked it. It was not until he re-read the first sections of the novel that he realized why his mother had not liked it. It was set in a gray, dreary setting, one she associated with her real life. She did not want to read books that were similar to her real life. Instead she wanted books that would give her an escape from life as she knew it.

Ziploc Baggies

These baggies symbolize Jean's attempt to keep bad books from contaminating her collection of books. Whenever Russo gave her a book she did not like she always



returned it enclosed in a zipped bag, symbolically sequestering it from the rest of her books.

Jean's Favorite Clock

During the medical emergency in which Jean's sodium level was discovered to be out of balance, she developed an obsession with a gold plated clock that Russo gave her. She desperately tried to find a way to make the clock run backward. She finally broke it.

Oxygen Tank

Although she had congestive heart failure and could not breathe well without it, Jean was very averse to the idea of having an oxygen tank. Russo thought it was because she remembered the huge ugly oxygen tank that her father had to have in the living room of the Helwig Street house. Even though her oxygen tank was nowhere near the size of her fathers, Jean still refused to be seen using it.



Themes

Independence as a Paradox

Although his mother claimed to be independent, she still felt as if she were living in a box. Her independence, as most independence is, was a paradox. Everyone suffers from the limitations of independence. We make one choice and that choice limits our options in other areas. Jean seemed to have trouble understanding that the choices an independent person makes can lead them to dependence on others.

One of the choices that Jean made that limited her independence was her decision to separate from her husband. Since her husband did have a bad gambling habit, Jean probably made the best decision for her circumstances but that decision to be independent from a bad influence in her life led her to a spot where she had fewer decisions about the rest of her life. She could not date because she was still legally married. She did not have a man, understood at that point in time to be the driver for the family, to take her where she wanted to go. She also did not have the benefit of the added income a man would bring into the household.

Another choice that Jean made was to live with her parents. Again, this was probably the best choice for Jean and her son but her freedom was limited by the fact she lived with her parents. Even though Jean thought that paying rent and reimbursing her parents for food they bought for Russo should have bought her immunity to her parents' judgments and advice, it did not.

As an older woman, Jean continued to tell people she lived independently even though she was in reality very dependent upon Russo and his family. Russo once joked with his wife, telling her that he did not think that his mother knew what the word independent really means. Even though she lived alone, Jean was both emotionally and physically dependent on Russo. He was the one to take her to the grocery store and to doctor's appointments. Because she had allowed herself to be so dependent on Russo when Jean decided she wanted to go back to Gloversville she was unable to do so because she had given away her ability to be independent. She would not drive even though she had a driver's license, for instance. Through her choices as an independent person, she made herself completely dependent on Russo.

Effects of Mental Illness on Relationships

Through the course of Russo's memoir, he discusses the way his mother's illness caused her to have trouble making and maintaining relationships. The most difficult relationships for Jean seemed to be those with other women. Though she interacted better with men, these relationships also had their troubles. A final relationship on which Jean's mental illness had an effect was the relationship with Russo and his family.



Through the course of his mother's life, Russo can remember her having only one positive relationship with another woman. This woman was Dot, the lady who lived in an apartment complex with Jean near the end of Jean's life. Even though Jean and Dot seemed to be close friends, Jean still moved from her apartment because she sensed Dot was going to move away to be closer to her family. It was almost as if Jean wanted to be first to leave instead of being the one left behind.

Jean's relationship with her mother and sister was also stressed. At times Jean insinuated that her mother and sister were cruel and abusive to her. At times it appeared she was being abusive to them. Even though Russo knew that Jean and her mother had completely different ways of thinking about life, a fact that kept them fighting against each other, he still saw some similarities between the two of them.

Even though Jean did better in relationships with men, there were problems in those relationships as well. The first man that Jean dated after she moved to Arizona was scared away because Jean got too serious about their relationship too quickly. The second one, the one that Jean wound up marrying, was crazy about her but she did not love him. She married him only because it would keep her from having to go back to Gloversville. After Russo and his father began to get better acquainted, Russo's father admitted to him that he was not able to spend more time with Russo as a boy because it would also mean having to spend time with Jean. He said he could not do that because Jean was "nuts" (85).

