

# **Her: A Memoir Study Guide**

**Her: A Memoir by Christa Parravani**

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



# Contents

<a href="#">Her: A Memoir Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">PART ONE: Chapters 1 - 3.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">PART ONE: Chapters 4 - 10.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">PART ONE: Chapters 11 - 14.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">PART ONE: Chapters 15 - 21.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">PART TWO: Chapters 22 - 26.....</a>	<a href="#">16</a>
<a href="#">PART TWO: Chapters 27 - 31 and PART 3.....</a>	<a href="#">19</a>
<a href="#">Important People.....</a>	<a href="#">22</a>
<a href="#">Objects/Places.....</a>	<a href="#">26</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">29</a>
<a href="#">Styles.....</a>	<a href="#">33</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">35</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">38</a>



## Summary

“Her” is the story of identical twins – Christa and Cara Parravani. Her is a memoir that contains the writings and memories of both sisters. Cara died from a drug overdose when the twins were 28. While Christa wrote the majority of the memoir, Cara’s thoughts and version of events are also included. Cara had been writing her own memoir before her death. To bring Cara’s voice into her story, Christa included excerpts from some of Cara’s unfinished book. The story focuses on the very close relationship that only identical twins can share and the confusion, angst and identity crises that occurs when one twin dies tragically and way too young.

Christa touches on the life that she and her sister shared as young girls, teenagers, college students and finally as professionals. As twins do, especially girl twins, they did everything together and shared their deepest dreams and secrets. In the case of twins, the larger twin is generally born first and often winds up being the dominant twin. Cara was born first and was the larger baby and she maintained a weight advantage over her sister as adults. Christa had always deferred to Cara in silent acknowledgement that she was the stronger one. But over the years, Cara demonstrated her weakness by first succumbing to prescription drugs and eventually to the lures of cocaine and heroin.

After being brutally beaten and raped, Cara’s life was never the same. She deteriorated and spiraled down and her addictions became solidified and more profound. Cara also became very needy and relied on Christa to be there for her. Cara, in fact, wanted Christa to be with her every minute. The girls were both married and Cara’s obsession to be with her sister put a strain on their marriages with both eventually resulting in divorce. Christa went out of her way to support Cara in every way even though it placed undue stress on her personal and professional life.

The book begins with Christa looking in the mirror after Cara’s death and not recognizing herself. She saw Cara instead of herself. In an effort to not let go of her twin and bring her sister back, Christa began to dress in her clothing, take prescription drugs and become promiscuous, often dating Cara’s old boyfriends although she was still in a marriage. Her life was heading to the same dark abyss that Cara’s life had ended in. At one point, she even contemplated committing suicide.

In the end, it was writing and her desire to be a successful writer that helped save Christa. Christa wanted to settle down and have a family. But she knew that in order to achieve her goals, she would have to have a clear head and be drug free. She managed to withdraw from Valium by herself. After she had shaken her habit she was able to see the world as it was and achieve resolution and understanding about her identity, her sister’s death and a new perspective of their relationship that was on a much deeper level.



# PART ONE: Chapters 1 - 3

## Summary

Christa Parravani was a twin until her twin sister, Cara Parravani, died when Christa experienced a loss of identity. When she looked in the mirror it was Cara staring back at her. Cara overdosed when she and Christa were 28. Christa learned that it was a common reaction for an identical twin to see the deceased identical twin in the mirror. Christa took on the identity of Cara in a more harmful way than just superficially. To bring her sister “back” Christa tore apart her life just as Cara had ruined hers. Christa’s memories were jumbled; she became unsure which memories were hers and which ones belonged to Cara.

In October 2001, Cara was raped while she was walking her dog in a wooded area. She was afraid to be alone after that, always wanting Christa with her. Christa was a photography student in New York City at the time. She decided to make Cara her subject and stay with her. Christa spent her days shooting photos of Cara and her free time hanging out with her. She spent no time with her friends or her husband. Christa finished her photography project with Cara and which she named “Kindred” over the next five years.

Cara would sometimes balk at having a shoot, making up excuses why she couldn’t. In reality, she was too emotionally wrought to work and was jealous that Christa was able to function so well. Cara would argue that taking the photos took time from her writing. But Cara hadn’t written a word in months. Cara trolled the Internet most of the time. Christa had fallen in love with the photos she took of her and her sister. They agreed that Cara would write the captions for the photos.

Christa felt she had pushed Cara too hard on the project. She felt guilty – had she contributed to her death? At 28, Cara had aged beyond her years from her smoking, heroin addiction and poor diet. After she died, Christa dyed her hair to match Cara’s Revlon auburn hair.

Cara was the dominant and slightly larger twin. Christa was tempted to commit suicide after Cara died. She cut her arms and got a divorce. She quit her job and became promiscuous. She wore Cara’s wedding rings and slept in her sister’s favorite dresses. Cara had started her own memoir. Christa couldn’t finish it but used parts of it in her book, “Her.” Christa learned that it was common for a twin who lost a twin would die from disease, suicide or accident within two years of the loss. As little girls they made a pact that when one died the other would commit suicide and follow. Their mother called them “her ladies.” Cara called Christa “Her.”

