

A Gate at the Stairs Study Guide

A Gate at the Stairs by Lorrie Moore

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Plot Summary

- This study guide was created using the following version of this book: First Vintage Contemporaries Edition, September 2010. ISBN: 978-0-375-70846-6

A Gate at the Stairs is a coming of age story about Tassie Keltjin, a 20-year-old college student. The story takes place a few months after the September 11th attacks. Interested in finding a part-time job, Tassie applies for a nanny position and is interviewed by Sarah Brink, a woman who, along with her husband Edward, is trying to adopt a child. Sarah hires Tassie and asks her to accompany her to meet potential birth mothers. The first meeting is unsuccessful, but the second leads to starting the adoption proceedings of a child named Mary, whose mother is white and father is African American.

Tassie bonds with the child, now called Mary-Emma, and they spend a lot of time together going to places around the town. At school, Tassie registers for a class called Intro to Sufism. In the class, Tassie meets Reynaldo, a young man claiming to be from Brazil. They strike up a friendship and then their relationship evolves into romance. Tassie's relationship with Reynaldo is her first significant relationship and she introduces Mary-Emma to him.

When Tassie is out with Mary-Emma, someone yells a racial epithet at Mary-Emma. Tassie tells Sarah and this prompts her to start a support group for families of color in the community. Tassie watches the children during the meetings. After one of the meetings, Tassie goes to Reynaldo's apartment and finds his apartment empty of furnishing, except for his prayer mat and poster with a black background and white letters. He tells her that he is not part of a terrorist cell and that she should not believe what she may hear on the news.

Sarah asks Tassie about Reynaldo when she hears he disappeared. Sarah also decides to confide in Tassie about an incident in her and Edward's past. They once had a son Gabriel who died. After the adoption agency learns about Gabriel's death, they halt the adoption process and take Mary-Emma back into foster care.

After the spring semester ends, Tassie returns home in time for her brother Gunny's high school graduation. Gunny leaves for basic training the day after graduation and is later deployed to the Middle East. During his tour, Gunny is killed in an explosion. Devastated by her brother's death, Tassie climbs into the coffin with her brother on the day of the funeral. She helps her father with the family farm and ends up taking a medical leave of absence from school to process her grief.

Once Tassie returns to school, she gets a new apartment and roommate and begins to look for a new part-time job. After listing Sarah and Edward as references on a job application, she gets a phone call from Edward out of the blue. He tells her that he recommended her highly and confesses that he and Sarah have split up. Over the

course of their conversation, Edward ends up asking Tassie to go to dinner with him. Tassie tells him no.



Chapters 1-2

Summary

Chapter One opens in December in Iowa and Tassie Keltjin, a 20-year-old, college student, is looking for a nanny position that will work with her school schedule in the coming semester. It is a few months after the September 11, 2001 attacks and a somberness remains. Her roommate Murph met her boyfriend on September 10 and stays mostly with him now. Tassie spends a fair amount of time alone.

Sarah begins interviewing for possible nanny jobs and meets Sarah Brink, a pale, auburn-headed woman, at Sarah's house. Sarah invites her in and they spend some time getting to know one another. Sarah tells Tassie about the neighbors: a woman, a man, and his lover. While Sarah talks about it, Tassie thinks about going on a date with a man who ended up telling her he was gay and how they made a cake instead of having sex. Sarah explains that she and her husband are adopting a child and want a nanny to help out because she also runs a restaurant called Le Petit Moulin. Sarah asks if Tassie is related to Bo Keltjin, which is Tassie's father. Sarah buys potatoes from Bo's farm for her restaurant, and Sarah considers how her father would not be able to afford to eat in the restaurant. The conversation between the woman turns toward "randomness" (21) and Tassie tells Sarah that she and her brother would make potato guns and Sarah says she spent a semester in France. Sarah remembers Tassie's father, but not her mother. Tassie explains that she did not often come into town, but on occasion did so to sell snapdragons and gladioluses. She learns that Sarah and her father are the same age: forty-five. Tassie is given the job description and leaves.

Tassie walks home, passing the university stadium on her way. She gets back to the apartment and thinks about how she does not mind being alone and rarely misses Murph. She listens to music and listens to messages on the answering machine. The last message is from Sarah asking her to call back. She returns Sarah's call the following day and Sarah offers Tassie the job, informing her that the job would start immediately and asks her to arrive at noon. Sarah wants Tassie to accompany her to meet the birth mother that afternoon. They go to a Perkins restaurant and meet with Letitia Gherlich and Amber Bowers, the woman from the adoption agency and a pregnant woman, respectively. Amber wants the baby to be baptized Catholic. Amber's probation officer watches from across the restaurant. Before the meeting is over, Sarah tells Amber not to sell drugs and that she should do something she is good at. When Sarah and Tassie get to the car, Sarah declares the meeting "a complete disaster" (36). In the car, Sarah gets a call from Letitia, who tells Sarah that if it does not work out with Amber, that she has had luck placing babies from South America, and that because of "a lot of German influence" (38), the children are often blond and blue-eyed. Sarah thanks her and hangs up. She remembers a man from cooking school who was "a blue-eyed Jew" (38) who often donated sperm because he was in high demand. Sarah drops Tassie at her apartment and tells her to call when she returns from Christmas break.



Chapter Two finds Tassie at home on Christmas morning, having slept in. Her mother refers to the Christmas tree as a “Hanukkah Hemlock” (45). She thinks about her brother Robert and how he does not apply himself in school, earning four Fs and a D on his recent report card. He earned the nickname Gunny from his friends because of how he would gun the car engine in parking lots. With the family gathered in the kitchen, they discuss how it is unseasonably warm and the snow is melting. Tassie thinks about her dad and how he is not considered a real farmer in Dellacrosse because his farm is so small. She tells her family about the classes she registered for, including Intro to Sufism and Intro to Wine Tasting, even though she is underage. She also tells them that she got a job as a nanny, but the child has not been adopted yet. Tassie’s mother wants to know why Sarah cannot have children herself and details about the husband. Tassie suggests that the husband is an academic, which her mother bristles at. Tassie’s father, Robert, became a farmer, but was raised from a college president.

Christmas gifts are exchanged and Tassie receives a pearl necklace from her mother, Tassie thinks of it a “gyno-noose” (55) and cannot think of a reason to ever wear it. She thanks her mother. Later Gunny and Tassie go out for a walk. Gunny tells Tassie that he is considering enlisting after high school, but that their mother is upset about the prospect. They talk about the military actions in Afghanistan. They reach a stream and toss stones into the water. Gunny tells her he has been reading poetry and she teases him. They return to the house and their mother has made brisket. When Tassie goes out in Dellacrosse, she thinks of what has changed and how people recognize each other. At New Year’s Eve, there are fireworks and Tassie notes the lulls between explosions. On New Year’s Day, Tassie receives a phone call from Sarah asking her to return for work early on January 3rd.

Analysis

As the novel opens, the theme of war is front and center. It is a few months after the September 11th, 2001 terrorist attacks, which sets the tone for the novel. It is a somber time in which people are coming to terms with the changes in their lives and their world view. In a way, this mirrors Tassie’s journey. As she makes her way through the coming year, she is able to see the changes that shook her to her core as well. Because she spends a lot of time alone, Tassie can be viewed as an outsider. She is the lens through which the reader sees her world. She acts more as an observer, rather than as an active participant. This demonstrates how Tassie is maturing and finding her place. In this way, the novel can be viewed as a bildungsroman, or coming-of-age story.

Part of where Tassie’s coming-of-age begins is with her seeking out a part-time job. She interviews with Sarah for a job as a nanny. During the interview, Sarah makes mention of the neighbors’ unorthodox relationship. Introducing this fact to Tassie during the interview allows Sarah to see how Tassie reacts to something out of the ordinary. This may foreshadow how Sarah will reveal a family secret in a later chapter as well. Tassie is largely unfazed by the news, accepting that the husband in the neighbor trio is gay. While the conversation between the women borders on awkward and random as Tassie points out, Sarah realizes that Tassie is accepting and would likely make a good fit.



The theme of class is first introduced during the interview as well. During the conversation, the women learn that Tassie's father has been a potato supplier for Sarah's restaurant. Just as Tassie will work for Sarah, Tassie's father has worked for Sarah as a produce supplier. It is indirect, but it puts Sarah in an elevated position: Sarah employs the Keltjins.