It was perhaps Jean's relationship with her son and his family that took the brunt of the punishment because of her mental illness. Russo wanted to be a good son and make his mother as happy as possible even though he knew that there would probably never be a situation in which she would be completely happy. He was frustrated with her pickiness when it came to the apartments in which she lived as well as her seeming inability to make rational decisions. It was only after her death that Russo realized that the illness he suspects she had kept her from making rational decisions.

One of the poignant conclusions to which Russo comes after his mother is gone is that the family was never really able to have fun because his mother always put a damper on any festivities. He wonders if she ever realized she was the one who kept the group from enjoying themselves. Russo also wonders what his daughters thought about their grandmother. Though she was a friend to them as children, she became stricter as they grew older. He was surprised when both shared warm memories during the scattering of her ashes.

Leaving Home

The impacts of leaving home, both on a person and his town, are discussed in Russo's memoir *Elsewhere*. When Russo was a child he remembers his mother telling him that she wanted him to leave Gloversville. As an adult he reasons that it was because he left that he has the lucrative career he does. Jean's attempts to leave her home town did



not have the same positive outcomes. Both seemed to be haunted by memories of Gloversville long after they have left.

Although Russo believes the dream he had about living with his mother and grandparents all of his life is about the reality of Gloversville and not his own life, there is a lesson for him there. In this dream in which he stayed in Gloversville Russo had not married, had not had children, and had not incubated a prosperous writing career. The dream is a representation of what would have happened to Russo had he not left Gloversville like his mother suggested he do.

Even though Jean tried to leave Gloversville, she left so late in life that the town had become part of her. Every place she went she compared to Gloversville. In Gloversville she was able to carpool to work, whereas in other places she had to have her own car. In Gloversville stores were in walking distance, whereas in other towns the apartment complexes were situated far from shopping areas and there were not even any sidewalks. Though Jean found fault with her town when she was actually living there, she missed it when she was away.

Both Jean and Russo appear to be haunted by Gloversville. Jean's memory of the town made her want to go back there. She associated it with the way she used to be and somehow believed that if she were to go back she would be young and spry again. Russo, on the other hand, is haunted by the downfall in the town since the tannery left. He is disgusted by the worshipful attitude the people had toward that manufacturing business even though people working there were killed and maimed. Families of the dead and injured were not compensated for the injuries. When the tanneries left, the people in charge did not bother to clean up the poison and pollution they left behind. In the end, Russo concludes that Gloversville got what it deserved because of the way it let the tanneries run its people into the ground.

Mental Illness

The treatment of and attitude toward mental illness through the years is addressed by Russo in his memoir. He begins the discussion by pointing out the way his family referred to his mother's emotional cycles as nerves. His father took the more pointed approach by telling Russo his mother was crazy. As the story comes to a close and Kate, Russo's daughter, was diagnosed with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), Russo wondered if his mother, too, had been handicapped by this illness.

Russo's earliest memory of any references to his mother's emotional troubles was his family's reference to what they called "nerves" (42). Even as a child Russo made some deductions about nerves. First, he recognized that only women were ever accused of having nerves. Second, he felt he had to behave to keep his mother from having a nervous breakdown, and finally, he knew he could not make her cycles any better, but he did have the ability to make them worse.



Notice the words that Russo uses to describe what the word “nerves” (42) did to categorize his mother’s condition. He writes that this one word described her condition, stigmatized her condition, and dismissed her condition. It was believed this one word summed up all the characteristics and qualities of his mother’s condition. The one word also cast a stigma over his mother’s condition. People with “nerves” were thought to be substandard. Perhaps worst of all is that after his mother was diagnosed with “nerves” her condition was dismissed. No more thought was put into it. Doctors did not even try to find causes for these cases of “nerves” to try to treat women so they could live fuller lives.

Just as Kate’s therapist had foreseen that if she did not get proper treatment her OCD would “eat her alive” (220), Russo sees the way the illness did eat his mother alive. The older she got the worse Jean’s anxiety and distress became, even when she had nothing to worry and stress about. She reached points where she could not even function because of the severity of her disorder. Russo wonders if he had realized sooner that his mother was suffering from an illness and had gotten her help if she would have been able to live a more fulfilling life.