In 2005, Cara had divorced her husband Kahlil and was looking for a new apartment. That winter Christa planned to beat the winter blues with a supply of prescribed downers and pain killers she had. Christa was experiencing severe back pain from



hours of standing in her darkroom developing photos. She was prescribed Soma to get her through the worst throes of pain and Valium to help relax her muscles.

On a weekend when Christa's husband Jedediah was away on business, she and Cara drank too much. Cara feared that Christa would one day abandon her because of her drug use. Christa knew that Cara was heavily into drugs again after being clean for a while. Christa had tried to intervene when deliveries of pharmaceuticals arrived for Cara. Those packages that Christa was able to seize, were quickly replaced by refills Cara would immediately call in.

Christa refused Cara's help in bringing in firewood. She took a dose of Soma to kill her back pain. Christa's pain did not recede with one dose, she took more Soma and Valium which were not supposed to be taken together. She lost consciousness. All the way to the hospital, Cara pleaded with Christa not to die on her. At the Emergency Room Christa was forced to vomit by drinking a thick chalky drink. The doctor interviewed her about what she took and if she was suffering from depression. He wanted to make sure she wasn't a suicide risk. Christa was released a few hours after she arrived.

After Cara's death, Christa became her. The first time she laughed after Cara's passed away was when she was with Ethan, one of Cara's old boyfriends. He loved Cara and wanted to fall in love with Christa so he could have a semblance of Cara again.

Their mother had hoped for a girl when she was pregnant. She was disappointed when the doctor told her it was a boy. Even though the doctor thought the baby was a boy, their mother never gave up and refused to buy any boy clothes. She prayed for a girl knowing that her husband didn't want any children but if he had to have one, he wanted a boy. She had a C-section and when the doctor cut her open, his "Oh, my God!" scared their mother to death. She had two beautiful girls, he told her. They were twice the girl she prayed for.

The girls were both well - under five pounds but healthy. Their father blamed their mother for having twins. He really didn't want them or their mother. Their father spoiled them in small ways – they could eat ice cream whenever they wanted to. He taught them how to spit and gave them his love of music. But his mood could change quickly and he could grow angry and volatile. He physically abused their mother. Once he hit her in the jaw with the butt of his gun.

The abuse came to a head when he beat her mercilessly and the police were called in. The twins stayed with their grandmother and their mother started to look for a new place for them to live.

## Analysis

The story of "Her" begins with a description of how an identical twin reacted to the death of her twin. Christa expresses her angst and confusion after Cara, her identical twin, died when they were 28. It is impossible for someone who is not a twin, especially an identical twin, to understand the trauma that a twin feels when losing what has been a



huge part of her identity. Sisters are often closer than brothers. And when the sisters are identical twins, the closeness is even more profound. It is apparent from Christa's description of her life after losing Cara that along with the natural grief associated with the death of a close relative, there is also a feeling of losing oneself when the dearly departed is an identical twin.

Although Cara was described as the slightly larger and more dominant twin, it was Christa who was strong for Cara. Cara was a heroin addict and a pill popper, something that Christa tried in vain to help her recover from. Cara also experienced a brutal rape which made her needier than ever. She wanted Christa with her all the time which put a strain on Christa's marriage and career. Christa describes her mother in positive terms but her father who had left when they were young physically abused their mother and didn't want the twins. If he had to have a child, he wanted a boy. Although he may not have expressed those feelings to the girls as they matured, there were undoubtedly signs that the girls picked up on that they were not wanted. The relationship with their father had an impact on their girls in terms of self esteem, in their later relationships with men and the choices they made.

## Vocabulary

trinity, mantra, scoliosis, catapulted, capstone, doppelganger



# PART ONE: Chapters 4 - 10

## Summary

When looking for her new apartment, Christa warned Cara not to move to Holyoke. Most grad students lived in Amherst or Northampton. But the rent was cheap and her apartment was large. There was even a sitting area on the porch in the back. They continued the Kindred photography project. Christa took shots of them together in Cara's bathtub. Cara was a natural before the camera. Christa told her to do what she wanted to do. Cara, as promised, wrote the text that went with the photos.

Christa always felt safe at her mother's house in Albany. She had fled there from the city streets after 9/11. She felt guilty for leaving her husband and grad school behind but she didn't want to live in a constant state of worry and panic. She drove into the city on weekends to see her husband, Jedediah who was patient and understanding.

Cara had written about the time leading up to being raped in the park. She described how she passed a man on a park bench without thinking twice about him. But he followed her as she climbed up a slope to a remote area. She played with her dog on the hill when suddenly she was confronted by the man who was wielding a thick branch and ordering her to come with him. When she refused, he grabbed her and threw her to the ground. He dragged her into the woods. She fought, kicking and screaming.

He brutally beat her with his fists until she lost consciousness. He put her sweater over her face and gagged her with part of it. He tied her up and raped her repeatedly. He warned her not to tell anyone, ordered her to close her eyes and count to ten. Then he was gone. Cara found her dog and ran home in terror. She was bloodied and her clothes were ripped and soiled. Before the rape she had been happy with her teaching job and life in general. But afterwards, nothing would ever be the same.

Shortly after leaving their father, Christa's mother began dating a man named Mike. He was a former marine and initially played with the little girls. But as the relationship went on, he grew stern and remote. Cara thought he was okay; Christa hated him.