Tassie is offered the job quickly and starts immediately. Sarah takes Tassie with her to meet the first prospective birth mother. The meeting does not go well. The theme of class is again examined in how Sarah interacts with Amber. Amber is a drug addict who has been arrested for dealing drugs and her probation officer is present in the restaurant. While it is a safe assumption that Amber is trying to do what is best for the child by giving it up for adoption, Amber is not sold on giving her child to Sarah. Sarah senses this and later tells Tassie that the meeting was "a complete disaster" (36), but Sarah may be struggling with who had the power during the meeting. Amber controls who gets her child and she has opted not to give her child to Sarah. When Sarah tells Amber that she should do something she is good at, she marginalizes Amber as a way to regain the perception of power in a situation where she has none.

In Chapter Two, Tassie goes home for the Christmas break. The reader watches Tassie move from Sarah trying to build a family, to being submerged in her own family. This contrast begins to develop the theme of family. The author gives character and dimension to the family. There is playful conflict in the way Tassie's mother refers to the Christmas tree as the "Hanukkah Hemlock" (45). This playfulness is also demonstrated in Tassie's dad commenting on Gunny's report card. Gunny has received four Fs and a D, to which he replies "it looks like you're spending too much time on one course!" (42). The comment sets the tone for how the family is to be perceived. It may not be perfect, but it is theirs.

There is a nod to the theme of race in Chapter Two as well. Tassie has registered for a class called Intro to Sufism. This foreshadows her introduction to Reynaldo and the relationship they have in a later chapter.

During the exchange of Christmas gifts, Tassie receives a pearl necklace. Her mother gives it to her in large part because her father had given her a pearl necklace around the same age. Tassie is not ungrateful for the gift, but she also does not feel that the gift is a good fit. She considers it a "gyno-noose" (55) as if the necklace is meant to represent purity or her virginity. It may also suggest that there is a difference in expectation from the two children by the family. Whereas a joke can be made about Gunny's failure, Tassie may be held to a different standard. This could also be Tassie's perception as well.

Gunny and Tassie spend time together talking over the break. They have a natural camaraderie and it is established that Gunny is able to talk to his sister about things that may not be as easy to discuss with his parents. He mentions the possibility of enlisting. Their mother does not like the idea and is likely trying to discourage him from doing so. Yet part of the reason Gunny is entertaining the possibility of doing so is to show how he can make something of himself. If he is not doing well in school and his father is able to



joke about it, Gunny may feel as if his parents have written him off. When Tassie hears the fireworks on New Year's Eve, she notes the beats between the explosions. Those explosions foreshadow Gunny's decision about the military and his inevitable deployment.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Sarah tell Tassie about the neighbors during her interview?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Sarah think the meeting with Amber and Letitia is a "complete disaster" (36)?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Tassie consider the gift of a pearl necklace as a "gyno-noose" (55)?

Vocabulary

modicum, delicacy, stamina, candor, portentous, hysteria, resiliently, fungal, gnomonic, kitsch, requisite, gild, decrepitude, oxidation, tenuous, bequeathed, reverberated, malice, dubious, ebullient, traipsed, chastened, mansard, lurid, apropos, gypsum, conflate, frugal, abutted, insurgents, jetsam, flotsam, ambivalence, porous, lucite, adjacent, coulis, artifice, verdant, indignantly, babushka, shmatte, rhetorical, dirge, stymied, siphon, crèche, ochre, rebuke, turrets, rennet, undulating, mirage, ostensibly, bleat, culminated, surrealism, copse, ad hoc, vestibule, incipient, indignation, glottal, derisive, subcutaneous, raucous, detritus, taciturn



Chapter 3

Summary

Chapter Three opens with Tassie back in Troy. Sarah is sending a taxi to pick up Tassie because they are flying to Green Bay to meet another birth mother. Edward will be joining them. Sarah talks about how one needs to go to the South to find good manners anymore and that “there are no manners in the Midwest anymore” (75). Sarah talks about her restaurant and how her father died before seeing it come to fruition, but that he was rich. She then asks if Tassie’s father is rich, to which Tassie replies that “people thought we were, but we weren’t” (76). Sarah and Tassie board the flight and Tassie learns that they are going to meet Bonnie, a birth mother, whose child was in foster care and almost two years old. The child’s father is black and Sarah talks about how people would rather adopt from China than adopt a black child, but she feels differently. They land and Tassie thinks about what Sarah and Edward’s marriage must be like.

They arrive at the lawyer’s office where Sarah gets into an altercation over a parking space. She jokes about the rental insurance covering everything and that she “once murdered someone and American Express covered everything!” (83). They meet with Roberta Marshall, the attorney handling the adoption, and she explains how ads are placed in the newspaper to try and contact the biological fathers. Roberta explains that the child is mixed-race, which Sarah is fine with, but is perturbed that it is an issue. Roberta introduces them to Bonnie, the birth mother, and Sarah tells her that she has seen pictures of the child and that she is beautiful. Edward finally arrives and introduces himself and explains he works as a researcher, but is not associated with a university. They all chat for a bit and then Bonnie and Roberta go to another room. Roberta returns and tells them that Bonnie has decided to give Sarah and Edward her child. Sarah agrees to send her an annual Christmas card with photos. Sarah, Edward, and Tassie leave the office and Sarah suggests they go to a fish fry and they treat Sarah to dinner.

The next day, Sarah calls Tassie in her hotel room to ask her if she would like to join her and Edward to pick up the child. They all go to the foster home to meet Mary. When they arrive, Mrs. McKowen, the woman who answers the door, explains she has not heard about any appointment to see Mary. They finally get to meet Mary and Mrs. McKowen asks if they have met the birth mother, when they reply yes, she then asks if they are sure they want her child. Mrs. McKowen asks if they believe Bonnie’s story about having been raped. She is not sure if she believes the story or if Bonnie used it as an excuse to cover up her relationship with the father.

Back at the hotel, Sarah comes to ask Tassie if she would like to join them at the hospital for Mary’s checkup. She agrees to go. In the car, they talk about the newly purchased car seat. When they arrive to pick up Mary, a woman named Julie, another foster mother, hands over Mary. She was charged with getting the child and explains to Sarah and Edward that while Bonnie had made her decision, the foster family did not want to let Mary go. Tassie thinks that Mary is “spectacularly pretty” (111).



Julie shows Edward Bonnie's medical history, noting that her last name has been blocked out for privacy reasons. Tassie felt strange seeing all the ailments that were in Bonnie's family history. Edward then realizes that one instance of Bonnie's full name was missed and they were able to see it. Edward and Tassie agree not to tell Sarah that they know her full name. Sarah asks if there is anything of concern in the medical file and Edward tells her that "it's no different really from anyone else's history" (115). As Sarah and Edward chat, Sarah again makes the joke about murder and American Express taking care of it, but Edward does not see the humor. Sarah decides to call the baby Mary-Emma. They return to the adoption office and sign the paperwork and Sarah and Edward write separate checks to cover the adoption costs, splitting the fee. In the car, Tassie overhears Edward and Sarah talking, to which Sarah replies "Well, all sex is a form of rape. One could argue" (119), and then advises him to be careful driving in the winter weather. After realizing he had taken a wrong turn, Edward doubles back through the town and heads home. Edward leaves Sarah and Mary-Emma at the house and takes Tassie home. When he drops her off, he tells her that Sarah will be calling her in a few days.

Analysis

As Chapter Three opens, the theme of class is apparent in Sarah's observations on manners. She has a certain expectation of the way she should be treated. She detects a decline in manners in the Midwest and suggests that manners in the South are also receding. This leads up to Sarah's comments about her father and Tassie asking if he was rich. The question is meant to be curious, but Sarah seems to deem it rude. Her reaction, however, differs from what one would expect from somebody who just commented on manners: she does not answer Tassie's question and instead asks her if her father is rich. Whether or not Sarah was expecting Tassie's answer about how people perceived her family is unclear, but it demonstrates that Tassie is not ashamed of her social status.