Guilt

The unusual placement of Russo’s guilt is interesting as he pinpoints his regrets at the end of his memoir. Mentions of guilt are made throughout the memoir in reference to the way Russo believes he disappointed his mother. He believes the dream in which he caused them to wander the streets aimlessly is a product of his guilt that he was never able to reach a point with her where they were both satisfied. Guilt was the motivation for many of the things that Russo did for his mother during her life. Surprisingly, after she is gone, Russo feels guilt about the way he chose to change his behavior for his mother, giving in to her demands and obsessions.

When Russo discusses the dream he had about walking his mother through unfamiliar streets he believes the dream is somehow connected to the fact he believes he neglected her during her life. Russo is far from the neglectful son. He took pains with his mother that many men would not. He arranged his schedule and neglected his family to take her to doctors’ appointments and even take her grocery shopping. Russo and his family did not move without first considering the impact it would have on Jean. They worked hard to make her as comfortable as possible during their moves.

The guilt that Russo felt in reference to his relationship with his mother was a great motivator in his life. Just after Russo and Barbara were married it was because he felt guilty that he agreed to allow his mother to move in with them even though he had been advised not to do so. When she lived with them, Russo and Barbara could no longer have friends over or go places because they felt guilty about leaving Jean out of their celebrations. For this reason they stopped doing things for fun. Russo believes it was because he agreed with his father’s diagnosis that his mother was crazy that he let her move in with them at all.



At the end of his memoir, after he realizes his mother might have been suffering from a mental illness, that Russo feels guilty for what he left undone. He wonders what might have been different if he had not enabled his mother to hold onto her obsessions and remain stuck in her brain's way of thinking. He wishes that he had pushed her to do something different. He tells his reader he was not the sort of person to continue attacking a problem from the same angle but that was what he did with his mother. Instead of trying something different to see if he got better results, he allowed her to push him into a corner and change the way he attacked problems. He reasons this lack of action on his part might have been one reason that she never got the proper diagnosis and treatment.



Styles

Structure

This memoir is divided into eight chapters. Russo begins his book with a description of the place where he and his family scattered his mother's ashes. The remainder of the first chapter goes back in time to his childhood when he remembered his mother being proud of her independence. The story moves forward at what is basically a linear timeline even though there are a few places where Russo bounces back and forth in time describing different decisions to move.

Perspective

Russo writes his memoir with the perspective of time. He has decided to write about his mother's influence on his life after her death. For this reason he is able to write about the entire relationship.

Of course, since this is a memoir, it makes sense that Russo writes from the first person point of view. He tells the reader about his experiences from his own point of view, sharing his own thoughts, reactions and emotions.

Tone

The tone of *Elsewhere* is both nostalgic and mournful, offset with a touch of humor. Russo seems to be writing his memoir with the intention of better understand the relationship between himself and his mother. He also appears to believe that by putting his experience down in writing he can somehow get some closure on his mother's death.



Quotes

That, of course, was another way of asking whether I was feeling guilty about neglecting her in death as I sometimes worried I'd done in life."

-- Narrator (Independence)

Importance: When Russo began having recurring dreams about his mother after her death but before the family had a service to scatter her ashes he wondered if the dreams were his way of telling himself she was neglected. He realized also that the dreams were a product of his own guilt.

From the time I was a boy, my mother valued few things more than her perceived independence."

-- Narrator (Independence)

Importance: Even though his mother was very protective of independence, Russo realized that she was not as independent as she believed she was.

In the GE photograph my mother looks both old-fashioned and modern, both of her time and oddly outside of it, a strange mix of stubborn confidence and acute anxiety."

-- Narrator (Independent)

Importance: Russo discovered this picture of his mother after her death. He believes the picture shows the person that his mother wanted to be. Despite the pulled together look, Russo can see both his mother's stubbornness and anxiety in her expression.