Until they were five, the twins saw their biological father every other weekend. He would tell the girls that their mother was a witch and an evil bitch. Their father had a swimming pool and he taught them to swim in preparation for their vacation to Florida. He took the girls to a barber and had their long hair cut so that they would be more comfortable in the hot and humid Florida climate. He told the girls not to tell their mother about Florida.

Their father took Christa and Cara to Florida. One day he packed up and said they had to return because of their mother and the police. Their mother married Mike while they were gone. She told them that Mike was their new dad and that they were moving far away to a new life in Camp Lejeune.



Both their grandmothers were named “Josephine.” Christa sometimes wished that she was named Josephine, too. They had fun with Josephine Vivian, their father’s mother. Josephine Marie was their mother’s mother and died a year before the girls were born. When they were older, they both wanted to name their daughters Josephine but agreed that the first-born daughter would have that honor.

Their new home was a trailer. It was used and dirty; bugs ran all over when they first opened the door. The girls moved a lot after leaving their father. They fought like any other siblings but they always made up. They felt they were all they had. As teenagers the girls would sneak out wearing conservative clothes and change to mini-skirts and more stylish apparel later. Christa’s mother and step-father began fighting when she returned to college to finish her degree. She told the girls that he had left them and that they’d be moving back to New York after she finished school. The girls were glad to see Mike go.

After Mike left, their mother concentrated on finishing her degree in laboratory technology. After graduation she found a good job that made their lives better. Both Cara’s and Christa’s teachers noticed that the girls were naturals in writing and the arts. Both girls were voracious readers; Cara was a talented writer. Their mother believed that Cara would be a writer and Christa an actress. The sisters were both accepted to Bard in early decisions. Christa would be studying poetry and Cara fiction. They shared a dorm room the first year which they decorated in their mother’s style.

Cara married when she was 22. Being a twin, Cara went to great lengths to include Christa in her ceremony. Later Christa did the same when she married. She missed her and feared that Christa wouldn’t need her any longer. Her husband, Kahlil, knew that Christa was the most important person in Cara’s life. Cara had warned Jedediah that he was marrying both of them. Cara joined Christa on her honeymoon. Cara continued to barge in on Christa and Jedediah during the duration of their marriage.

Christa stayed with Cara at the hospital through the night after she was attacked. It was difficult for Christa to look at Cara’s battered face. Cara told Christa bits and pieces of her ordeal. The imagery of Cara fighting off the huge man was devastating to Christa. Cara had an out-of-body sensation as if she was floating above herself when she was assaulted. She watched herself die. Christa pointed out that she didn’t die. Cara responded that in a way she did.

## Analysis

In this section, Christa describes Cara’s neediness, dependent tendencies and her reliance on being with Christa even though it put pressure on Christa’s marriage and jeopardized her career plans. Cara is seen as self-centered; however, she was suffering from psychological problems that problem had a dual root. Her father had been abusive and her step-father harsh and militaristic.





The event that damaged her the most was the brutal assault during which she was raped repeatedly and severely beaten. Christa comments that the attack changed Cara forever. She had been in a happy place before it happened; she continuously spiraled downward afterwards and was never the same. Her dependency on drugs and on her sister became even more pronounced than it had already been.

The twins had a confusing childhood. They had a father who really hadn't wanted them. He would spoil them by letting eat things they wanted but that weren't particularly good for them. He told them vile things about their mother and he took them on a trip to Florida without telling their mother. He was stopped but, given his history with the girls and not wanting them in the first place, he probably was trying to hurt their mother.

Their step-father Mike was friendly at first but turned dictatorial and remote. He left after a brief marriage to their mother. The girls had to be confused about family life and especially about men. The men that were most dominant in their family were emotionally unreachable and self-centered.

## Vocabulary

ambient, festooned, piazza, interspersed, odyssey, murky, bedridden



# PART ONE: Chapters 11 - 14

## Summary

Cara was notorious for “borrowing” Christa’s personal items – clothing, jewelry, make-up. Christa in turn decided to help herself to whatever she wanted of Cara’s personal belongings. Cara copied Christa’s style hoping that if they possessed the same things that they would have the same lives. Cara’s family, friends and co-workers all looked out for her after the rape. The rapist was still out there which unnerved everyone. Christa was afraid he’d see her and think she was Cara. Christa began to feel a distance between her and Cara after the assault. Cara said that they couldn’t be twins because she was no longer “clean.” The police spotted the rapist on a surveillance tape and arrested him.

Christa stocked Cara up with groceries during her recovery. Most of it went bad because she wasn’t eating. Cara had lost the hearing in one ear from the savage beating. The detectives came to tell Cara that they had arrested Edgardo Hernandez for the rape. They needed Cara to identify some of his belongings and to identify her own things that had been collected at the crime scene. Cara lost it when they pulled the rapist’s underwear out of the evidence bag for ID.

Christa worked in New York City during the week and spent her weekends with Cara in upstate New York. She had been following this routine for more than a year after the rape. Christa was working toward her graduate degree. Cara was also in a graduate program but was limping along. She did not get along with her workshop peers who she felt gossiped about her.

