

Hard Laughter Study Guide

Hard Laughter by Anne Lamott

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Plot Summary

Jen is living a sloppy, Bohemian life in a small town in California, enjoying her friends, and writing. Her family is very worried when they find out that Jen's father, Wallace, has a brain tumor.

Jen lives in Clement, a tiny town in southern California, in the late 1970's. Clement is filled with the dregs of the free-love movement—a variety of old hippies, burn outs, shamans, holistic healers, and crazy weirdos. Jen fits into the last category, living in squalor in a cabin, cleaning houses three days a week, and writing. She has never yet been published, but her father is a writer, which inspires her. She loves spending time with her strange friends and drinking and doing drugs. One day, Jen's father tells her that he has a brain tumor in the language center of his brain. The first noticeable symptom is that he has trouble finding the right word for what he wants to say.

Wallace, Jen's father, goes in for brain surgery to remove his tumor. The doctor thinks they have gotten the entire tumor, but recommends two weeks of radiation therapy to follow up. The whole experience is harrowing for the entire family. Jen gets a lot closer to her two brothers and tries to deal with the confusing circumstances. Although Wallace is holding up like a trooper, Jen is not doing so well and exhibits symptoms of mental illness. Her friends tell her that this is normal when going through a crisis like this. Everyone feels bad for Wallace, especially because he is such a nice person, known for his generosity.

As the days go by, Wallace gets healthier, and it appears he will live after all. Jen and the others try to pick up their lives again and act like everything is normal. It is hard because they are all so confused and have no proof that the tumor is not going to come back. Jen thinks of all the people who deserve to get a brain tumor instead of Wallace. She tries to go back to work, and even Wallace starts writing again. One day, Wallace starts hiccuping and can not stop, even after many hours. The entire family is worried that this means that the tumor is back and that they are all going to have to go through it again. The doctor relieves their fears, saying that hiccups are a side effect of the radiation. They all try to relax and be thankful for their blessings, now that they have felt the specter of death.



The Family

The Family Summary

Jennifer's family lives in a castle in California during her childhood. The children grow up and move on, but then they find out that their father has a brain tumor.

Jen's mother is an Englishwoman, and her father the son of missionaries in Tokyo. They move into an ancient castle in the San Francisco Bay area, built many years ago by German immigrants who wanted to feel at home. The family has three children, Ben, Jennifer, and Randy. Ben is the oldest, so he tortures Jen, and Randy is a few years younger than Jen, so Jen and Ben torture him a little, mostly just wedgies. The children have become young adults by the beginning of the story and have moved out of the castle. Jen lives alone in a cabin nearby. Ben has finally straightened out after being on a lot of drugs for many years. Randy still lives with his father, Wallace, and Wallace's girlfriend Sarah. Jen remarks on how idyllic and pleasant their lives have been up to this point, although the kids all were in their fair share of trouble growing up.

One day, Jen is talking on the phone with Wallace, who has trouble thinking of the word "zucchini." He visits a doctor and discovers he has a brain tumor right next to the language center of his brain. This is especially hard for him because he is a writer, so words are extremely important to him. He tries to get some work done in the time he has, but it is frustrating because he finds that he can only accomplish about one hour's work in four hours. He schedules a surgery to take out the tumor. In the weeks before his surgery, he spends time with his grown children and talks to them about the tumor. This requires many drinks for all. Wallace tells his kids he hopes he does not die on the operating table and also hopes the tumor is not malignant, for if it is, he will almost certainly die in a few years. Wallace is primarily concerned for his children, in case he dies, and worried about brain damage from the surgery. His biggest fear is that he might become brain-damaged and be able to sense his own incompleteness. He discusses euthanasia with his children and tells them that if he becomes a vegetable, they should pull the plug.

When Randy, Jen, and Wallace are walking on the beach, Randy finds a dead heron and gets very excited about it. It is in almost perfect condition with only one eye damaged, and he wants to take it home with him as a pet. Wallace says that they are absolutely not taking the heron with them because it already stinks, but Randy begs. Finally, Wallace tells him he can keep it but can not take it inside the house. Randy decides to name the dead heron Morty, short for Rigor Mortis. When they are walking down the street of their tiny town, they see Miriam Brown, the town's most infamous alcoholic. She has one of her babies with her, the one who was conceived on the pool table at the bar. Miriam parks her baby carriage outside the bar and goes inside.

Even though everyone adores Randy, he drives the others crazy with his silly, boundless energy. He plays a game with his dog, where Randy pretends that the dog is



some sort of mystical wild boar, and Randy is hunting it. Randy has a habit of blurting things out and keeps accidentally making jokes about his father dying. This makes Randy feel awkward, but the whole family has a strong sense of humor, so they decide to laugh at their situation, rather than mourning it.

The Family Analysis

In this chapter, the author introduces the members of the family and the town in which they live. It is immediately apparent that this is a family where laughter is very important. Even though Randy is seventeen, he clowns around like a child, but no one really minds. In fact, the entire family looks indulgently on his antics because they all like playing and acting silly. It is this laughter that holds the family together in trying times. The book's title, *Hard Laughter*, has a double meaning: it can refer to laughing very hard, or it can refer to laughter that is hard to come by or hard to do. The characters find that sometimes it is hard to laugh in the face of sorrows, but when life stops making sense, it is easier to see it as a funny joke than as a tragedy.



The Town Where I Live

The Town Where I Live Summary

Jen wakes up with her friend Megan, since Megan has spent the night at Jen's cabin. Jen lives rent-free in an old cabin that used to belong to her grandparents. She loves having ten-year-old Megan come over and feels Megan understands her better than most grown-ups. Jen likes being around Megan because Jen can just be herself without worrying that Megan will judge her. Megan remarks that she can not believe that Jen cleans houses for a living because Jen is such a spectacularly bad housekeeper. Jen lives in squalor with an ancient alley cat prowling around peeing on things. Jen cleans house for three locals each week, and the money she makes from it is enough that she can spend the rest of her time writing, which is what she really likes to do. Jen gets up to go clean, and Megan says she will hang out and read until Jen gets back.

Jen sneaks past the home of her next-door neighbors, a weird, friendly family with a worm farm. They remind Jen of Martians and are always wanting her to come to their parties or talk about raising worms. She runs into Frank Morgan, a very old man who entertains everyone with his unidentifiable bird calls. Soon Jen is picked up by one of the town's many Burn Outs, who offers her a ride in his car. The man quickly drives into a ditch, and Jen thanks him for the ride. There are many Burn Outs in the town, old hippies who did way too many drugs and now can not stop tripping. The Burn Outs, some of whom escaped from nearby mental hospitals, provide a show for everyone else in town with their crazy antics. Sometimes Jen likes the shows, but often they make her sad. One Burn Out named Moonboy receives a thousand dollars a month just to stay out of his parents' hometown. Moonboy howls at the moon every night.