While Tassie and Sarah are en route to meet Bonnie, another prospective birth mother, the theme of race is addressed through Sarah's observations on adoptive parents. Mary-Emma is a mixed race child and Sarah comments on how potential adoptive parents would rather adopt a child from China rather than an American one who may be Black or multi-racial. Sarah's judgements are designed to make the other adoptive parents look inferior to her because she does not hold these same views.

Tassie wonders about Edward and Sarah's marriage. At this point, Tassie still has not met Edward. Once he arrives, she finds him old and does not connect with him. She may recognize a rift in their relationship as well, but is unable to fully comprehend it. The adoption process appears to be driven by Sarah and Edward is more of an observer. Prior to Edward's arrival, Sarah jokes with Tassie about getting away with murder. It is an offhand remark that amuses Sarah and Tassie laughs at as well. Were it a one-off joke, nothing would be made of it, but Sarah makes the same joke in Edward's presence. It seems a strange joke to tell twice and Edward does not share in the humor.



This foreshadows that something is off between them, which will be revealed in a later chapter.

The theme of family is developed further with the adoption process. Sarah and Tassie learn about how the adoption agency publishes notices for the biological fathers. They also meet Mrs. McKowen who has been Mary-Emma's foster mother. During the meeting, Mrs. McKowen asks Sarah about believing Bonnie's story about being raped. Her motive for asking this question is unclear, but it is clearly meant to be shocking. It is possible that Mrs. McKowen likes to gossip and the temptation to talk about Bonnie's claims are too great, but it likely indicates Mrs. McKowen's attachment to Mary-Emma. Julie, a different foster mother, is the one who turns over Mary-Emma to Sarah and Edward. She indicates that there had been a scene when they took Mary-Emma away. Mrs. McKowen may have brought up the rape story as way to make Mary-Emma appear less desirable for potential adoptive parents so that she could keep her in her custody.

Once Sarah and Edward take custody of Mary-Emma, they start to head home. As they talk in the car, Tassie overhears Sarah reply to Edward, "Well, all sex is a form of rape. One could argue" (119). It is an odd comment, but suggests that sex is inherently a violation. Because the reader does not know what Edward's comment is that prompted Sarah to reply in such a way, it is difficult to ascertain how Edward feels about the rumor of Bonnie's rape. By only having Sarah's response, however, it may give insight into Sarah and Edward's relationship. If Sarah posits that all sex is rape, then that would indicate her own sense of violation. This creates unease in their relationship. Edward has been absentee up until this point and now something between them seems off.

The unease in their discussion, combined with the winter weather, creates tension for the reader. There is a sense of impending disappointment. At this point in the novel, the problem encountered is Edward making a wrong turn and having to double-back through the town. But now that Sarah and Edward and a child, plus Tassie, are in the car traveling together, it begins to foreshadow something greater than a wrong turn.

At the conclusion of the chapter, Edward takes Tassie home. He explains that Sarah will reach out to her in a few days after she has had an opportunity to bond with Mary-Emma. Because Sarah has previously included Tassie in every step of the adoption process, it seems peculiar that Tassie would be dismissed in such a way. It is as if Sarah has used Tassie as a prop to help her appear more appealing to potential birth mothers.

Discussion Question 1

Why is Sarah defensive about others mentioning that Mary-Emma is mixed race?



Discussion Question 2

Why does Mrs. McKowen ask Sarah and Edward if they believe the story about Bonnie being raped?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Edward tell Tassie not to tell Sarah about Bonnie's full name?

Vocabulary

morose, amply, pliable, sachets, acronym, bucolic, hegemonic, disputatious, prospective, cordoned, plumage, bigotry, coerced, benign, aquiline, portended, ingratiating, charade, apparition, dirigible, perfunctory, sullen, pretentious, aperture, flummoxed, impediment, acerbity, cadence, conjugation, verkleemt, obliqueness, parody, amorphous, canted, dearth, brusque, sepia



Chapter 4

Summary

Chapter Four finds Tassie in her apartment the week before the spring semester begins. The kitchen and refrigerator are a mess, with mold and decay on the bread and strawberries and other foods. She receives a check from Sarah, but did not calculate her hours to judge whether the amount was sufficient. Tassie spends her time reading magazines and surfing the internet. She finally hears from Sarah. On the phone, Sarah refers to Mary-Emma as Emmie and Tassie asks if she still responds to Mary and Sarah does not know. Later,

Tassie walks to Sarah and Edward's house, not minding the cold. She notes the broken gate at the top of the porch steps and rings the bell. Sarah answers wearing a white chef's coat and has Tassie sample some food in the kitchen. As they talk, they realize that they are both half-Jewish and Sarah wonders if that is what drew Tassie to her. Sarah leaves Tassie with emergency numbers and instructions. Sarah leaves and returns to get her chef's knives and leaves again. Tassie reads through the instructions and finds it odd that Sarah has written that she has "arranged for some risotto to be FedExed to her but I will also bring her something home from the kitchen tonight" (131). Tassie goes upstairs to see Mary-Emma and changes her diaper. They go down to the kitchen and Mary-Emma asks for a frozen yogurt pop. When Sarah gets back, Tassie tells her about the yogurt pops and Sarah reminisces about a prune yogurt that is no longer available in the United States, but that she was able to find it in France. The next day, Tassie takes Mary-Emma ice skating, which she takes to. Back at home, Sarah greets Mary-Emma and Tassie explains that they got cider with whipped cream; Sarah has never heard of such a thing.

Classes begin and Tassie meets Reynaldo, a Brazilian man, in her Intro to Sufism class. They pass notes to each other, joking about what they are doing in the class and the weather, which Reynaldo is not accustomed to. Later, Tassie accompanies Sarah to the courthouse to pick up provisional adoption papers. The clerk asks if Tassie is Sarah's other daughter. When Sarah and Edward decide to have a date night, Tassie is invited to stay overnight. In the morning, Mary-Emma wakes all three of them and Tassie feels included in the family.

One weekday morning, Tassie arrives to find Edward alone in the kitchen. He greets her and compliments the way she smells. Tassie was not expecting him and he explains that he was waiting for her to arrive before he left for work. Later, Tassie takes Mary-Emma out in the wagon. They go downtown and go in different shops, including the mattress store where Tassie lets Mary-Emma hop on the mattresses. On another street, a car full of teenagers slowed and watched Tassie and Mary-Emma. The car comes back around and the driver calls Mary-Emma "Nigger!" (151) and then spin out in the slush, with snow hitting Mary-Emma's face.



Tassie tells Sarah about what happened and she is furious. She decides to form a support group for families of color and asks Tassie to watch the children while they meet. The meetings take place every Wednesday and the parents get together and discuss issues of race, diversity, and where to get the girls' hair done. Sometimes the group asks Tassie questions and compliments her on how much the children like her.

Tassie continues with her classes and the next time she goes to Sarah and Edward's house, Edward greets her again, explaining that the "cleaning gay" (162) is coming. Tassie is taken back by the expression and Edward tells her that Noel cleans for them and is gay. When Tassie meets Noel, they get on well and Noel says he is happy for Sarah, but he does not care for Edward.

Back in her Intro to Sufism class, Tassie starts dressing up for Reynaldo. One day when they leave class together she invites him to have coffee with her. He says no, but says he would have a Coke. He teaches her words that she would learn later are Spanish and not Portuguese, but she did not know the difference at the time. Tassie loses her virginity to Reynaldo.

Tassie starts bringing Mary-Emma to Reynaldo's apartment. One day she notices that "two black women and one white scowled at me: I was a tramp" (167). When Mary-Emma is with her, Tassie does not show Reynaldo affection. Mary-Emma likes Reynaldo and he is sweet with her. When Tassie takes Mary-Emma back home, Sarah wants to know where they have been because she and Edward had both seen them coming from "quite far away" (169) and then Sarah's demeanor softens.

As spring arrives, Tassie notes the physical changes in the landscape with bulbs blooming all around. She takes Mary-Emma to gardens on their strolls. Sarah comes home to find a note in her mailbox from a neighbor about the weeds in their yard. Tassie takes photos of Mary-Emma that Reynaldo took to be developed. The woman at the counter tells her that she should have Mary-Emma's hair braided, because no one wears afros anymore. When Sarah sees the photo, she asks who took it and Tassie says a friend. As they discuss the picture, they notice loud rap music in a car that keeps driving past. Sarah wants to know if it is her friend. Tassie says no, her friend is Brazilian. Sarah wonders if it is the birth father driving by. Sarah ultimately compliments the picture, but tells her not to let her friend take any more pictures. She tells Tassie that she never called any of the references Tassie gave her. Sarah knows that Tassie and Mary-Emma love each other and she warns Tassie about love being a "fever" (177) in reference to Reynaldo and tells her that she is concerned for her. This leads to Tassie taking alternate routes to take Mary-Emma to see Reynaldo. Tassie again interacts with Edward alone in the house. He is warm toward her.