Christa often arrived to a pile of dirty dishes in the sink and a stoned-out Cara on the couch. Food that had dropped to the floor spoiled there. Dirty laundry also stayed where it first landed. Cara had pierced her nipples and her wardrobe of “clean” clothes took up every empty space. The house was filthy.

Edgardo had refused to take an HIV test which subjected Cara to monthly tests and a preventative drug regimen that left her nauseated. She was terrified that she had contracted the virus. On one occasion Kahlil took Cara to a locked ward after finding her unconscious and nearly naked in the front yard. In the year following the rape, she had been to many rehab centers and would return healthier but would ultimately lapse back into drug abuse.

A doctor diagnosed her with PTSD, post-traumatic stress disorder, which sometimes led the victim to thoughts of suicide. Christa felt that the diagnosis might be the first step toward recovery. Cara had horrifying flashbacks and nightmares. She felt wobbly and had slurred speech. Deep down Christa knew she’d never truly recover. All the while she was shooting heroin and blaming the bruises from the needles on injuries from



falling. Christa felt powerless and at a loss. All she could do was ignore the truth and hope that it would fade.

Christa could no longer ignore her sister's dire condition when she arrived to find her asleep in her car on the driveway with French fries strewn all about. Her pupils were constricted to pinpoints. Bags of groceries in the back seat had spilled out all over the seat and floor. Soon after she flew to Sedona and collapsed at the airport there. She was taken into custody and placed at the Meadows.

Christa, her mother and Kahlil visited Cara at the Meadows for Family Week. She had written letters claiming that she was happy and ready to change her life. There were group sessions all during the week in which the family was required to participate. Cara vowed to stay clean and take one day at a time. The family promised to see her through it and support her in every way.

Midway through Family Week, Cara was asked to leave. She had violated the rules by having sex with another community member. Cara owned up to her conduct. She had sex with a younger man named Charlie and had fallen in love with him. Christa was furious that Cara had screwed up this opportunity. Cara's expressed her bitterness that Kahlil had not looked for her when she was gone too long to just be walking the dog. She came home to a filthy mess at home and told Kahlil to leave.

Kahlil packed up his sparse belongings in his pick-up and took off. He ultimately moved into a hippie commune. He was late to the courtroom on the day he was supposed to testify in the rape trial. Kahlil sat with Cara for a while in the courtroom. He told her he had met another girl and that she was pregnant. Cara rushed from the courtroom in tears. The trial lasted a week. The DA presented evidence including the DNA results that matched him. He was convicted and sentence to life in prison.

In April 2005, three years after the trial, Cara visited Christa in Spain where Christa was teaching photography in Burgos. Christa discovered that Cara was heavily into prescribed drugs. She had found a Pharmacia in Spain where she could get Klonopin without a prescription. Christa sneaked a look at her diary and found that she was very bitter over her divorce and that she had resumed her heroin addiction.

After Kahlil left her, Cara was in a downward spiral. She'd disappear for days and then lie about what she'd been doing. Christa broke into her apartment more than once fearing that she'd find her dead. Christa didn't bring up Cara's prescription drug problem because she'd been so lonely that she was just happy to have her there – under any circumstances.

## Analysis

The rape had turned Cara's world upside down. She already had issues but they were worsened and solidified by the assault. In this section, focus is on the impact that a crime has not just on the victim but on the victim's family and loved ones. Not much



background about Cara's marriage to Kahlil and the depth of their relationship prior to the rape but the assault created a chasm between the couple that continued to widen.

There are hints that Cara was promiscuous before the assault. After the rape, she and Kahlil apparently had no sex life. However, she was thrown out of her rehab center for having sex with another client – something that was strictly taboo at the institute.

Cara was diagnosed with PTSD which caused her to have thoughts of suicide. There were signs of deterioration that her family may not have taken completely serious. Her house was a filthy mess, a sign of depression and psychosis; her husband stayed away from her hidden in the den playing video games; and she was obviously deceitful about her heroin abuse. Her decline escalated to the point that she was committed by authorities to a mental institution.

Cara was lost in confusion. She told Kahlil to leave yet she was despondent over the divorce. She visited Christa in Spain where Christa was teaching but her main focus while there was getting prescription drugs to fill in between her shots of heroin. Christa seemed to be aware of the danger that Cara was in but she gravitated back and forth from being concerned to being angry and disgusted with her.

## Vocabulary

mimicry, cataclysmically, hackles, genetically, monolith, kamikaze



# PART ONE: Chapters 15 - 21

## Summary

The sisters took a train from Burgos to Venice. Cara had been to Venice when she was younger and loved it. But that was before the rape – Edgardo Hernandez had beaten the joy of life out of her. Cara connected with a dealer in the train station at Burgos and bought a small baggie of heroin. Christa was angry and distancing herself from Cara warning her that she wasn't going to spend the night in a Spanish jail. Cara snorted some of the heroin in the restroom. Cara was not in the mood to discuss her addiction; she wanted to have fun in Venice. The sisters stayed at a small hotel in the center of the piazza. They enjoyed the food, the shops and the sights and sounds of Venice for the next few days. Cara regretted that she'd cheated on Kahlil and was worried that she'd always be alone.