Another group living in the town are the higher consciousness gurus, adherents of some slippery Eastern religion, who love to share their goodwill and peace with anyone who will listen. They tend to be stupid and happy about everything, taking joy in things like contemplating miso soup. Megan and Jen call them the Cosmica Ramas and try to avoid the group whenever possible. The Cosmica Ramas like to proselytize about their message and try to touch strangers, which makes them uncomfortable. The town, Clement, is filled with all different kinds of weirdos, who have somehow trickled into the small, isolated California town. Jen finds the town irritating with all its conflicting messages about values, but it is the only home she has.

Jen hates cleaning houses, especially because the homeowners are all so neat and clean. Jen resents the fact that she has to go pretend to clean a spotless house for four hours and rejoices in any actual dirt or hairs she can remove from the immaculate homes. On Mondays, she cleans the house of an environmentalist; on Wednesdays she cleans for a Hindu disciple, and on Thursdays she cleans the home of a trust-fund radical, who is anything but radical. He lives off the income from his family's chain of drugstores. Jen especially hates cleaning for this man, since he always tries to cheat her. Sure enough, this week he does not have the correct change to pay Jen what he



owes her, and she tells him she will just put it on his account and charge him next time. The man awkwardly tries to tell a joke about animal cruelty, and Jen pretends to laugh.

Jen heads back home after cleaning, and finds Megan doing tricks in a tree in her yard. Megan tells Jen about a bizarre article she just read, about a new fertility drug. Megan thinks it is hilarious that the new drug is made from the urine of Italian nuns. As the two of them walk along, they stop to watch a bull and a cow mating. They see Zapata, a little boy who lives in a tepee in the field with his mother, Aurora. Aurora is one of the local shows, and she comes out to get Zapata wearing cardboard Tampax applicators on her fingers like fake nails. Aurora is one of the eccentric Burn Outs, and she allows Zapata to have an entire menagerie of wounded animals. Aurora is one of the shows that makes Jen and Megan sad.

The Town Where I Live Analysis

Clement is a town that is very accepting of all different kinds of people, regardless of how they behave. Having grown up in such an environment, it is no surprise that Jen and Megan are not judgmental of their neighbors, although they try to avoid some. Some of the shows are sad, like Aurora and the Burn Out who always drives into a ditch, but others are just fun. Jen does not mind that some crazy people make bird calls all the time or howl at the moon. In fact, Jen identifies with some of these people because she recognizes that everyone is kind of crazy. In her opinion, those who do not seem crazy to others just have better disguises, better acts. She thinks there is a thin line between normal and insane, and some people like to pretend they are on the normal side. This is typical of the author, Anne Lamott, who tends to laugh at herself and find beauty in failure. Lamott recognizes that everyone has mental or emotional problems and has decided that it is better to laugh about this than cry.



Romance

Romance Summary

Megan wishes that Jen would spend more time with her and less time with Eric, Jen's sort-of-boyfriend. Megan's main problem is that Eric often spends the night at Jen's cabin, which means Megan can not. Megan openly admits that she is jealous of Eric's time with Jen and makes fun of him. Jen thinks back to meeting Eric and how they got together. One day, they are playing tennis doubles against one another, and after the game, they head up to Jen's cabin. Eric, fortunately, does not say anything bad about the mess, and Jen does not say anything about him losing his hair, about which he is self-conscious. They hang out, drink some beers, smoke some joints, and then make love. What follows is not so much a romance as a casual friendship punctuated by convenient sex. They generally get along well together and like the companionship. Once in a while Jen tries to get Eric to open up to her and talk about his feelings, which he considers to be prying and does not appreciate.

The night before Easter, Jen is very sick, and Eric comes over and watches basketball with her. When she wakes up at midnight, he is gone, and she is sure he is off sleeping with someone else. When he returns the next morning, it turns out that Jen was right, and he watches some more basketball. Jen talks about Eric with Kathleen, her dream consultant and best friend, who says that if there isn't anyone else in Jen's life, she might as well stay with the comfortable convenience of Eric. Eric decides he wants to go to Wyoming for a while to find himself, and the dream consultant says that this is for the best. A week before Eric is supposed to leave, Jen finds out about her father's brain tumor, but she thinks that if she tells Eric about it, he will feel compelled to stay.

As soon as Jen hears the news about the brain tumor, she is calm and collected, as long as she is with her father. Once she gets home, though, she falls apart, and cries and gets drunk. She calls Eric, and when he hears the emotion in her voice, he immediately tells her how sick he is of all her touchy-feely drama. Jen hangs up on him and calls Megan. Even though it is late, Megan understands that it is important when she hears Jen crying, so Megan's dad drives her over. Jen tells Megan about the brain tumor, and Megan tries to comfort her by telling her about Megan's dog who had a brain tumor. Unfortunately, the dog died. About a week later, Jen gets a postcard from Eric in Wyoming. He tells her he is sorry for thinking she wants to pin him down and that he will be staying in Wyoming longer than planned.

Romance Analysis

Megan comments that it is too bad Jen does not have a boyfriend who likes her as much as Megan does. There is an obvious contrast in the way Megan acts toward Jen and the way Eric does. Megan accepts Jen for who she is, while Eric only accepts the aspects of Jen that he desires. For instance, Megan understands that Jen is a total slob,



and that the cat is a very old cat and allowed to live the way it wants. Eric, on the other hand, buys Jen for her birthday, books about topics in which only he is interested. When the cat pees on one of the books, Eric suggests putting it to sleep. This shows that Eric has no problem trying to impose his own will and personality on Jen's life, yet he refuses to open up at all with her. He wants to be able to change Jen, without having her change him at all. To be fair, Eric is honest about his desire for privacy and tells Jen several times that if she is looking for emotional intimacy, he is the wrong guy.

A more striking contrast between Megan and Eric is how they respond to Jen when she is in need. Jen indicates that when Eric leaves her in the middle of the night while she is sick, it is the first time that he has come over and not stayed the night. This shows that Eric likes the sex when it is easy and he can watch basketball, but he certainly doesn't want to be around when Jen is gross and sick and needs taken care of. Of course, this is much more obvious when Jen is in a true crisis, worried about her father. Eric immediately assumes that her emotional state must revolve around him and has no interest in finding out why Jen is hurting. Megan, on the other hand, does not even know what is wrong when she convinces her father to drive her up there late at night. It is inconvenient for her, but she knows Jen is important, and if Jen is crying, it must be about something important. Even if it had turned out that Jen was just depressed about nothing, Megan would still have shown up to support her.



Gatherings

Gatherings Summary

In the months leading up to Wallace's (Jen's father's) surgery, the town of Clement has more than its fair share of tragedy. Various people, young and old, die in accidents, from disease, or from suicide. Several cars blow up; a friend turns out to have cancer, and some of the local Burn Outs have to be taken in straitjackets back to the mental hospital. The townspeople hypothesize that the problem is that Mercury is retrograde, causing all sorts of catastrophes. Jen reminisces about various friends she has known who have committed suicide and remembers their funerals. In Clement, these funerals tend to be strange, eclectic affairs, not focusing on one religious viewpoint, with all sorts of folks wearing whatever they think is appropriate for sending off the soul of someone they love.