Later, while she is working on homework, Tassie receives two emails from her brother. The second email reads: Please read this new one and ignore previous e-mail" (181), which she does.

Tassie begins thinking about Bonnie, dreaming about her. She also notices that the phone rang a lot at Sarah and Edward's and that no one was on the other line when she



answered. When the phone calls stop, she searches for Bonnie on the internet, worried that Bonnie may have killed herself. She finds a woman with the same name in a Georgia newspaper who was murdered. Tassie wonders how Bonnie would have gotten the money to go to Atlanta.

Tassie spends Saturday nights with Reynaldo and then goes directly to Sarah and Edward's from there. At one of the Wednesday support groups, Tassie overhears the discussions on race, religion, and feminism. The conversation then begins to discuss Islam and Black Muslims. One night, while Tassie and Reynaldo are in bed together, Reynaldo asks her if she believes "in spiritual mistakes" (191). She says yes, but he continues with his question, ultimately asking if "an entire country could be a spiritual mistake" (191). They talk about immigration and terrorism. At one point Tassie ponders whether Mohamed Atta ever said "Hasta la vista" (192), to which Reynaldo answers very seriously that he did.

After another one of the Wednesday night support groups, Tassie goes to Reynaldo's apartment and notices something is wrong. In the apartment, she finds Reynaldo on his prayer mat, and that the furnishings are gone, leaving only a poster on the wall with white letters on a black background. He tells her that he is moving to London, explaining that he is not part of a terrorist cell, and that he is not Brazilian. He tells her that she is innocent "especially for a Jew" (205). She asks him if he is a jihadist and if he is taking flying lessons. She notices a roll of toilet paper and two white pills sitting on the window sill. He tells her that people believe that he is part of a cell, but he hopes that she will believe he is not.

Analysis

In Chapter Four, Tassie returns to school and begins work as a nanny to Mary-Emma. Prior to classes starting, however, she is idle with her time and comments on the state of her kitchen. This demonstrates how Tassie is not in control of her life. If motivated, she would be able to rectify these things, but she is detached. She remains merely an observer of her life and those around her.

When Sarah does finally call Tassie into for work, Tassie is curious as to whether or not Mary-Emma still recognizes her name. Sarah agreed to keep Mary as the child's name, but then added the preferred name of Emma, and now only refers to her as Emmie. Sarah was interested in keeping Mary as a name when the birth mother was involved, but now she has assumed ownership of Mary-Emma's identity. Tassie, however, feels differently. Because of Mary-Emma's age – she is nearly two – she knows her name is Mary. Tassie feels it is important to keep the girl's name.

The first day that Tassie is alone with Mary-Emma, she reads the instructions from Sarah. One of the things that jumps out at her is the note about having risotto FedExed to her. This addresses the theme of class. There may be baby food in the pantry, but Sarah is more interested in giving Mary-Emma food that would be suitable for fine



dining. Further, the cost associated with FedExing risotto for a toddler seems excessive. It is clear that Sarah is not bothered with cost.

What Mary-Emma does eat is frozen yogurt. When Sarah returns, Tassie tells her that Mary-Emma had two of the frozen pops. Sarah does not react to the information and instead starts talking about a prune yogurt that she is no longer able to find in the United States, but that she found in France. Sarah is more concerned with food instead of what Mary-Emma ate. That is not to suggest that Sarah does not care what Mary-Emma eats, rather it demonstrates how Sarah has already decided what types of food are available to Mary-Emma, and because she chose them, they are acceptable.

The theme of race is explored with the introduction of Reynaldo and Tassie's outings with Mary-Emma. Tassie is taking a class called Intro to Sufism, during which she meets Reynaldo. The two pass notes to each other and ask each other what the other one is doing in such a class. Reynaldo is playful with her and given how their relationship ends, he may actually be baiting her with questions that would make her a less-suspicious candidate for a girlfriend. Tassie is naïve when it comes to Reynaldo, and a lot of what may be obvious to someone older or with a broader life experience, such as the prayer mat and his using Spanish instead of Portuguese words, may seem obvious. During their relationship, Reynaldo is kind to Tassie and to Mary-Emma.

When Reynaldo turns, it is quick. Tassie arrives and finds his belongings gone, a poster that is likely of an al-Qaeda flag, praying on his prayer mat. Also at issue are the white pills on the window ledge. Reynaldo preempts the questions Tassie may have by trying to convince her that he is not part of a terrorist cell and that he is headed to London. The reader does not know the particulars because of the limited scope of Tassie's narrative, but what she notices around her is ominous.

In one of their earlier conversations, Reynaldo asks her about whether or not a country can be a spiritual mistake. This, combined with Reynaldo's comment about Tassie being a Jew, indicates that Reynaldo may have radicalized. If he is, there remains the possibility that he did genuinely care for her in the way he tries to convince her that that he is not part of a cell. While he may or may not be, he does not want Tassie to think that way about him. Yes, it helps his position if someone close to him is advocating for his innocence, but he may also be protecting the innocence he believes she possesses.

The other way in which the chapter explores the theme of race is when Tassie and Mary-Emma are on one of their outings. The racial slur aimed at Emma is disturbing. This person has circled back in his car to deliberately call a child a "nigger" (151). This type of aggression toward a child demonstrates how deep-seeded racism can be in a person. After the incident, Tassie tells Sarah what transpired. This prompts Sarah to form the support group for families of color.

The intention of the group is earnest, and while perhaps something could come from the group to affect long-term change, the group functions as a space for like-minded people to come together and voice complaints on the issue of race. Some of the group members make valid points, but the group lacks action. Further, the group does not



continue after Mary-Emma is taken from Sarah and Edward's custody. As more about Sarah is revealed in the coming chapter, it may be logical to wonder if Sarah started the group as a way to assuage her guilt for not being able to protect a child.

During one of the support group discussions, the group addresses issues with Islam. This is juxtaposed with Tassie having just come from Reynaldo's apartment. While Tassie may be unaware of Reynaldo's deception, the reader may be able to begin to piece together what she is missing.

Another way in which Sarah is protective of Mary-Emma is with her remarks to Tassie about Reynaldo. Sarah does not know who Reynaldo is, nor does she know his name. She does, however, suspect that something is off. Understandably, Sarah is unnerved by Reynaldo having taken a picture of her daughter. Sarah is also somewhat protective of Tassie. She tries to talk to her about her relationship, but a full-fledged conversation never materializes. When Sarah presses the issue, she talks about love being a "fever" (177).

While the reader is not capable of knowing what Sarah may or may not suspect about Reynaldo, that she warns Tassie about love with such a word suggests that she realizes that Tassie is blind to some of Reynaldo's behaviors. Sarah may also be speaking from experience. As soon will become evident, Sarah and Edward have a dark past together. Sarah may recognize herself in Tassie, thinking about things she may have missed with Edward's behavior.

Discussion Question 1

What does Sarah's decision to form a support group for families of color reveal about her character?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Sarah tell Tassie she is worried about her in her relationship with Reynaldo?

Discussion Question 3

How does the reveal about Reynaldo's identity shape both Reynaldo and Tassie as characters?

Vocabulary

inane, avidity, conspicuous, insouciant, denunciation, ostensible, charlatan, credulous, disparage, chic, pedantry, tepid, gullible, mullions, gait, propaganda, affluent, tannin, garroted, staccato, vortex, veneer, tuberos, incumbent, cartilaginous, lockstep, gestural, ostensible, destitute, timpani, folly, dacha, dichotomy, sequestered, reprimand,



cantilevered, rheumy, piety, renunciation, cryptic, skitter, semantic, indignation, contrition, toque, penchant, vim, magnet, ostentatious, sibilant, tedious, recombinant, debacle, mullah, dullard, stoicism, irrevocably, hubris, desiccated, stanch, fervent



Chapter 5

Summary

Chapter Five opens with the clocks being moved ahead an hour. Tassie confesses how long it has been since she mopped or swept the apartment. She also realizes that no one asked her about Reynaldo, leading her to understand how “private and isolated” (214) their relationship was. Sarah is the only one who asked about the student who disappeared and asks if he was the one who took pictures of Mary-Emma. Tassie gives a vague reply.