A year after their trip to Venice, Cara visited Christa. It would be the last time Christa would see Cara alive. Cara had moved in with their mother to save money. Her divorce was final and she finished her MFA degree. As soon as Cara arrived, she excused herself to the bathroom taking a plastic baggie with her. She emerged twenty minutes later looking flushed and happy. She had brought a bottle of champagne with her to celebrate her MFA. Christa went to the gym for a workout. When she returned an hour later, Cara had drunk all the champagne and was passed out on the couch.

There was tension between the sisters during Cara's stay. One day, Cara was shooting up in the bathroom. Jedediah confronted her but she denied it. He told Christa it was between her and her sister. She was disappointed that Jedediah refused to try harder. Christa packed Cara's things and ordered her to get out. She would not have anything to do with her until she cleaned up.

Christa made all the arrangements when Cara died then planned her own funeral. Christa dressed Cara in the gown she'd worn to her and Jedediah's wedding. Christa stared down at her twin lying dead in her casket. Death somehow made her look younger. Christa touched Cara's arm it was cold and stiff. It was almost as if the Cara's corpse was also her body.

Christa had a premonition about Cara's death. Christa had been at a small bar where Jedediah was reading excerpts from his book. She was feeling guilty about how she'd treated Cara. She tried calling her but kept getting her voice mail. When Jedediah answered her cell phone that evening while they were driving home, she knew from his reaction that Cara was dead. Her mother had found her dead when she came home from work. The police determined that she had accidentally taken an overdose. Christa stopped the car and got out, running through the traffic and shrieking at the top of her lungs.



Christa had a difficult time after Cara's passing. She thought of the pact that they had made as young girls. Whoever would die first would send a message to the other. Christa believed that the hallucinations she was seeing of her sister was Cara trying to reach her and tell her that she was okay.

Cara's former fiancés and boyfriends came to her wake. Christa invited Joseph Mario, Cara's last fiancé, to ride in the family car in the procession. Devon, another boyfriend and roommate, gave the eulogy. Kahlil did not attend; he sent three calla lilies. Christa stood at the casket and received the guests. There was a large sign with the word "Sister" spelled out in red roses and a display of photographs of Cara's life. Christa had been trying to repair her relationship with her father. When Cara died, Christa's efforts to reunite with her father died, too. She excluded him from Cara's funeral. Mike, their ex-stepfather came to pay his respects. Christa had the sense that people saw her as the living and the dead Cara. She assured every boyfriend privately that Cara loved him the most.

The family had decided on a cousin named Larry to preside over the funeral ceremony. He was a born-again minister and had reservations because Cara was unsaved and a junkie. Cara had died outside of God's plan. He would decide which scriptures to use. Christa and her mother were the last to leave the funeral parlor to join the procession to the church. Her mother sobbed at her casket. Larry told those gathered that Cara would tell them to make Jesus their Lord and savior. Christa was disturbed by his words because that wasn't Cara. She told the mourners that Cara would tell them to live each day with joy and to not be sad. She would want them to be dancing. Christa had prepared a prayer card that was handed out. It contained the prayer that Cara asked everyone to recite in unison at her wedding.

## Analysis

This section covers the last days of Cara's life including the last time that Christa and Cara were together. It was a pretty scene and one that haunted Christa for years. They had traveled together in Spain and Italy. Christa was growing more and more disappointed and disillusioned with her sister who was snorting and shooting up heroin. Christa was at a loss about what to do to help her sister. She didn't bury her head in the sand but she also didn't take any actions that truly intervened to change her sister's behavior.

When they returned to the States, things went from bad to worse. Cara's addiction had worsened and she didn't do much to hide it. In fact, she was becoming more and more blatant with her addiction. Perhaps it was a call for help. Christa suffered from guilt for years after Cara's death because of how harshly she felt she had treated her that last time they were together. Cara had come to visit Christa and during her stay was shooting heroin in her bathroom. Christa did not want her sister doing drugs at all but definitely wasn't going to allow her to use in her house. She packed her sister's clothes and basically threw her out.



Christa never saw Cara again. When she got the call that Cara had died, it was like she already knew. It is understandable that Christa felt guilty over their last time together. After Cara died she was at very low point in her life and had to figure out how to find resolution about her sister's passing and understand that she was not to blame. Guilt is one of the stages of grief that Christa had to learn to come to terms with.

## Vocabulary

asymmetrical, motif, retrospect, effigy, specter, pallbearer



## PART TWO: Chapters 22 - 26

### Summary

In the months after Cara died, Christa had been unfaithful to Jedediah. Christa, Jedediah and her mother took a vacation to Hawaii, a place that Cara always wanted to go. Among the items Christa packed for the trip was a Ouija board, wrapped in Cara's favorite scarf. Christa had been wearing the scarf with every outfit she wore. Cara had always believed that clothing or personal items was a direct link to the dead. Christa attempted to contact Cara in Hawaii using the Ouija board. She talked to Cara about Jedediah and her future. She felt Cara wanted her to ruin her life like she did.

Christa, Jedediah and her mother hiked the Nepali coast on the Kalalau Trail by a dormant volcano. Christa brought her purse filled with remnants of Cara's life with her. One of the items in her purse was a small box with some of Cara's ashes. Her mother had some of Cara's ashes, too. Standing by the water on the beach, she tossed them into the breeze over the ocean.