Even to my mother, her hard-won autonomy must at times have resembled a cage. Still, it was a cage of her own design, different from and superior to the one my father and her parents and Gloversville itself would have put her in if she'd allowed them to."

-- Narrator (Independent)

Importance: Russo describes his mother's independence as sort of a cage because it depended on a certain set of circumstances. For instance, she could not have paid her expenses if she had not rented her parents' apartment. She could not have afforded the rent anywhere else. This is an example of one of the ways that Jean was both independent but still caged in by her circumstances.

I would own worse cars, but never another in which you could slam the accelerator to the floor and nothing, absolutely nothing, would happen."

-- Narrator (A Good Talking-To)

Importance: This quote is an example of Russo's use of humor in his writing. He perhaps exaggerates the car's downfalls when he indicates that nothing happened when he pushed the accelerator all the way to the floor.



Other kids were good because they didn't want to get punished if they misbehaved; I was good because I feared that if I misbehaved it was my mother who'd be punished."
-- Narrator (A Good Talking-To)

Importance: Russo indicates it was his fear that his mother's condition would cause her to have a nervous breakdown that led him to be well behaved. He was aware that he had the ability to make his mother's condition much worse even though he could not make it better.

Indeed, as I walked back to campus along busy Speedway Boulevard, I had a profound sense that my mother's life and my own had just diverged, probably for good."
-- Narrator (A Good Talking-To)

Importance: Russo describes his short lived belief that when he began college and his mother started her new life in Phoenix that their lives would develop some separation.

You do know your mother's nuts, right?"
-- Jimmy Russo (A Diagnosis)

Importance: It was when his father confronted him with the fact that his mother was crazy that Russo first recognized he had known his mother's disorder all along. The comment came when Jimmy was explaining to Russo why he chose not to be a bigger part of his son's life.

My mantra — that come the end of the day, she was going to have to order off the menu — was an idea she'd always resisted."
-- Narrator (A Diagnosis)

Importance: This idea that his mother would have to "order off the menu" came from an experience in a restaurant where Jean had wanted to order a food that the restaurant did not offer. It was Russo's way of telling his mother that there are some things that are just impossible no matter how much she might want them to exist.

As often was the case with my mother, when faced with a real worry, some clear and present danger, she was remarkably calm, reassuring Kate and Emily that everything would be fine, that the firemen knew what they were doing."
-- Narrator (A Diagnosis)

Importance: During the time that his family waited for the fire at a nearby camp to be extinguished, Russo noticed how calm his mother was. He indicates that it was a habit of hers to be calm during a real emergency while it was imagined crises that caused her to become unwired.

Barbara and I both have a hard time disposing of books, even those we don't like, aware that behind even the most wretched failures there's an author who slaved lovingly, for who knows how long."
-- Narrator (Unsettled)



Importance: Russo describes why he and his wife do not have what he would call a library. He says that while his mother had no trouble getting rid of books that did not fit her personality Russo and Barbara could not bring themselves to throw away even books they did not intend to read because they recognized someone had worked hard to bring that book into existence.

If my mother lived to be ninety, we'd be in our early sixties before we were allowed to make unencumbered decisions about our own lives."

-- Narrator (Unsettled)

Importance: It is when Russo and his wife were considering moving to the coast that he realized that if he were to wait until his mother passed that he and his wife might be elderly before they could make a decision that did not cause his mother distress.

It was from my mother that I learned reading was not a duty but a reward, and from her that I intuited a vital truth: most people are trapped in a solitary existence, a life circumscribed by want and failures of imagination, limitations from which readers are exempt."

-- Narrator (Unsettled)

Importance: Russo indicates he learned from his mother the lesson that through reading he could visit other cultures and places. She taught him that a reader's life was never boring or limited.

She said I'd one day think as she did; what she probably meant was that one day I'd be like her — obsessive, dogged, and rigid."

-- Narrator (Unsettled)

Importance: It is after Russo has considered his own personality and his mother's claim that one day he would think like her, that he says she would have been more proper to say that one day he would be like her. He comes to realize that he shares with his mother her stubbornness and obsessiveness.

For months that inexplicable and humiliating madness held me in its grip until one evening, on my very first quarter, I entered some kind of zone, winning so many free games that the thought of actually playing them made me ill."