Tassie begins to miss Murph about the time she returns to the apartment after breaking up with her boyfriend. They hang out and play music and write a song together. Tassie continues to watch Mary-Emma, sometimes napping with her after Mary-Emma is moved into a bed instead of her crib. One day when Tassie checks in on Mary-Emma, the little girl comments that she has brown eyes just like Tassie. They go to the park where a woman approached Tassie to arrange a playdate between her daughter and Mary-Emma because “Maddie doesn’t have any African-American friends, and I think it would be good for her to have one” (229). Tassie replies no because “Mary-Emma already has a lot of white friends” (229). Back at Sarah and Edward’s house, Tassie meets Liza, the woman who does the laundry.

Sarah confesses to Tassie that her name is actually Susan, Edward’s name is John, and that they once had a biological child together named Gabriel and lived on the East Coast. One day they were driving on the turnpike and four-year-old Gabriel threw a temper tantrum. He pulled Edward’s hair and threw one of his shoes at him from his car seat. Unable to control Gabriel, Edward decided to punish him by leaving him on the side of the road near a picnic table at a rest stop along the turnpike. Susan tried to change Edward’s mind and even to get out and stay with the child, but Edward drove off. Edward decided to circle back at the next exit and get Gabriel. A soda can in the freezer explodes and distracts Sarah from telling the remainder of the story and Tassie leaves.

At the last Wednesday support group, the group gathers and discusses college opportunities for people of color and how biracial kids tend to find one another. One person in the group claims that it is “more prestigious” (236) for the child’s mother to be black, rather than the father.

On a different day, Sarah decides to continue to tell Tassie about what happened to Gabriel, explaining that there are reasons for her doing so. Edward circled back to get Gabriel and they saw that he was on the shoulder of the road. Edward sped up to get to him and Gabriel saw the car and stepped out into traffic. Gabriel was struck by a vehicle and killed. The police arrived and Sarah and Edward were arrested and charged. When their case got to trial, they pled guilty and the judge suspended their sentence. “Their loss was considered, by the court, sufficient” (242) and then changed their names and



moved away. Sarah explains to Tassie that when they decided to try for another child, they were unable to conceive and opted for adopting. She confesses that the adoption agency has learned about Gabriel and Mary-Emma's adoption is now at risk. Tassie tells Sarah they have to fight for Mary-Emma, but Edward does not want to. Sarah gives Tassie a bowl of puree that she made from paper white bulbs and asks her not to eat it, but to keep it in her refrigerator until she may ask for it at a later date.

Tassie takes the puree home and leaves it in the refrigerator and forgets about it. Tassie's school work is suffering and her essays are returned to her with question marks in the margins. While watching Mary-Emma, Tassie and the girl are singing and Sarah hears the doorbell and asks Tassie to answer and stall. Roberta Marshall waits outside and has come to take Mary-Emma back into custody, returning her to foster care. Tassie realizes that everyone seems to call Mary-Emma by a different variation of her name. Mary-Emma is frightened and crying when she leaves. Back at her apartment, Tassie misses Mary-Emma and focuses on her schoolwork. One night, she comes home to find Murph unconscious on the couch. Tassie realizes Murph ate the paper white concoction and calls 911 and tells the paramedics what Murph ingested. They pump her stomach and Murph makes a full recovery. With the semester finally over, Tassie's father Robert calls and asks if she would like to help with the farm. Tassie decides to go home for Gunny's graduation and see him before he goes off to boot camp.

Analysis

In Chapter Four, Tassie is coming to terms with what happened with her relationship with Reynaldo. While she spends time alone and admits that she actively misses Murphy, she does not openly grieve the relationship or exude any anger. Instead she is now able to see some of the peculiarities of their relationship. This is most clearly represented by how she observes that no one has asked about her break up. She now sees how private their relationship was, but it is also worth noting that Tassie does not appear to be engaged with any other people. She, herself, is quite isolated. This may have even been part of what attracted Reynaldo.

The connection between Tassie and Mary-Emma has deepened by this point. When Mary-Emma comments about how she and Tassie both have brown eyes, she is focusing on what the two have in common, rather than how they differ. Mary-Emma thinks of Tassie as an important part of her life and Tassie appears to feel similarly. The theme of race is further developed when they are at the park. A woman comes up to Tassie to invite Mary-Emma for a play date. Ordinarily, this would be a lovely gesture and would give Mary-Emma an opportunity to socialize with another child her age. But the mother confides in Tassie that she thinks it would be a good idea for her child to have a black friend. Tassie quickly retorts that "Mary-Emma already has a lot of white friends" (229). While the woman's intent is not necessarily harmful, she does not realize how she marginalizes Mary-Emma by doing so. Tassie sees Mary-Emma as a person and this woman sees her a novelty or a quota and Tassie finds this unacceptable.



The theme of family is explored in a dark fashion in this chapter. Sarah seeks out Tassie to explain to her about her and Edward's past. She reveals that they had a son together and explains that the child was difficult to control. While Gabriel may have been a difficult child, this should not be a justification or excuse for what Edward did to punish him. In framing the story thusly, Sarah sets the stage for there to be a reason for why Edward did what he did. This story may make retelling the events more palatable for Sarah. Edward's intent was not for the child to be killed, but rather to try and rationalize with a four year old. If the child does not know not to step out into traffic, he is certainly not going to be capable of understanding the punishment he is being given.

In a way Sarah tries to absolve herself from ownership of what happened by putting the decisions and actions on Edward. While Edward may have been the driving force in this scenario, Sarah could have stopped him and prevented the tragedy. But Sarah's personality has been revealed to assert her thoughts, much as she did earlier by telling Tassie about seeing her and Mary-Emma walking from a great distance and later with the photograph, but she backs off of her assertions. Sarah had to have known that Edward was making a grave mistake, and while she told him not to do it, he maintained control of that situation and she backed off.

This pattern of behavior can be seen again when Sarah makes the paper white puree. Paper white bulbs are toxic and Sarah would likely know this. She gives the concoction to Tassie to keep, which leads to the question of what Sarah's intent was in making the puree. She may have had strong intentions to consume the puree, give it to Edward, give it to Mary-Emma, or have all of them consume it. She may have thought that instead of losing Mary-Emma, she would rather die with the family unit she has created. Her intent may have come on strong, but she does not follow through and gives it to Tassie. Tassie does not destroy it, but rather puts it in the back of her refrigerator. On some level, Tassie has to suspect that something strange is going on with Sarah and the paper white puree. In keep the puree, however, Tassie further demonstrates her position as observer. She remains without control of her situation. Tassie does not even suffer the consequence of her action. Instead, Murph is the one who consumes it and gets sick.

The theme of race and class are both evidenced in part of Sarah's story about Gabriel. Because Sarah and Edward have moved away and started a new life with new identities, it is clear that they had the financial resources to do so. They also had the financial resources to hire a good attorney for their defense. Further, their prison sentence was suspended. It is likely that given the same situation, black parents would not have been afforded the same leniency.

Discussion Question 1

What does Tassie's reply to the woman about making a play date with Mary-Emma because her daughter does not have any African American friends reveal about her character?



Discussion Question 2

Why does Sarah tell Tassie about what happened to her son Gabriel?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Sarah give Tassie the paper white puree?

Vocabulary

burnished, totemic, ribaldry, innuendo, illumine, detritus, bravado, mitigate, obstreperous, dissolution, progeny, devoid, despondency, blanched, mordant, grotesque, sibilant, recalcitrant



Chapter 6

Summary

Chapter Six finds Tassie being picked up by her father and brother at the bus station. They talk about the impending graduation ceremony. During the ceremony, a tornado siren goes off and everyone stays where they are. The next day, Gunny leaves for basic training at Fort Bliss and the family sees him off. Tassie starts working in her father's farm, whacking the greens with "plastic hawk-like extensions" (270) to keep the mice from getting into the harvest. She spends time with her parents, but feels disconnected from them.