Christa's mother and Jedediah left Hawaii before she did. Jedediah knew that Christa had been unfaithful and wanted out of the marriage. But he was afraid of leaving her while she was in such a fragile state. Christa took several Valiums after drinking a pitcher of rum punches. She fell asleep in her beach chair and was woken by the bar manager. She was so drunk that she was told not to come back.

After Cara died, Christa's already slim build of 115 lbs. had dropped down to 85 lbs. Clumps of hair were falling from her head. Her teeth became loose and the peach fuzz began growing all over her body. She buried some of Cara's ashes in the sandy soil of Poipu after which she cried and screamed and swore at everyone from Jesus to Edgardo.

Nine months after Cara died, Christa flew home from Rome where she had planned to commit suicide. On the flight from Rome she began popping pills. A young woman across the aisle noticed and called her on it. She told the girl about her visit to Rome and poured her heart out about her problems. Sensing that Christa was near the breaking point, the woman stayed with her during the rest of the flight.

Christa kept her teaching job in the first year after Cara died. She dated men she met on the Internet even though she was still married. She felt that Cara wanted her to become her. Christa's drug taking increased in size and scope. Jedediah was still planning on leaving but he was afraid Christa would lose her job and be destitute. Jedediah saw her through some rough times but finally it became too much for him and he moved out.

That year Christa taught a full schedule of photography classes. She was seen by her peers as able and reliable. She was dating a man she liked who she referred to as "D".





Thoughts of settling down and having a family appealed to her. Yet her personal life was deteriorating and in shambles. She never opened her mail or combed her hair. Brushing her teeth took all her energy. On breaks during class, she'd find a private place and sob.

Drafting letters of resignation during her time at the school became the norm. She gave as much as she was able to give to her students. She encouraged her students to take themselves out of the photo so that it lacked any remnant of self-consciousness.

Christa wound up in the Payne Whitney Clinic for the mentally or emotionally disturbed. She was placed in the personality disorder "wing." Conditions in that wing ranged from dissociative identity disorder to major depression and to full-blown psychosis. She had checked herself into the clinic just before Thanksgiving after she'd almost overdosed. She had been alone at D's apartment when she made the attempt. A call on her cell phone from Jedediah saved her. A few days before she had begged him to reconcile but he was through with the marriage. He called her to apologize for rejecting her so harshly. She didn't really want Jedediah back, she wanted Cara back.

During the call Jedediah could tell that Christa was high. He demanded to know where she was but she wouldn't tell him. He convinced her to walk to the Emergency Room where she collapsed on the floor. D came as soon as he could and stood by her. He told her he loved her and didn't know what he'd do without her.

The clinic's Dr. Otto Kernberg was interested in Christa's case because of Cara's case. She was told that being invited to meet with Kernberg was like an invitation from God. Kernberg wanted to know of a time when she and Cara unknowingly acted the same and if she had acted the same since. She provided several times when they were little girls when they made the same choices independent of each other. Kernberg suggested that she been taught that her lack of free will connected her with Cara. The doctor ultimately decided that she needed more help but was not borderline. She was allowed to go home. D was impressed that she'd seen Kernberg who he referred to as the father of modern psychology.

## Analysis

Christa's life began to mimic her dead twin's. She was unfaithful to Jedediah and started becoming promiscuous. In an effort to find resolution to Cara's death and a measure of relief in the guilt she feels, Chris traveled to Hawaii, a place where Cara wanted to go, to disperse some of her ashes. Christa traveled with her mother and husband. She brought a Ouija board with her in hopes of contacting Cara.

Christa's health and personal appearance began to deteriorate along with her pill-popping habits. She does not write about being hooked on heavier recreational drugs like cocaine or heroin but the decline in her life hints at the possibility. She nearly followed herself to the grave with her plans to commit suicide but was saved by a stranger who sensed that Christa needed intervention. She writes fondly of Jedediah



who, aware of her many infidelities, wanted to leave the marriage but stayed because she was in such a fragile state.

Getting more deeply with the man she referred to simply as D was possibly rooted in the poor relationship she had with her own father and step-father. D was twenty years older and admitted to himself that he was a father figure for Christa. She innately knew that D wasn't for her but she was so confused and had become so needy like Cara that she stayed in the relationship beyond its shelf life.

Just as Cara had, Christa began to have problems with her job as well as with her personal life. She wound up in a rehab center and seemed to be going down the same path as her sister. A famous psychologist talked with her because he was interested in the "twin" aspect of her story. Although Cara had been referred to as "borderline" the psychologist did not conclude the same for Christa. It was a hint that she had not declined to the level that her sister had and that her sister perhaps suffered from mental illness.

## Vocabulary

reciprocate, planchette, tenable, ludicrous, malaise, intuit, dissociative, impromptu, blustery, solace, ideation, idyllic, formaldehyde, desecrated



## PART TWO: Chapters 27 - 31 and PART 3

### Summary

After leaving the clinic, Christa moved into D's apartment in Brooklyn and started going out with Cara's old boyfriends. She thought she'd learn more about Cara through them. Cara's emails told a story about them. The most common phrase was "don't mention this to my wife." Christa felt she wasn't cheating on D, she was doing research. D seemed to understand or at least tolerated her activities.