In the week before Wallace's surgery, it is more like Mercury is personally targeting him. Wallace gets evicted; his car is destroyed; his chicken coop catches fire, and the IRS comes after him, all in the space of a few days. It gets to the point where it is more like a joke. The family passes time going to poetry readings, getting drunk, and just waiting. Wallace makes out his will, just in case, and Jen, Ben, and Randy argue and barter over who will get what if Wallace should die. When they finally check him in to the hospital, they are all very nervous, but they make jokes to cover this up. The nurse keeps trying to hurry them out of the room, saying that Wallace is not allowed so many visitors.

Jen goes home and tries to occupy herself. She spends as much time as she can drinking and smoking pot, knowing she will not be able to sleep. Every activity she tries to do does not work out, so she sits in the yard throwing pebbles, trying to convince herself that it is all just a bad dream. Ben calls her and tells her that the surgery is over, and Wallace seems all right, although he looks terrible from the surgery. Unfortunately, the doctor thinks that the tumor might be malignant. It will be a few weeks before they get the results from the biopsy, and Jen can not believe that she has to wait some more. She thinks back to a friend, whose mother recently died of cancer, and how the woman spent her last days in an LSD dream because they had heard that LSD alleviates pain. Jen thinks that gatherings like these and the funerals, are the best gatherings she knows about.

Gatherings Analysis

When Wallace's children say goodbye to him in the hospital, Jen kisses him on the mouth, and also kisses his girlfriend, Sarah. Jen's brothers kiss Sarah, but then awkwardly put an arm around their father. When they drop Jen off at her cabin, both of her brothers kiss her all over her face. This demonstrates that they are overwhelmed with emotion and desperately want to kiss their father but feel it would be unmanly. They are probably concerned with seeming homosexual, since they are willing to kiss Sarah



and Jen, but not Wallace. The boys transmit the emotion they feel for their father to the family member who is capable of kissing Wallace. Yet there is nothing sexual about either Jen's kiss on Wallace's lips or Ben and Randy kissing Jen, and Jen recognizes this.

There are a lot of suicides in Clement. Clement is a town inhabited by weirdos and drop-outs, by people who do not fit in anywhere. Many of them have very unusual or confused values, and many of them are very mentally ill from using too many drugs. In the 1960's many people had an idealistic attitude, thinking that a new era of peace and love was beginning, and they wanted to turn the world upside-down. By the late 1970's, when this book was written, many of those people were disillusioned and bitter, having gambled all on something that didn't work out. Still others insisted on continuing the hippie lifestyle, even if it didn't work out materially or culturally, any more. These flower children often had trouble trying to reconcile their ideals with real life. With no new cultural philosophy to replace the peacenik slogans, other than the selfish materialism of the 1980's, it is no surprise that many of these characters decide to take their own lives.



My Brothers

My Brothers Summary

Jennifer, Ben and Randy all drive to the hospital to visit Wallace after his surgery. Before they go into the hospital, they stand outside, while Ben smokes and tells the other two to calm down. It is obvious that Ben is the one who needs to calm down, so Jen and Randy put up with his older-brother lecturing for a while. Finally, they go to Wallace's room, where Sarah is sitting by the bed. Wallace is asleep and looks terrible. His head and face are badly mangled from his surgery, but Sarah says this is normal, and the surgery went very well. The bruises should go away in about a week, and Sarah says that Wallace is on a lot of drugs. She also warns them that Wallace is having some trouble talking because of pressure on his brain. Wanting to give the kids some time alone with their father, Sarah goes out to get some lunch.

After the three pretend to read for a while, Randy knocks over a vase, and the noise wakes Wallace. He is happy to see them and talks as best he can. They tell him he looks great. He asks for some juice, which Randy spills. All three kids kiss Wallace this time. Soon, Wallace goes back to sleep, and Randy and Jen make jokes and kick each other, while Ben tells them to stop it and act like adults. Randy points out that the idea that Wallace looks great is like the Emperor's New Clothes, and it is not fooling anyone.

On the way home, Jen thinks about her brothers and how much she likes them. She is sad she has no male friends in town over the age of fourteen, other than Ben and Randy. Jen remembers having male friends, but they have all either left or killed themselves. The siblings get lunch at a deli and go home and have a picnic on the floor. They talk about how much they like each other, and they all agree that if one of them died, the others could not continue living. They are surprised that they are now so close, since they used to fight so much as children.

My Brothers Analysis

On the way home from the hospital, Jen and Randy and Ben talk about how crazy the whole situation is. They agree that it feels like they are in a dream, but whose dream is it? They come to the conclusion that it is Randy's dream. All three of them feel sort of crazy because of their stressful situation, and Ben says he is worried about how others will perceive him. He is happy that his brother and sister will not reject him if he acts disturbed, and Jen points out that all of his friends know what he is going through, and what does he care what strangers think of him? Ben answers that for so many years he was messed up on drugs, and now that he has his life together again, he does not want people to think he has thrown that away. They end up agreeing that everyone in their family is mentally ill anyway, but Ben is a little envious of Jen. Jen never pretends to be sane but says and does what she wants without worrying about what others think. Lamott is indicating that people who seem to be mentally stable are only faking it for

everyone else and will give in to insanity as soon as life throws a curve ball their way. Since life is filled with insane situations, she sees no reason to try to approach them as though they are normal.

Skunks

Skunks Summary

Each Tuesday night, Jen has a standing appointment to meet her dream consultant, Kathleen, for drinks at the bar. Kathleen is always late, but Jen never knows how late Kathleen will be. Jen arrives in the bar forty minutes after the appointed time and tries to avoid the other bar patrons while she waits for Kathleen. This takes some effort, since everyone knows everyone else, and several people try to talk or sit with Jen. After waiting for an hour, Jen calls Kathleen's house from the pay phone and gets no answer. Finally Jen angrily walks home from the bar. When she gets home, she smokes a joint, and drinks some more, trying Kathleen's phone again. Jen gets so drunk that she knocks over her glass and the wine bottle, and in her drugged state, imagines a group of doctors watching her through the window, talking about all that is wrong with her. Jen cries a lot, then gets in bed with the cat. When the cat puts his filthy feet on Jen's pillow, she snaps and throws him at the wall, and the phone rings. Jen gathers up the cat, sobbing, and when she answers the phone, it is Kathleen. Jen hangs up.

In the night, Jen wakes up because Kathleen is standing above her, apologizing for not calling her. Kathleen has been very stressed out and rather than meet Jen, she has gotten drunk with a man and slept with him. Jen is very resentful and tells Kathleen that she is tired of this pattern, where Kathleen can not be depended upon. Kathleen is hurt and asks if she can spend the night, and maybe they can talk it over in the morning. Kathleen also mentions that she has been to visit Wallace, and that Ben and Randy were there. Kathleen feels like Jen's family can not openly admit how upset and worried they are. Jen lets her spend the night, but in the morning Kathleen remembers she is late for work and has to hurry out. When Jen wakes up hours later, she remembers a disturbing dream from the night before, and calls Kathleen at work to ask her about it. Kathleen says that the dream symbolizes that Jen is afraid that others will see the bad, embarrassing parts of her that she wants to hide from everyone. They agree to meet later to talk more about it.