Tassie goes to the restaurant to see if Sarah is there and even asks for an application, but is told the restaurant is closing the next day. She asks for Sarah and is told she is not there. Tassie decides to dine in the restaurant, and after seeing her father's name on the menu, she asks to keep it. She rides her scooter back to her parents' house in the rain and they tell her the scooter is not suited for a trip that long.

The family receives a postcard from Gunny informing them that he is shipping out the next day. Tassie spends time walking the farm and cuts flowers from the meadow. She goes to the meadow in the evenings as well. One evening she wishes on stars, thinking of Reynaldo and Gunny. She looks ahead and sees Reynaldo and Gunny "standing side by side at the end of the field" (292).

While Tassie is not present when the military officers arrive at the house, she learns that Gunny was killed during his deployment. No clear explanation is given for Gunny's death, except that there was an explosion, destroying his leg and his hand "was very high up" (294) in a tree and had to be left.

At the funeral, Robert tells a story about Gunny swinging on a rope and falling and telling his father: "Daddy, don't yell: I know I'll need stitches and a shot, but it was awesome" (297). When she is alone in the church, Tassie goes to her brother's coffin. She thinks about superstitions involving touching the dead, but she opens the coffin and gets into the coffin next to him. His legs gone, there is room for her, and she notes the chemical smell and that something that looked like a shower cap covered his face, which she does not touch. She closes the lid on them and stays next to her brother. Eventually, she hears her father asking where she is and her mother reply that she probably went ahead to the cemetery with friends. The coffin is taken to the hearse, and she stays with her brother until they reach the cemetery. The pallbearers start to take out the coffin and Tassie climbs out and her mother races to her and holds her.

Tassie takes a medical leave from school. In the fall, after the clocks are set back, Tassie finds the email that Gunny told her to ignore. She reads it and learns that he was seeking advice from her on whether or not to join the military, stating that she would



have been the only one he would have listened to if she said not to do it. She leaves the email in her archives.

When applying for a job, Tassie puts Sarah and Edward down as references. After Thanksgiving, Tassie gets a new apartment and a new roommate. In December, Tassie receives a phone call from Edward. He tells her that he and Sarah have split and that Sarah returned to New York. Edward tells her that he recommended her for a job at Starbucks and he invites her to go to dinner with him. She refuses.

Analysis

Chapter Six opens with Tassie returning home after the spring semester and her nanny job having ended. She is home in time to attend her brother's high school graduation and see him before he heads off to basic training. During the graduation ceremony, there is a simultaneously benign and ominous event: a tornado siren goes off. Instead of taking cover, the crowd stays in their seats as though nothing is happening. This is evidence of people who live comfortably with the threat of weather. It may be that they are used to sirens being sounded without funnel clouds making a direct hit that they do not need to move. They could be waiting for some other alert, such as hearing the wind or someone reporting as an eye witness. Regardless, this is a crowd that is in the calm of a storm.

This threat, which is not taken seriously, works as a metaphor for war. The United States may be involved in military action overseas, and there may be a color-coded system to indicate a threat level, but neither directly affects the people. The sirens function, of course, is to signal impending danger. Whether it is for an air raid or a tornado, the siren is a call to action. In this instance, the siren is foreshadowing Gunny's fate.

After Gunny finishes his basic training, he is deployed overseas. Not long into his deployment, he is killed by a landmine or perhaps an improvised explosive device (IED). The exact details of Gunny's death are unknown to the family. As Tassie thinks about what happened to her brother, she thinks of all the possibilities that could have led to his death. Regardless of a mistake Gunny might have made, friendly fire, or an IED, Gunny lost his life. This addresses the fog of war as well as the theme of war explored in the novel.

Since the opening of the novel, war has loomed in the background. War is a part of life, but consequences of war are not actively felt until this chapter. This loss is further compounded by how Gunny is returned to the family: incomplete. Gunny's body becomes symbolic of how the Keltjin family is now missing a part of itself.

During the funeral services, Mr. Keltjin details a story of how Gunny hurt himself, but thought it was worth it. This story stands in for why Gunny chose to enlist. He knew there was risk, but he also knew it was something he wanted to do. Earlier in the novel, he mentions his intent to Tassie. While they discussed the war, Gunny did not seem



overly concerned with that aspect of enlisting. When he emails his sister, he sends two emails. The one in which Tassie would have been able to change his mind is the one that he asks her not to read. Tassie must live knowing that she could have had an opportunity to stop her brother from enlisting, but ultimately it was what Gunny wanted to do.

The funeral also marks a change in Tassie's character. She shifts from observer to active participant. While her earlier comments to the woman on the playground who asked for a play date with Mary-Emma may have been the first instance of Tassie actively engaging, the funeral is the moment when she transitions. Climbing into the coffin with her brother's dead body may be difficult for many readers to relate to or even understand, but Tassie's intent is clear. She needs to be close to him because this is the last opportunity she will have. In being that close to death, she is able to make her next step with purpose. Coming out of the coffin is an act of rebirth for Tassie. She has lost her innocence.

As the novel concludes, Edward reaches out Tassie. He invites her to dinner and has waited until after he has separated from Sarah to do so. His attraction to Tassie has been evident throughout the novel, but he did not act on his attraction. When Tassie rejects his invitation, she takes ownership of herself and the path that she is on, completing her transition into adulthood.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Tassie go to Sarah's restaurant?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Tassie get into the coffin with her brother's body?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Edward call and ask Tassie to dinner?

Vocabulary

maudlin, marauders, ethereal, confit, aioli, amuse-bouche, viscosity, tropes, provincial, gorgon, odoriferous, bodice, scherzo, ineptitude, buoyant, trundled, fetid, moraines, inertia, dubious, paucity, propitiate



Characters

Tassie Keltjin

Tassie Keltjin is a young woman attending college in Iowa after the 9/11 attacks. She takes a job as a nanny for a couple who are preparing to adopt a child.

From a family that owns a small farm, Tassie is half Jewish/half-Lutheran. While at school she becomes involved in her first serious relationship with Reynaldo, an international student she meets in a class on religion called Intro to Suffism.

Tassie wants to understand the world around her and makes sense of her relationships with others. She grows attached to the child she nannies, Mary-Emma, and struggles with her brother's death.

Sarah Brink/Susan

Sarah is the woman who hires Tassie as a nanny for her adopted child. She is married to Edward and their relationships suffers from the strain of losing their biological child Gabriel.

Sarah wants acceptance and to be a parent. She feels guilty about Gabriel's death. She hides his death in order to adopt Mary-Emma, but loses the child after the truth is revealed.

She is also a chef and has a restaurant in Troy. While Mary-Emma is in her custody, Sara conducts a discussion group for other parents with mixed race children.

Edward Thornwood/John

Edward is Sarah's husband. He made the decision to leave Gabriel at the rest stop, which led to Gabriel's death.

He works a lot and is regularly unfaithful to Sarah. After Sarah and Edward divorce, Edwards asks Tassie out for dinner, which Tassie refuses.

Murph

Murph is Tassie's friend and roommate who spends most of her time staying at her boyfriend's apartment. When Tassie leaves the paper white concoction in the refrigerator, Murph consumes it, causing her to become ill.



Robert/Gunny

Robert is Tassie's brother, who is also known as Gunny. He enlists after graduation and is killed while deployed in the Middle East.

Reynaldo

Reynaldo is Tassie's boyfriend at college. He claims to be from Brazil, but is later revealed to be of Middle Eastern descent. He packs up all of his belongings and leaves abruptly, telling Tassie not to believe what she may hear on the news.

Mary-Emma

Mary-Emma is the child Bonnie gives up for adoption. She is mixed race and there is speculation that she was conceived during a rape. She becomes closer to Tassie than Sarah. She is removed from Sarah and Edward's care after the truth about Gabriel's death comes to light.

Roberta Marshall

Roberta Marshall is the attorney who facilitates the adoption process for Sarah and Edward. She takes Mary-Emma back into foster care after Gabriel's death is discovered.

Gabriel

Gabriel is the biological child of Sarah and Edward. He was left at a rest stop as punishment for throwing a temper tantrum. As his parents came back for him, he walks out into traffic and is struck by a car and killed.