-- Narrator (Unsettled)

Importance: When he tries to find some aspect of his personality that differentiates himself from his mother, Russo instead remembers his college infatuation with a pin ball machine. He realizes he has his mother's ability to harbor an obsession and none of her strength of character to give himself a talking to and make himself behave better.

Nor, to borrow my mother's phrase, had I given myself a good talking-to. That would have been pointless. I knew myself well enough to know I wasn't listening."

-- Narrator (Unsettled)



Importance: Even as he thinks about his mother's ability to temporarily change her attitude with a self lecture, he believes that lecturing himself would have done no good. He realizes that he would not listen to his own lectures.

Maybe that's why I like her. Being your own worst enemy is something I understand."
-- Dot (Real Time)

Importance: After Jean decided to move out of the apartment complex where she had made friends with a woman named Dot, Dot told Russo that she had liked Jean because she understood what it was like to be one's own worst enemy.

Because I'd given up on someone I loved, someone who'd never, ever, given up on me. I couldn't speak because the only thing left to say was I'm sorry, and the person I needed to say it to was gone."
-- Narrator (Here and There)

Importance: After his mother died, Russo felt a deep need to apologize to her for having given up on her. He felt he had done so because he had not tried more actively to find some help for her nerves.

When I'd confronted my mother about obsessing over minutiae, I was merely recommending that she act rationally. It never occurred to me that, as this book suggested, she couldn't, that something was preventing her and actually holding her reason hostage."
-- Narrator (High and Dry)

Importance: It was not until he discovered that his daughter suffers with obsessive compulsive disorder that Russo considered that his mother might not have had any choice but to act and think the way she did.

They're about Gloversville, about a ruined house that in the slightly out-of-plumb language of dreams stands in for the town Vincent DeSantis believes can be saved and I do not."
-- Narrator (High and Dry)

Importance: Russo argues that the dreams he had about living in his grandparents' decaying house were not about his childhood home or his mother but instead about the town of Gloversville, a place he does not think is worth saving.

Though I can't justify doing so, it appears that on this topic I've taken my mother's part. Gloversville got what it deserved."
-- Narrator (High and Dry)

Importance: Russo agrees with his mother that Gloversville got what it deserved when the tannery left town and did not clean up after itself.



What distresses me most is that I made an exception for my mother in how I normally go about things.”

-- Narrator (High and Dry)

Importance: What bothers Russo most about his relationship with his mother is that he allowed her to make him continue trying to handle her and her moods in the same way. He believes if perhaps he had been able to respond to her problems in some other way they could have found some way to better deal with her.



Topics for Discussion

Do you think it is fitting that Jean decided she wanted her ashes scattered in Menemsha Pond on Martha's Vineyard? Consider Russo's concern that his mother might not have liked it if she had seen it during the winter. Do you think his worry is justified? Why or why not?

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Discuss Russo's definition of a library. Do you think this definition is too narrow? Do you think one's books must really all make a comment about one's personality in order to be classified as a library?

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Based on Kate's diagnosis as suffering with obsessive compulsive disorder do you think that Russo's mother suffered from the same disorder? Why or why not?

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Discuss the way Russo chose to deal with his mother. Do you think there was a way he could have helped her to be less dependent on him? What might this have been?

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Considering the way that Russo jumps through hoops to try to make his mother comfortable, at what point do you think a child's responsibility to his parents ends? Should Russo be criticized for neglecting his family in favor of his mother?

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What difference does it make if Russo's mother asked permission to go with her son to Arizona or if she just told him she was going? How does this first trip define the remainder of Russo's relationship with his mother?

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It is significant that Russo gives his mother credit not only for his love of books but also his writing career? Why?

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Consider Russo's decision to emphasize his writing instead of his teaching. Why do you think his mother was so against this decision?

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Discuss the way Russo and his mother held similar attitudes toward Gloversville. How were their attitudes different?

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Why do you think Russo's mother appreciated her life in Gloversville when she was not living there but thought it was awful when she was there? What do you think influenced her way of thinking?

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