Skunks Analysis

Since Kathleen is a sort of therapist, it is significant that Jen spends time analyzing Kathleen's behavior and what it says about her psyche. While Jen is waiting for Kathleen at the bar, she contemplates various possible motives for why Kathleen is always late, demonstrating that Jen is capable of understanding the various things that make people tick. Kathleen herself admits that she is rather crazy, talking about voices in her head, and an inability to make decisions. Yet Kathleen easily interprets Jen's dreams, pointing out the ways different animals symbolize Jen herself. Kathleen tells Jen that even though Jen is going through a crisis, this does not mean Jen is the only one hurting. This underscores Lamott's theme that no one is really sane, so we might as well just make the best of things and laugh at ourselves.



Although Kathleen easily recognizes that Jen is afraid others will see her ugly side and reject her, it is apparent that Kathleen has some of the same issues, but physically. Jen mentions how Kathleen was once married to a surgeon, who encouraged her to become bulimic rather than gain weight. The fact that a doctor is giving her terrible medical advice also shows that even those who seem to know all the answers may be full of nonsense. When Kathleen spends the night at Jen's she dresses very quickly in the morning, so Jen will not see her naked. Even though Kathleen has a great body and practically no fat, she never lets any of her lovers see her naked because her ex-husband the doctor told her that her body wasn't good enough.



Lumpoid Masses

Lumpoid Masses Summary

On the day Wallace is to be discharged from the hospital, Jen's old cat dies. She buries it in the yard and then cries into her coffee. Jen calls her father at the hospital and tells him that she will be there soon with Megan. Randy is too busy getting ready to go to college to come with her. Wallace pretends to feel bad about the cat's death. When Jen calls Megan, Megan says she will be happy to come but needs to visit her great-aunt first. Megan is very sorry to hear about the cat and tells Jen how stupid she thinks it is that Wallace of all people should get a brain tumor because he is so nice.

Megan and Jen go to see Honey, Megan's great-aunt, who is eighty-five and senile. Beforehand, Megan warns Jen not to mention Honey's leg ulcer, and Jen agrees, as long as Honey doesn't make fun of her new pimples. Honey is happy to see them and plays games with them, making jokes that do not really make sense but are still funny. Megan is about to go back to Portland for the school year, and Honey says that she does not know whether she will live to see Megan again. This annoys Megan because Honey always says this when they part. They talk about Megan's horse in Portland, and how Honey used to have a horse named Damocles, before her husband made her give it up.

After leaving Honey, Jen drives Megan to the hospital in Los Angeles, and they talk about lumpoid masses, which is what Jen calls the tumor and other irritations in life. They talk about how senseless it is that young, good people get cancer, and how sometimes people can live through things that should definitely kill them. Megan has a blunt honesty to her that most grown-ups lack, and she talks about their fear that Wallace will die, instead of pretending they are not worried. Both Jen and Megan think Wallace will probably die. Jen says that sometimes things in life which seem totally senseless turn out to be for the good.

Lumpoid Masses Analysis

Jen compares the situation with Wallace to the story of the sword of Damocles, in which a man brags about how good his life is, only to discover that there is a sword hanging over his head, suspended by a single hair. The sword of Damocles is meant to show that even in the best life, catastrophe could strike at any minute, bringing swift death. This is also alluded to by the name of Honey's horse, Damocles, who was taken away from her. Honey is always conscious that her death could come at any minute, and in fact wants Megan to wake her during naps, to make sure she is still alive. Yet this seems to be the only thing Honey understands about time. She loves to play games with the clock, but for senile Honey, every moment is Now, and death could come any day. This is also reflected by the sudden death of the cat after he lives through years of trauma. Jen tries to find value in some of the tragedies of life, but sometimes the only

value in such situations is that they make one appreciate blessings while still having them. Life can be taken away at any minute.



Rallying

Rallying Summary

Randy and Jen wait at Wallace's house for him to get home, cleaning and drinking beer. They discuss life and death, and Jen reveals to Randy that their uncle Colin was once medically dead for three minutes. After Jen and Randy wait for a few hours, Sarah and Wallace arrive, and everyone is impressed with Wallace's stitches. He is happy to be home, and everyone is happy to have him home. The most noticeable difference is that he now drinks juice instead of beer. Kathleen comes over to see him, and when Wallace needs a nap, Kathleen and Jen go get some ice cream. While they are on their errand, they discuss the various effects that drugs can have on a person, such as destroying the brain. They know quite a few people to whom this has happened. Jen talks about how she prefers women who have scars all over their faces to beautiful women because she likes seeing that these women have been through something and survived.

When the girls get home, Wallace is up and doing better. He talks about the drugs he was on in the hospital and warns his kids that this would be a very bad time to do LSD. Jen says that of course they will not, since it has been over a year since any of them have dropped acid. She and Kathleen reminisce about the last time they were on LSD, and how they put their lives in danger by driving around. Even though it was sometimes scary, and even though Jen does not want to do it again, Jen feels the experience was worth it, and she would not take it back. They talk about the way some people never stop having acid flashbacks but stay in a trip for the rest of their lives. Randy comes back inside and presents his father with a gift: he has had the dead heron stuffed, and it is beautiful. Looking at it, Jen feels that just about anything can recover, even from almost-certain death.

Rallying Analysis

Jen examines the various ways that death and danger come to people and how they recover from it. She takes hope from the fact that her uncle seemed to come back from the dead, and the dead heron is like a reflection of that. Even Kathleen seems to be finally recovering from the double suicide of her parents, ten years before. The girls talk to Sarah, who is a grade-school teacher, about how the children of the drug addicts and hippies fare in life, and Sarah says that such children either turn out wonderful and tough, or they turn out terribly. It seems that with some situations, it is possible to recover, even from death. Other situations are just too hard, and there is no coming back from them. Jen sees a woman in town who has traveled the world and done a lot of drugs. This woman used to carry around a poison mushroom along with her other drugs, in case she should find herself in a situation from which she could not (or would not) want to recover. One day, the woman catches her friend's children playing with the pouch containing the poison mushroom, and she flushes the mushroom down the drain. After all the experiences she has been through, she realizes that the only thing from

which she could never recover, would be if she caused the death of her friend's child, through her own carelessness.