Many of Cara's male friends expressed their regret that they hadn't helped her in some way. Christa could relate to them on that point. Christa's relationship with D had started as an affair but had grown into one with true feelings. He was twenty years older than Christa; some people took him for her father. His age was a barrier for her in fully committing to him. D thought in terms of them marrying one day. He would accept it if she took a younger lover. Christa contacted a psychic who claimed she connected with Cara and conveyed her messages to Christa through the psychic.

Christa decided that she needed to see a therapist. She had suffered the loss of her twin four years before, gave up her position as a professor and moved to Brooklyn. She was in an unsatisfying relationship with an older man. She was hooked on Valium and had suicidal thoughts. She needed help. She began seeing Katherine to whom she described the pain she suffered from the loss of her sister. She complained that men used women but didn't love them. Christa revealed that her father had abused her mother. Katherine wondered if the violence early in her life influenced her choice in men. D had often commented that she gravitated to him because he was a father figure.

Christa felt that she was more forgiving toward men than her mother who didn't give them a second chance when they screwed up. Thinking back to her childhood, Christa felt she couldn't have survived without Cara. There was a lot she couldn't remember since Cara died. Therapy was going well. Katherine slowed things down to a good pace. After the eighth session, Katherine said she needed to clear the air about something. Katherine told her that she, too, had an identical twin sister who was dying. She took Christa on as a patient partially to learn how it was to lose a twin. That was the last time Christa saw Katherine. Soon after, she decided to end her relationship with D.

Christa went to visit her friend, Grace, in Rhinebeck. They discussed her relationship with D and infidelities committed by both of them. Christa explained how D couldn't make the commitment to having a family life; he needed options. Christa and Grace became closed after Grace lost her mother and sister to suicide within a few months of each other.

Grace had set up Christa with a man named Tony. They met for a drink in Manhattan for their second date. Tony had been a sniper in the Marine Corp in the first Gulf War. He had written a memoir about his experiences. Christa and Tony had both been raised by



strict military fathers and had both lost a sibling. His brother, Jeff, had succumbed to non-Hodgkin's lymphoma in his mid-thirties. Tony had trouble spreading his brother's ashes just as Christa had with Cara's remains.

Christa was considered the poet and Cara the writer of fiction. Cara was territorial about her writing, instructing Christa which topics were off-limited to her poetry. Most of the taboo subjects involved anything about the two of them. Once Christa became interested in photography, she cast the writing aside. Cara was also bossy about the car they shared. If she wanted to use it, Christa's needs for a car were secondary.

The twins got into a shouting match over the car one time. Christa needed to use it to go to the darkroom lab to develop some photos. Cara wanted to use it to go to a party. Christa grabbed Cara's thesis which was on the back seat, held it out the window and threatened to let it go unless she got the car. Cara grabbed Christa's thesis and thrust it out the window while driving with one hand. They were swerving all over the road. Christa screamed for Cara to slow down but she refused. Finally, Christa pulled on the emergency break. Both the theses were lost.

A year after she left Payne Whitney, Christa was accepted into the graduate program for Poets and Writers at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst where she was granted a full teaching fellowship. She had problems focusing on her work because of her Valium addiction. When she tried to quit, she'd suffer from hallucinations and withdrawal. But Christa wanted to write and alone went through the pain of withdrawal. It took five long days until the need for the pills left her. She was able to sleep without pills, wake clear-eyed and write.

Christa continued to see Tony and they were married three months after they first met. Four days after their wedding, Christa learned that she was pregnant. She earned the right to call her baby girl "Josephine." Christa worried that the child would look like Cara. Gaining a lot of weight during her pregnancy, she looked more like Cara who was always heavier. She gained fifty pounds but her pregnancy was easy compared to delivery. She screamed that she couldn't breathe and that she wanted her sister. Tony stood by her side and encouraged her that she'd get through it. She felt Cara's presence. Christa touched the top of Josephine's head as it crowned. Cara smiled when the baby was born. Her life was over; Christa's was beginning again with a new life. Josephine wasn't identical to anyone. She looked only like herself.

## Analysis

By the end of the story, Christa has learned a lot about herself and a lot about her sister. She has learned most importantly that she is not her sister. Her sister was Cara; she is Christa. Although she referred to Cara as the stronger, dominant one, it was Christa who in the end was the strong one. She tried to support her Cara while Cara was self-centered and live in self-delusion bringing many others along with her in her steady decline.



Christa had the strength to self-withdraw from the Valium she was addicted to. She wanted to make something of her life. Although it was tempting to keep taking the pills that dulled her senses, she was determined to break free. She did not want to wind up lying in the graveyard next to her sister before she gave her chance to have a full life. Once she got herself off her prescription meds, she was clear-eyed and writing came easy to her.

Christa was also clear-eyed enough to see that D wasn't right for her. He wasn't the life partner she was looking for and neither were any of Cara's old boyfriends. Christa was done with trying to be Cara. She could only be herself. Once she had resolved her relationship with Cara, her ex-husband and D, she was open to a new relationship one that would be satisfying and complete her. She married Tony only a few months after she met him. They had a daughter, Josephine, who was named after both grandmothers on Christa's side. Josephine didn't look like Christa or Cara... she looked like Josephine.