Don Donagal

Don Donagal is the professor of the Intro to Suffism class where Tassie and Reynaldo meet.

Gail Keltjin

Gail is Tassie's mother.



Bonnie

Bonnie is Mary-Emma's birth mother. She meets with Sarah and agrees to allow Sarah to adopt her biological child, Mary.

Letitia Gherlich

Letitia Gerhlich is a woman from the adoption agency to introduces Sarah to Amber Bowers.

Amber Bowers

Amber Bowers is the first birth mother that Sarah meets with, but she decides against giving her child to Sarah and Edward. Amber is accompanied to her meeting with Sarah by a corrections officer and is in jail for drug use and dealing.

Robert Keltjin

Robert Keltjin is Tassie's father. He runs a small farm where Sarah buys specialty potatoes from him.



Symbols and Symbolism

The Gate

The gate symbolizes how Tassie's life is transitioning further into adulthood.

The Weather

The weather symbolizes the changes happened to and around Tassie. She understands how the weather can influence her mood and how she feels and that extends to how her relationship with Reynaldo and the situation with Mary-Emma and her brother all affect her.

The Paper Whites

The paper whites symbolize Sarah's guilt for the loss of her son Gabriel and how it eats away at her. That Murph ingests the poison represents how Sarah's actions affect others.

The Prayer Mat

The prayer mat symbolizes Tassie's naiveté. She believes what Reynaldo tells her because her feelings for him cloud who he really is.

The Coffin

The coffin symbolizes the death of Tassie's innocence. When she crawls into the coffin with her brother she figuratively dies, only to be released from the coffin as an adult ready to confront her life ahead.

Gunny's Email

Gunny's email symbolizes regret for what Tassie cannot change about her life. It represents being reminded that there are some things that remain beyond her control.

Eye Color

Eye color symbolizes family. When Mary-Emma notes that Tassie has brown eyes and she has brown eyes, it demonstrates how Mary-Emma is making family connections by identifying similarities.



Tassie's Kitchen

Tassie's Kitchen symbolizes the lack of control over what is going on around her. The kitchen, like situations in her life, is messy.

The Pearl Necklace

The pearl necklace symbolizes Tassie's mother's desire to protect her daughter's innocence and virtue, regardless of the fact that she will not be able to do so.

The Farm

The farm symbolizes rejuvenation and survival. Tassie will get through the difficult times just as the farm will grow again.



Settings

Tassie's Apartment

Tassie's apartment is a small, off-campus apartment she shares with Murph, but typically Tassie has it to herself. It is where Tassie takes the paper white concoction and Murph consumes it, causing her to get ill.

Keltjin House/Farm

Keltjin house and farm is in Dellacrosse, where Tassie and Gunny grew up. It has a small farm where Tassie helps her father after Gunny's death.

Sarah and Edward's House

Sarah and Edward's house is a nicely furnished two-story house. There is a gate at the top of the stairs on the front porch, which is where the novel takes its title. It is where Mary-Emma is taken back into foster care by Roberta.

The University Classroom

The university classroom is where Tassie and Reynaldo meet. They sit next to each other during the religion class and begin talking by passing notes.

Troy

Troy is the town where Sarah and Edward live. It is where Tassie and Mary-Emma play and walk, and the locals pass judgement on them because she is young and Mary-Emma is mixed race.



Themes and Motifs

Race

The author demonstrates through the action in the novel how race is not only used to categorize people, but also how different racial experiences are people.

Mary-Emma is a mixed-race child. She does not understand the social constructs that come with racial identifications. Whereas people see differences, e.g. the women who give Tassie and Mary-Emma a look when they see her on the street, Mary-Emma searches for similarities. She notices that she has brown eyes, just as Tassie does. She searches for commonalities as a way to connect. Tassie witnesses the reality of what Mary-Emma will experience through her life because she “saw again and again what it was simply to walk into a store for a doughnut and have a wordless racial experience” (168).

Sarah has a heightened awareness about the role the race of a child plays in adoption. She comments about children from China being preferred over a child of color in the United States. When Letitia meets with Sarah about adoption, she even indicates the possibility of finding a white children, but Sarah is open to any child of any race. Sarah understands the power of having a child. By losing Gabriel, she knows to value any child and is not foolish enough to reject a child based on race.

Sarah also reacts after Tassie tells hers about the boy calling Mary-Emma a “nigger” (151). She decides to start a support group for families of color, which is where the bulk of the novel's discussion on race resides. The people who come to the group want the discussion, but do not necessarily know how to affect change. They recognize that there is institutional racism in the schools as well as gender bias with people of color. When the subject of Muslims come up, inclusion is not at the forefront of the discussion. Ultimately, the group is left with the question “is it racism or racial inexperience?” (187).

Part of that inexperience relates to Tassie. She enters into a relationship with Reynaldo unable to recognize his true identity. Beyond her inexperience is her naiveté. Reynaldo may tell her he is from Brazil and teach her words in Spanish, but Tassie does not know enough to understand that if he was from Brazil he would speak Portuguese. She also mistakes his prayer mat for a yoga mat, indicating her cultural inexperience as well.

A need to perceive oneself through as part of a class

Related to the discussion on race is the theme of class, which the author uses to call attention to how people perceive themselves and how important class distinctions were to many characters.

Sarah and Edward have money. They have enough money to start a new life with new identities and are able to afford legal counsel who was able to get them out of jail time



after the death of their son. Edward works as a researcher and Sarah has a restaurant. At home, they have a cleaning person, an employee who does their laundry, and a nanny.

Tassie notices what they have as compared to what she would expect the average person to have. She even notices that Sarah is FedExing food to Mary-Emma, which seems an absurd thing to do. Given what they have spent their money on thus far, Sarah and Edward appear to care very much how they are perceived by others.

When Sarah talks about her father, Tassie asks if her father was rich, to which Sarah counters Tassie with the same question. She responds by suggesting that people thought her family was because of the farm, but because of the farm's size, they were not. Wealth was not a preoccupation for Tassie's father and Tassie does not have a tremendous concern about money. When she received her first check from Sarah, she does not validate the hours; it is not a priority to her.

In contrast to all of Sarah and Edward's possessions, Tassie lives fairly simply. It is appropriate given her position as a college student, but Tassie has learned to live modestly. She does not seem to care much what others think of her, especially if she is perceived as having a lot of money or not.

Coming-of-age through the experiences of different types of love

The main character, Tassie, comes to age throughout the novel largely due to the different types of love she experiences, from familial love, to romantic love, to learning to love a child.

Tassie experiences different kinds of love throughout the novel. She falls in love for the first time with Reynaldo and shares her first sexual experience with him. Though he is deceiving her about his identity, Reynaldo does exhibit feelings for Tassie. What is unknown is how much of his feelings for her are an act. While Reynaldo misrepresents himself, he does offer clues as to his identity, which may have been his way of offering part of his true self to Tassie.

Tassie also experiences loving Mary-Emma. She has not spent a lot of time with children in her life, but she grows quite fond of Mary-Emma. They bond and exhibit love for each other. Mary-Emma considers Tassie family. Just as Tassie feels loss when Reynaldo leaves her, she experiences it when Mary-Emma is taken back into foster care.

Sarah may love Mary-Emma as well, but because of her past, it is difficult to ascertain her true feelings. Sarah and Edward do not try and fight for Mary-Emma when the adoption falls through; they let her go. Perhaps they are unable to go through a sustained loss after losing their son Gabriel. It is clear, however, that Sarah wants to try and do the right thing. She wants to be accepting of people's differences and try to



affect change. She holds the support groups in an effort to make things better for Mary-Emma.

Tassie's relationship with her brother is another type of love that she experiences. They have history together and trust each other in a way that is hoped for in a family. Gunny loves her enough to trust her with helping him make a life-altering decision. Because she was unable to address Gunny's email before he enlisted, Tassie is left with understanding how to reconcile the love she has for her family.

War

The theme of war is explored through the novel as a way to heighten the stakes of everyday life. War is addressed early on in the novel when the reader learns that the novel takes place in the months following the September 11th, 2001 terrorist attacks.

This puts the nation at war, but it is a war that is largely fought on foreign soil. Life does not much change for Americans. While there are scars, the landscape, particularly where Tassie is in Iowa, is unchanged. The mood and anxiety have altered, but the landscape has not. The changes the landscape experiences are as a result of the weather, not because it is a battlefield.