Paranoia

Paranoia Summary

Jen feels sorry for the many paranoiacs around town, and she is glad that she is not one of them. She is kidding herself, since she is only slightly less paranoid than local mental patients. Jen gets a letter from her uncle Colin, who sends his best wishes, and tells her not to be paranoid. When Jen gets home from checking the mail, she gets a phone call inviting her to a party that evening, and she claims that she already has plans. She finds that she often has trouble socializing at parties, and often does not even like the people there, and besides, she worries that people will ask her if her father is dying. After hanging up the phone, Jen goes to a nearby cliff to watch the sun set and smoke a joint. She sees her reclusive neighbor, a man she refers to as the Hulk, and starts worrying that he is going to murder her. She sees the Hulk so seldom that she does not even know his name, but he is a very large man, and carrying a trowel. When the Hulk passes by Jen with just a "Hello," Jen is very relieved.

Jen goes home and writes on her typewriter, dredging up old stories of abuse at Ben's hands. Such a strange story emerges that Jen stops writing, and looks up the word "paranoia" in the dictionary. She falls asleep but wakes up from a nightmare in which her bed is on fire, and her father is trying to put it out. Trying to fall back asleep, Jen starts to masturbate and is terrified when she finds a small lump on her upper thigh. She is sure that she has cancer and has six months to live. Jen thinks of the embarrassment of having cancer, especially cancer of the genitals, and imagines how embarrassing it will be when her family goes through her belongings after her death. She determines that everything will be all right if only she can live long enough to hide the most incriminating possessions, the filthiest dishes, the worst clothes, and the cheesiest record albums.

The next day, Jen makes an appointment with her gynecologist for a checkup and PAP smear. Rather than admit that she has a lump, Jen claims that she thinks she has an STD. At the very end of the exam, Jen shows her doctor the lump, and the doctor tells her it is an infected lymph node. It is a perfectly normal lump that should clear up in a few weeks. Jen is intensely relieved and pretends that she knew all along that it was nothing. She does not want the doctor to think she is hypochondriac.

Paranoia Analysis

When thinking about the nature of paranoia, Jen thinks about the terrors of childhood and concludes that no wonder people are paranoid. Jen knows that her childhood was pleasant compared to some children, like her friend who was sexually abused. Still, she feels that even if the fears are ungrounded, the fears of childhood are every bit as bad as the fears of adulthood. She especially remembers times when Ben told her that their parents were planning to stab her to death for breaking a window and when he would

put snakes in her room at night and then wake her up. When Jen is wondering whether she will make it through the night before dying of cancer, she remembers the first prayer she ever learned, containing the line, "If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take." Jen remembers being terrified at this suggestion and thinks it is bizarre that parents introduce their small children to such a message.



One Day with Wallace

One Day with Wallace Summary

Jen wakes up screaming from a nightmare, in which she is chasing a scary dwarf who has open wounds all over his face. Lately, no one wants to sleep over much because Jen is getting harder to deal with. She often finds herself filled with anger that Wallace has a brain tumor and turns on the radio and screams. Jen somehow knows her father will be coming along soon, so she sits and waits for him. After about ten minutes, he shows up and asks if she wants to go with him to the hospital, because the biopsy results are in. Jen goes with him to the hospital, and they talk about what it will be like, once they know for sure whether he has cancer. They talk about whether this has anything to do with karma and also reminisce about how embarrassing it was for both of them, the first time they bathed nude together in a hot spring.

After Jen nervously waits in the waiting room, Wallace comes out and tells her that the tumor is precancerous, but the doctor thinks that she got all of it. Wallace should be all right, but the doctor recommends two weeks of radiation treatment, just in case. Jen and Wallace both have trouble figuring out how to respond because they have been expecting a verdict of "Cured" or "Dying," not this intermediate prognosis. They go for ice cream, as is their habit when leaving the emergency room.

They get home and tell the other family members the news. At first, everyone is kind of upset, thinking about Wallace getting radiation, but the relief begins to sink in as they drink more. Randy announces that considering the circumstances, he has changed his mind about going to college. He is surprised when Wallace tells him that it is up to him.

One Day with Wallace Analysis

After the hospital, Jen and Wallace both get bittersweet chocolate ice cream. This is symbolic of both their immediate situation and the entire story. Wallace's diagnosis is both bitter and sweet because he may still die of cancer, but there is no reason to think it will happen right away. Realistically, anyone could die at any moment, but people tend to avoid such thoughts, unless there is an immediate reason to fear death. Life is also both bitter and sweet, but it is impossible to separate the bitter from the sweet. Jen is trying to see the positive side to life's bitter moments. Sometimes the sweet is more noticeable when contrasted with the bitter.



Kathleen and Getting Older, or Life's Little Joke

Kathleen and Getting Older, or Life's Little Joke Summary

One morning about a month after Wallace's surgery, Jen wakes up and calculates how many hours it is until she can go to bed again. Kathleen calls and comes over for coffee. Jen tells Kathleen how she is just barely coping with things, having to spend several hours each day lying on the bed, doing what they call "prone yoga." Kathleen has to go to work, but they make plans to meet at the bar later that evening. Jen is excited about hanging out with Kathleen and sits down and tries to write. Finally she manages to sit still and writes for several hours. That afternoon, Kathleen calls her and asks if they can move their plans to the next night because she has a date. Jen is hurt that Kathleen has chosen a guy over her and tells her so, but Kathleen still wants to go on her date.

Jen cries and gets very drunk. She rereads an old letter of Kathleen's and reminisces about meeting Kathleen, who is now her best friend. Back when Kathleen was getting a divorce, Jen slept with Kathleen's husband Kent a few times. The sex was unbelievably bad, and once Jen and Kathleen become fast friends, Jen confesses it to Kathleen. Kathleen is a little upset but decides that their friendship is worth too much for her to throw it away over a jerk like Kent. A couple years later, Jen finally gets around to seducing Kathleen. The experience is a first for both of them, and their one-night stand does little to change their friendship. As Jen is drinking and thinking about these things, Kathleen walks into her cabin, having decided to come home after her date after all. She comforts Jen, who is hammered by now, and spends the night. The next morning when Jen wakes up alone, she calculates how many hours it is until she can go to bed again.

Jen starts driving Wallace to radiation therapy. Each time they go, he feels a little bit weaker, and his hair starts falling out in patches. People begin to stare and then quickly look away, and Jen is reminded of the way people avoid looking at those who have disabilities. She cuts off the rest of Wallace's hair that night. On the last day of radiation, Jen sees a pretty girl her own age in the waiting room wearing a wig. Jen is chilled by the girl's calm, accepting demeanor as she talks to the radiologist about her condition.

When Jen and Wallace get home, Randy is playing in the yard with the wheelbarrow and drinking beer. Jen gets a beer, too, and Randy suggests she ride in the wheelbarrow. He gets a blanket and knit cap and dresses her up like a baby in a baby carriage. Randy pushes her around the yard and then down the street in the wheelbarrow, pretending she is his baby. They pass a real mother with a real baby in a carriage, and Randy inquires politely about the baby, then gives an account of his baby. The young mother is not amused, but Jen and Randy find this to be hilarious.



Kathleen and Getting Older, or Life's Little Joke Analysis

Jen talks about how people tend to teach children not to gawk at those who clearly have something wrong with them or are very strange-looking. Parents do not want their children to point and stare, and so out of compassion they tell their children to look away. As a result, those who are visibly disabled become somewhat invisible, as people avert their eyes. Individuals with disabilities end up being more stigmatized and left out because everyone is afraid of offending them by referring to the obvious. Jen thinks that as a result, most people are not comfortable around those who have visible evidence of their problems. The truth is, everyone has problems, but some are easier to hide than others. Jen starts to feel the shame of an outcast when she sees a child stare at Wallace's patchy hair, wondering what is wrong with him. The child's mother makes him stop staring, but Jen knows that others have the same attitude.



Back to Work and Monday

Back to Work and Monday Summary

On October first, Jen feels like enough time has gone by since she stopped cleaning houses. She needs more money than the twenty dollars a week she is living on, so she posts an ad in the newspaper, offering to do odd jobs and tennis lessons. Her criteria for a job include not having to dress up, not waking up to an alarm clock, and not working under fluorescent lights. Right away the phone starts ringing, and Jen schedules two housecleaning jobs. Jen reminisces about how nice it was working in a hot springs retreat, and the bizarre characters she would meet there. Whenever Jen observes the strange people around her, she thinks of them as writing material and wishes she could get something published. Jen's father is also a writer, and now that he is feeling better, he has also gone back to work writing. Jen cleans both of the houses and decides that the people who live in the houses are obnoxious enough that she will have to find some other way to make money.

One Monday morning in November, Jen is woken up by a visit from her old friend Michael. The two have been friends and sometimes lovers for years, and after they have coffee, they make love. Jen is happy to see Michael and tells him about Wallace's brain tumor. Michael does not know how long he will be in town because he has a girlfriend that he lives with in Pasadena. He has to go, but he makes an appointment to come back in the evening and hang out some more. Jen writes for several hours, thinking about a dream she had this morning. Megan shows up in town for Thanksgiving, and the two of them walk over to Wallace's house.

Wallace is baking cookies for the first time, and as he takes a drink of liquor, he hiccups. Although the girls make fun of him, he continues hiccuping for over an hour until Jen has left. Jen does what she can to straighten up her cabin for Michael, and when she is just about ready for him, the phone rings. It is Ben, who is worried because Wallace is still hiccuping. The family worries that the hiccups are caused by pressure on Wallace's brain, possibly the tumor. Jen is upset that she still has to deal with this issue and upset that her date is destroyed, which she has been looking forward to. She starts hitting her bed with a tennis racket and screaming her frustrations out, when Michael walks in. He assumes she is angry that he is late, but she explains the situation to him. He walks her over to Wallace's house and asks if he can come over in a few hours and maybe spend the night.

Inside, the family tries to relax, listening to the radio, singing along, and reading while they wait for the doctor to call them back. By now, Wallace is in pain every time he hiccups, and the family pretends that they are not worried. Finally, after hours, the doctor calls and tells Wallace that hiccups are a normal side effect of radiation, and that he can take a pill that will stop them right away. The pain is caused by cramps from hiccuping so much. Relieved, Wallace and Sarah go to bed, and Ben, Randy and Jen breathe a collective sigh of relief.

Back to Work and Monday Analysis

Jen's family discovers that once their security has been threatened, they can not go back to assuming that they are perfectly safe. Now that Wallace has fought the monster of cancer, everyone worries that any physical anomaly will lead to death. In a way, this attitude is paranoid, since things like a case of the hiccups should not be a cause for fear. Yet in another way, this attitude is more realistic. The truth is, each of us faces the threat of death every day, and no one knows what freak accident will turn the world upside-down. The family has discovered that their happy security was just a facade in the first place. They have also discovered that they can weather a storm and that the world does not end when a family member has a deadly disease. Even when they are anxiously waiting for news from the doctor, the family gets through the tough time by making each other laugh.



Characters

Jennifer

Jennifer is twenty-three years old and at least half crazy. She wants to be a writer like her father and loves writing but has yet to have anything published. Like most of Anne Lamott's heroines, she is a thinly disguised version of Lamott herself. Jen is embarrassed and self-conscious about her yellow Afro, her pimples, and her big butt, but she only sees beauty in others when they are scarred, showing that they have survived something. Unlike most respectable people, Jen does not pretend to be normal and sane but just goes ahead and acts the way she feels like acting. Like the rest of her family, Jen is a semi-alcoholic and also enjoys doing various drugs. Jen enjoys laughing at life and the people around her, and she loves her family and her many strange friends. Jen cleans houses to support herself, yet her cabin is disgustingly filthy all the time. Jen values her free time so much that she would much rather be penniless than have to get up to an alarm clock and go to a real job.

Wallace, Jen's Father

Wallace is well-known through the town Clement as the most generous man around. He can never accumulate much money, because he always ends up giving it away to anyone who needs help. Wallace is divorced, with two sons and a daughter, and now he lives with Sarah, his girlfriend. Since Wallace is a writer, it is especially frustrating when he starts having trouble finding the right words, whether speaking or writing. This turns out to be a brain tumor in the language center of his brain, and he tries to face his situation bravely. When catastrophe after catastrophe happen to Wallace in the week before his brain surgery, Wallace has to laugh at his situation. Wallace does not complain about his pain, the rigors of radiation treatments, or the tension of not knowing what is going to happen. He does not even seem to be very scared of the thought of dying, although his children are all terrified that he will die. After Wallace's recovery, he takes a teapot that has been smashed and glues it back together. The teapot symbolizes Wallace. Although he will always have scars, he has been put back together again.

Sarah

Sarah is Wallace's girlfriend who lives with him. She is a very calm woman who teaches third grade.



Ben, Jen's Brother

Ben is Jen's older brother. Although he spent many years doing way too many drugs, he has recently gotten his life back together. Now he likes to think of himself as very responsible.

Randy, Jen's Brother

Randy is Jen's younger brother. He is a very silly seventeen-year-old. After all the worry about Wallace's health, Randy decides that he wants to stick around, rather than go to college.

Kathleen

Kathleen is Jen's best friend and dream consultant. She is just as crazy as Jen and works in a pharmaceutical research facility.

Megan

Megan is Jen's ten-year-old friend, who spends the summers in Clement.

Michael

Michael is an old friend and sometime lover of Jen's. She feels very comfortable with him.

Eric

Eric is a casual boyfriend to Jen but with no real commitment. He is never willing to open up emotionally, and when he leaves, Jen does not bother to tell him that Wallace has a brain tumor.

Uncle Colin

Jen and her uncle Colin like to exchange letters a lot. He offers her and Wallace emotional support through their ordeal.



Dr. Rainbow

Dr. Rainbow is one of the main doctors in Clement, who specializes in both traditional medicine and holistic healing. Dr. Rainbow is the name he gave himself to seem more professional (his name is not really Rainbow).

Honey

Honey is Megan's senile great-aunt. She loves to make jokes with people.



Objects/Places

Clement, California

Clement is the town in which Jen's family lives. It has a population of two thousand people, most of whom are weird and crazy.