Reynaldo being revealed as Muslim addresses the paranoia following the attacks. He represents the anxiety related to sleeper cells in the country. While Reynaldo's true mission remains unclear, he is meant to represent the enemy. The intimacy of Tassie's relationship with him and her inability to see clues, such as his prayer mat and inability to speak Portuguese, illustrate how culturally unaware Americans may have been at this time.

Tassie family pays the ultimate price of war after Gunny enlists and is killed during his deployment. While it may not look like the nation is at war based on the landscape, those lost overseas illustrate the toll. When Tassie has her vision of Gunny and Reynaldo side-by-side in the field, it brings the battlefield to her symbolically, as she connects the two men in death.

Family

The theme of family is explored through heartbreak throughout the novel.

Tassie comes from a tight family unit in which her parents remain married and she has one younger brother and dog. This is a typical nuclear family. In contrast, Sarah and Edward are a married couple without children. They have opted to try and adopt. In hiring Tassie as their nanny, they bring Tassie in as part of their family.

Tassie and Mary-Emma forge a strong bond, arguably stronger than the bond Mary-Emma has with Sarah. When Tassie takes Mary-Emma to Reynaldo's apartment, the three of them serve as a makeshift family unit. Tassie is interacting with Mary-Emma



and Reynaldo in the confines of a family. Sarah has questions about Reynaldo, though she does not know him by name, and does not want Tassie to take Mary-Emma around him.

While Sarah may be concerned about who Tassie is spending time with and by extension who Mary-Emma is spending time with, she has a complicated relationship with family. Sarah and Edward had a child years before who was killed. Gabriel's death shattered the family that they had together, and in a way, Sarah is searching for a way to repair that family unit through adoption. Because of what occurred with Gabriel, Sarah and Edward lose custody of Mary-Emma. Their relationship is unable to sustain the loss and the two separate, destroying what remained from the family unit they originally formed.

Tassie's family also suffers a tremendous loss when Gunny is killed overseas. Tassie, having lost Mary-Emma and Reynaldo prior to Gunny's death, is now reeling from the loss of her brother as well. When she crawls into the coffin with her brother, she is clinging to her last opportunity to spend time with her brother. Gunny's death alters her family dynamic irreparably and now she is challenged with making sense of how her new family exists.



Styles

Point of View

A Gate at the Stairs is a first person narrator told by Tassie Keltjin, a 20-year-old college student. Her experiences are in line with a person of that age: an apartment to take care of, a roommate, classes to attend, a relationship, and a part-time job.

Tassie functions are more of a witness to major life events rather than as a participant. She observes what happens to and around her. She watches Sarah and Edward go through the adoption process and, in turn, have the child taken from them; she watches as her first significant relationship falls apart; and she must deal with her brother's death.

The novel is set in the months following the September 11th, 2001 terrorist attacks. As happened with many at this time, Tassie observes horrific events around her. She cannot control or prevent them, but must instead figure out how to cope with the aftermath.

Because of Tassie's age, the lens through which these events are experienced are young eyes. In this way, Tassie stands in for how the United States, suddenly coping with vulnerability on American soil, dealt with the attacks.

Language and Meaning

The novel uses vocabulary consistent with a college-educated person. The language is conversational in tone, with sporadic use of sophisticated vocabulary.

Tassie is a quiet observer and the narration is her internal monologue. It is direct, rather than overly confessional. She is aware of the story she is telling, but does not comment on the actions too far beyond what would be expected from someone of her age.

The dialogue used in the novel is conversational. It is natural and appropriate for the characters involved. During the support group meetings, the sections are dialogue heavy, with the majority of the dialogue coming from unnamed characters. This allows the reader to concentrate on the ideas being posited rather than trying to keep multiple new characters straight.

There is very little slang or colloquialisms used in the novel. Tassie comments about how saying "Sounds good" (40) is typical for a Midwestern response at the conclusion of a conversation. Some of Mary-Emma's dialogue is spelled phonetically and with limited vocabulary to convey her age, such as "Oag cool!" (135) to ask for frozen yogurt.

Structure

The novel is comprised of six chapters of relative equal length. As the book runs 322 pages, having only six chapters results in longer chapters of an average of fifty pages.

The longer chapters allow the readers to be submerged into the story. This demonstrates how Tassie is dwelling on the events around her. Some of the chapters may include mundane information, such as the mess in her refrigerator or how long it has been since she mopped the floors, it offers insight into her mental state.

By thinking of these small details, she can balance out the bigger concepts she is facing. Tassie is experiencing loss on a graduated scale. She becomes close to Mary-Emma, but when she loses her, she loses her in the context of a part-time job. When Reynaldo leaves, she experiences her first breakup. Both of these losses pale in comparison to the loss she experiences at the close of the novel when her brother is killed overseas.

The story is told in a linear fashion without the use of flashbacks, with the exception of Sarah telling Tassie about her son Gabriel's death. The novel is set in the Midwest. Time is marked by the changing of the seasons and anomalies in the weather, such as the unseasonably warm weather at Christmas.



Quotes

Sounds good.' It was the Midwestern girl's reply to everything."
-- Tassie as Narrator (chapter 1 paragraph 184)

Importance: The quote sets the tone for Tassie's character and her awareness of where she lives.

The whole reason he had become a farmer is that he thought it would be fun.
-- Tassie as Narrator (chapter 2 paragraph 90)

Importance: The quote indicates how her father views his job and how the enjoyment outweighs the potential for profit.

These faraway countries that had intruded on our consciousness seemed odd to me."
-- Tassie as Narrator (chapter 2 paragraph 133)

Importance: The quotes gives insight into Tassie's state of mind trying to process the aftermath of the September 11th attacks.

So I stayed quiet with him. It is something that people who have been children together can effortlessly do."
-- Tassie as Narrator (chapter 2 paragraph 159)

Importance: The quote demonstrates the depth of the relationship between Tassie and Gunny.

I preferred the mentally ill witch Sylvia Plath, whose words sought no enlightenment, no solace, whose words sought nothing but the carving of a cry. An artful one from the pitch black."
-- Tassie as Narrator (chapter 3 paragraph 10)

Importance: The quote helps to establish Tassie's mindset at this period in her life, foreshadowing how she will cope with the heartbreaks to come.

I once murdered someone and American Express covered everything!"
-- Sarah (chapter 3 paragraph 172)

Importance: The quote demonstrates Sarah's dark sense of humor as a coping mechanism.

I was like every kid who had grown up in the country, allowing the weather – good or bad – to describe life for me: its mocking, its magic, its contradictions, its moody grip."
-- Tassie as Narrator (chapter 4 paragraph 17)



Importance: The quote demonstrates how the weather impacts everyday lives in the Midwest.

School is white. And school is female. So it's the boys of color who have the hardest time, and if they're not into sports the gangs will lure them in..."
-- Unnamed Character (chapter 4 paragraph 203)

Importance: The quote is from an excerpt of dialogue during one of the support groups. The unidentified speaker demonstrates how the problem may be recognized, but no one takes ownership of how to go about addressing it.

Everyone, I only noticed now for some reason, called Mary-Emma by a slightly different name, like she was no one at all."
-- Tassie as Narrator (chapter 5 paragraph 393)

Importance: The quote illustrates how Mary Emma has not found her space and must be altered to fit with whomever she is with at the time.

No one actually proposed the possibility of Robert's own fright and ineptitude of or 'friendly fire,'" but the jumble of alternative explanations raised suspicions."
-- Tassie as Narrator (chapter 6 paragraph 186)

Importance: The quote addresses the multitude of factors that may have contributed to Gunny's death in the fog of war.

I knew there were superstitions about touching dead people. But one belief had it that if you touched one you would never be lonely again."
-- Tassie as Narrator (chapter 6 paragraph 202)

Importance: The quote demonstrates the importance of Tassie's relationship with her brother and how she wants to maintain their closeness regardless of death.

People died, but then if you forgot that they had died, even for a minute, they could achieve a kind of immortality: that is they kept on living, even though they were dead."
-- Tassie as Narrator (chapter 6 paragraph 257)

Importance: The quote shows how Tassie is going through the grieving process. It shows how she can offer her brother immortality and still have him be a part of her life.