Jen's Cabin

Jen lives rent-free in a cabin she inherited from her grandparents. She does not clean the cabin.

Wallace's House

Wallace lives in a small house with Sarah and Randy.

The Bar

There is one nasty little bar in Clement, with a jukebox that patrons sometimes break to protest the disco selections.

The Hospital

Wallace goes to stay in the hospital while he has his brain tumor removed. His family sneaks in food, since the hospital food is so bad.

The Oncologist's Office

Jen drives Wallace to the oncologist's office each day for two weeks for his radiation treatments.

The Ridge

Jen loves to go out to the ridge near her cabin which overlooks the ocean. Jen likes to watch sunsets there or scream out her frustrations or do drugs.

The Lumpoid Mass

Jen refers to Wallace's tumor as the lumpoid mass; she uses this term to refer to anything in life which is terrible and should not exist.



Morty, the Dead Heron

Randy finds a dead heron on the beach and has it illegally stuffed and mounted as a gift for Wallace.

Snakes

Jen is terrified of snakes, which is unfortunate, since she lives in an area inhabited by rattlesnakes.

Hot Springs Retreat

Jen worked for four months at a hot springs retreat before going into early retirement around the age of twenty.

Portland

Megan lives in Portland during the school year.



Themes

Surviving

Jen's family has a rough time making it through the ordeal of Wallace's brain tumor. They do not know if he is going to live through it and feel as though they could hardly survive if he died. They and their friends keep trying to find some sort of meaning in it all, wanting a reason why such a kind, generous man would develop such a condition. While Jen is trying to deal with it, she often thinks about the various problems her friends have been through that they survived. Her friend Kathleen's parents both committed suicide when Kathleen was a teenager, and Kathleen then made it through an abusive marriage and then a divorce. Jen has known many people who committed suicide or who suffered horrible abuse as children or who dealt with some deadly disease. At the end of the book, Jen's father puts together a Japanese teapot that has been smashed, patiently gluing it back together until it is whole. This brings to mind his Japanese kimono that he wears in the hospital, and it is easy to see Wallace as the teapot, once horribly mangled and still bearing scars but still in one piece.

Jen sees great value in surviving the ups and downs of life, and so she sees more beauty on faces with scars. In her opinion, the scars show the person has faced trouble and was strong enough to emerge alive. Jen realizes that friends and family make all the difference in whether she can survive Wallace's brain tumor. She learns to appreciate each day with the ones she loves because she comes to understand that death can come at any time.

Being Ashamed of What Others Will Think

Jen has various symbolic dreams throughout the book, and many of them have the same theme. Jen explores the meaning of her dreams with Kathleen, her best friend and dream consultant. One night, Jen has a dream that someone is coming over to her house, but she has two skunks in the room. Jen keeps trying to put the skunks in a plastic bag so they will not stink up the house, but they keep poking their heads out of the bag. She is terrified that her guest will think she is disgusting. In another dream, Jen looks out of her cabin window and sees that the yard is filled with beautiful gazelles. She calls someone to tell them to come over and see the gazelles, but after she hangs up, she looks outside, and the gazelles are gone. Then she looks down and sees that she has poop all over her arms. Jen is ashamed and tries to clean her arms off and worries that her guest is about to come over. Instead of gazelles, all they will see is Jen with poop all over her arms! Kathleen says these dreams both have the theme that Jen is ashamed of what others will think of her if they can see what she is really like. Interestingly, the things that Jen is afraid of in these dreams are things that she does not fear in real life. She is such a terrible housekeeper and does not worry what guests will think of the mess, and she often conducts herself as though she does not care what anyone thinks. She also thinks skunks are cute.



Toward the end of the book, Jen has another dream with the same theme. She is at a tennis match and sees a woman who looks just like Jen looks but fatter. The woman bends forward and her skirt blows up, and Jen is horrified to see that she is not wearing underpants. Jen is filled with shame for this woman, whose butt is in full view. When Jen tells the dream to Kathleen, Kathleen points out that the other woman is also Jen, and that sometimes when one reaches for something, one's butt shows. She means that to accomplish something in life or to grow as a person, it is necessary to expose oneself to ridicule by others, and this can be scary.

It Is Okay to Be Crazy

Jen openly admits that all the members of her family are crazy, although she pretends to be perfectly sane herself. Most of the inhabitants of Clement are crazy, too. Jen herself often acts very strangely in public, if she thinks it will be fun, clowning around with her friends. Sometimes she gets overwhelmed by her emotions and has to scream at the top of her lungs for a while. She also tends to assume she can foresee the future and responds emotionally to events she imagines will happen. Most of the characters regularly abuse alcohol and various drugs, putting their lives in danger by driving while hallucinating. Jen finds most of the townspeople to be entertaining, and a few of them make her sad. There are religious fanatics, political radicals, discharged mental patients, confused hippies, drug addicts, and eccentrics living in Clement, most of whom dress and act bizarrely. Jen starts to realize that the world sometimes does not make sense, and things happen for which there can be no logical explanation, such as someone as nice as Wallace getting a brain tumor. She also thinks about all the people she has known who committed suicide or who died far too young. In a crazy world, Jen finds that it is easier to cope with her problems by acting crazy. Jen's father compares living with a brain tumor to acting out theater of the absurd and says that this helps him deal with his situation better. In a way, a brain tumor is a metaphor for insanity, since it involves the destruction of the brain, and the same is true of psychedelic drugs.



Style

Point of View

The story is told from the first-person point of view of Jennifer. The character of Jen is based on Anne Lamott herself, and so she tells her story in an open, conversational way. Jen is eccentric, and so is her storytelling style. Jen does not tell her story in strict chronological order. Instead, she places everything in the present, telling about events as they unfold. Any events that take place outside the three or four months that the book covers, Jen relates as though she is casually telling a story, perhaps to a close friend. In these reminiscences, she often comments on things she has learned since those events, or mentions whether or not she regrets them. She tends to introduce characters and events by thematic association. In her narration, Jen does not know what will happen next, or what any of the other characters are thinking, although she often thinks she knows both of these things. It is very important to the story that there is not an omniscient author because it is a story about the torture of not knowing what will happen. The family finds that the hardest part about Wallace having a brain tumor is waiting for surgery, waiting for treatment, waiting for biopsy results, and then waiting for the tumor to come back. When the book ends, they are still in a state of waiting, and they have realized that they will never know with certainty when something may happen.

Setting

Most of the book takes place in Clement, California, a town of two thousand people. It takes place in the late 1970's, modern day for when it was written. A lot of the tension in the plot has to do with waiting for the phone to ring, or trying to get a hold of someone whose phone just rings and rings. It was a lot harder to get an urgent message to someone in the days before voice mail, answering machines, cell phones, pagers, and text messaging. In the turbulent 1960's, the hippies were trying to achieve free love and world peace, and Eastern religions, self-help groups, and psychedelic drugs urged people to "Tune In, Turn On, and Drop Out." A lot of people were confused and bitter by the 1970's, and some of the rejects of the 1960's settled in the sheltered little community of Clement. There are all sorts of freaks there, from mental patients, to religious gurus, to people who have fried their brains with way too many drugs. These people have unique problems, and in such a small town, everyone thrives on the gossip about everyone else.

Clement is located in an absolutely beautiful area. Although there are rattlesnakes, there are also all different kinds of beautiful birds, and Clement is right by the ocean. There are mountains, and Jen loves to drive up the ridge to watch the sun set over the water. Since it is southern California, the weather is foggy but warm and mild.

Language and Meaning

Lamott writes as though she is in the room with the reader, telling a story. She often uses run-on sentences or sentence fragments, imitating the pacing of real conversation. She frequently swears, uses slang, and makes up words, just like a friend relating a personal experience. She also bares her soul through Jen, admitting Jen's dreams, doubts, fears, and hopes, especially the ones that are so embarrassing that Jen wants to hide them. Each character also has his or her own voice, with an appropriate vocabulary and accent.

Jen goes to some poetry readings in the story and often refers to poetry she has read. Since Jen is a writer, the specific choice of words is very important to her. Lamott tells stories as though they are poetry, somehow using metaphor to mix poetry with the grit of everyday life. Often Jen herself recognizes something as a metaphor and thus uses that term to refer to anything which fits the metaphor. For instance, she has a dream in which she is ashamed of the skunks in her house and worried someone will think she is disgusting. Later, if there is any aspect of herself that Jen is ashamed to show to others, she calls it her skunks.

Structure

Hard Laughter is divided into fourteen chapters. The chapters tend to be divided by theme, and the name of each chapter gives a hint as to what the theme is. The story basically goes in chronological order, following Jen's activities for three or four months. However, the book is filled with flashbacks of earlier times. The flashbacks usually appear to be related in subject matter to what is going on in the present, but more importantly, they are always related thematically.

In the first chapter, "The Family," Jen introduces her family, and her father reveals that he has a brain tumor. This chapter establishes the main characters and also the main conflict of the book. The next two chapters, "The Town Where I Live" and "Romance" show what the town of Clement is like and how Jen interacts with the people around her. In "Gatherings," Wallace goes into the hospital for his surgery, and in "My Brothers," Jen and her brothers try to deal with Wallace's surgery. In "Skunks" through "Rallying," Jen tries to come to terms with her own failings and with the failings of life in general. In "Paranoia" through "Getting Older, or Life's Little Joke," Wallace recovers from surgery and goes through a round of radiation treatment while Jen tries not to have a nervous breakdown. Finally, in "Monday," the family realizes that the worst seems to be over, but that they have no assurances at any time that disaster is not around the corner.



Quotes

"Most of my friends are motley, antisocial, deranged, semialcoholic, and black-humored, each one stranger than the last." (Ch.1, The Family, p. 3)

"I was drinking more slowly than Ben, and had felt happier just seeing the whiskey, which may be one of the ten warning signs of alcoholism, this and my conviction that I wouldn't want to live in a world without alcohol." (Ch. 1, The Family, p. 15)

"She has a strange sense of humor: nothing amuses her more than an especially poignant memorial service." (Ch. 2, The Town Where I Live, p. 33)

"He found our gallows humor to be a good sign of something, perhaps the survival instinct." (Ch. 4, Gatherings, p. 60)

"Watching Westerns as a child, I thought that outlaws who were shot on television were, in real life, criminals who chose to die on television rather than be gassed." (Ch. 4, Gatherings, p. 66)

"I knew by ten years old that life would be happier if only I were quite stupid and devoutly religious, but unfortunately I wasn't." (Ch. 4, Gatherings, p. 66)

"Somewhere along the line a good meal with my family took its place among the other estimable things: good music, good hard laughter, good sex, good industry, and good books." (Ch. 5, My Brothers, p. 85)

"I thought I had lost this hopeful-waiting feeling, after too many disappointments when the awaited party actually showed up, or didn't." (Ch. 8, Rallying, p. 128)

"I think that you might as well believe in whatever makes you feel better, since there's no proof, and if you believe in God or the Other Side all your life, you can never be proven wrong." (Ch. 8, Rallying, p. 129)

". . . everything since the tumor diagnosis has felt like theater of the absurd, and that seeing "it all" as theater of the absurd makes it a good deal easier." (Ch. 8, Rallying, p. 133)

"I take hotshot women with scars much more seriously than beauties." (Ch. 8, Rallying, p. 134)

"I'm inclined to think that karma is wishful thinking, and a bit unrealistic, and not nearly as interesting as the possibility of free will." (Ch. 10, One Day With Wallace, p.167)

"The only reason that they are going to die is because they were born and they breathe." (Ch. 10, One Day With Wallace, p. 173)



"Maybe death exists as a deadline to force the issues, so that you have to learn what there is to learn—which is how to enjoy this life—before you die." (Ch. 10, *One Day With Wallace*, p. 173)

"We're all on borrowed time anyway, and it's good to be reminded." (Ch. 10, *One Day With Wallace*, p. 175)

"He said that in his early twenties he thought that at twenty-eight one became an adult, and that he only recently realized that one never really grows up, or, at least, that one never loses the child inside." (Ch. 10, *One Day With Wallace*, p. 178)

"I have had better sex with an assortment of fruits and vegetables, MUCH better sex." (Ch. 11, *Kathleen*, p. 195)

"She is a lapsed Catholic; I am a lapsed atheist." (Ch. 11 *Kathleen*, p. 202)

"Colin says that before his first heart attack he had never been able to live in the here and now, had never understood that the moment is the only reality." (Ch. 12, *Getting Older, or Life's Little Joke*)

"The teapot had been reconstructed, and Wallace's hands lay folded on the table." (Ch. 13, *Back to Work*, p. 240)

"They do have infections, and I can assure you that there is nothing funny about fish infections." (Ch. 13, *Back to Work*, p. 240)

"He said something also about developing the skill of paying attention, paying attention to every moment, but I was thinking about something else and missed much of what he said." (Ch. 13, *Back to Work*, p. 240)

"I thought also that mothers sometimes feel resentful when their children hurt themselves and need a lot of attention because it cuts into the little free time the mother has." (Ch. 14, *Monday*, p. 281)

"You have to tell people you love them whenever you can, or it risks going unsaid, because they might be dead in the morning." (Ch. 14, *Monday*, p. 283)



Topics for Discussion

Why is the town of Clement populated by such strange people? Would you like to live there?

What does Jen learn through Wallace's brain tumor? Are there blessings to medical problems like a brain tumor?

Jen and her family drink and do drugs a lot. Do you think this is a sign of a problem or a helpful way of coping? Explain.

What are the messages of some of Jen's dreams? Do you ever try to interpret your dreams?

Compare and contrast the various doctors in the book. Which ones are most effective?

Is it appropriate to laugh in times of grief? Explain.

What is Jen's attitude toward nudity? What does this say about her character?

There are many references in the story to different animals. What is the significance of these animals?