## Vocabulary

solipsistic, cathartic, camaraderie, tribulations, cursive, doula



# Important People

## Cara Parravani

Cara Parravani was the identical twin of Christa Parravani. Cara was the heavier twin, by several ounces, when they were born. She remained slightly bigger and heavier than Christa and was considered to be the dominant twin. Cara often displayed self-indulgent and self-centered behavior that placed great strain and pressure on others, especially on Christa.

Like most identical twins, especially girls, Cara and Christa had an extremely close relationship. Cara took advantage of Christa's more gentle nature by making demands upon her that Christa found difficult to reject. Cara became addicted to both prescription drugs and to hard drugs including cocaine and heroin. Her addiction worsened when she was brutally beaten and raped one day when she was walking her dog in the woods by her house.

The more deeply Cara became involved in drugs, the more demands she made on her sister. She was terrified to be without Christa. She inserted herself into Christa's life and placed great stress on Christa's marriage. Cara was in and out of rehab many times but always lapsed back into her addiction. Cara was staying with her mother when she overdosed in her bathroom. Her frantic mother found her but it was too late. Cara died of a drug overdose at the age of 28.

## Christa Parravani

Christa Parravani begins her memoir, "Her," by saying that she used to be an identical twin. She lost her sister, her identical twin, when they were 28 years old. The grief that Christa dealt with was magnified because of their close relationship and because they had always felt a part of each other. When Cara died, part of Christa died with her.

Christa had always deferred to her sister who was considered the dominant twin. Christa and Cara shared a childhood that had elements of abandonment and uncertainty. But no matter the ups and downs, the girls always had each other. When Cara was brutally raped, it was Christa who she wanted by her side. Christa worked in New York City at the time but would drive from the city to upstate New York so that she could be with Cara. Cara's demands on Christa's time and attention caused damage to both of their marriages.

After Cara died of a drug overdose, Christa had an identity struggle. Her grief was prolonged and she had to deal with feeling as though Cara was alive within her. Christa wore Cara's clothes, took on some of her personality traits and unfortunately began to follow her into drug addiction. But in the end Christa wanted to write more than she wanted to follow her sister to the grave. After a self-imposed withdrawal from prescription medication, Christa was clear-headed and able to begin a successful



writing career, find the love of her life and have a daughter who didn't look like anyone else.

## Mother

Christa and Cara's mother was never named. She was just called their mother throughout the memoir. Their mother was twice-divorced and usually had a man in her life. She was devoted to her daughters and raised them as best she could as a single mother. She returned to school when the girls were grown to get her degree in laboratory technology.

Their mother was the one who found Cara's body. Cara had been staying with her mother. One day they were supposed to get together after her mother came home from work to get Cara's car repaired. She found Cara passed out in the bathroom. She called 911 and Cara was rushed away in an ambulance. The police were involved and found a dirty syringe and other evidence of drug abuse. Cara did not survive the overdose. Her mother had an emotional moment in Hawaii when she stood on the beach and threw some of Cara's ashes out over the ocean.

## Father

Christa and Cara's father only lived with the family a short time. He had not wanted children but if he had to have a child, he wanted only a boy. He was stupefied when his wife had twin girls. When the girls were five, he took them to Florida without telling his ex-wife. His wife and the police tracked him down. More than wanting to be with the girls, he wanted to frighten his ex-wife who, when talking to the girls, he referred to as a witch. Although Christa had been trying to reestablish a relationship with him prior to Cara's death, she excluded him from Cara's funeral.

## Jedediah

Jedediah was Christa's first husband. They had a lot of common since both were pursuing a career in the arts. He was a writer who stayed behind when Christa went to teach in Burgos, Spain. He sent her new pages of his book to review while she was away. She took the job in Spain because they needed the money. The plan was that once Jedediah sold his novel, they would be together and start a family.

Ironically, the plot of Jedediah's book involved male twin brothers one of whom was murdered. But the surviving twin realized that killing one was killing both of them. Christa related very personally to the plot. The stress that Cara's demands on Christa placed on the marriage helped to lead to its end. Jedediah stayed longer in the marriage than he wanted to because of Christa's fragile condition after her sister's death.



## **Kahlil**

Kahlil was Cara's husband. He was tall and model handsome. Once Cara began to spiral downward in her drug addiction, Kahlil was at a loss as to how to deal with her and secluded himself in his den passing time playing video games and watching sports on TV. He worked long hours as a construction supervisor and was attending classes for a degree in architecture. After Cara was raped, the marriage was under great pressure from the trauma and from her addiction. Eventually, Cara demanded that Kahlil leave. He took his few possessions and left eventually living in a commune.

## **MichaelMichael**

Michael was Christa's mother's second husband. As a step-father, he was at first fun and attentive toward the girls. He changed shortly after the marriage and became harsh and distant. A former Marine, Mike told the girls that they were a military family which meant that they didn't boast about themselves. The marriage did not last long and both girls were happy when it ended.

## **Dr. Otto Kernberg**

Dr. Otto Kernberg was a renowned psychologist who D referred to as the father of modern psychology. He was familiar with Cara's case and when Christa was admitted into the Payne Whitney Clinic after her breakdown, he wanted to interview her about the similarities between the twins. After their meeting, Kernberg concluded that Christa needed therapy but was not borderline, a diagnosis that was made about Cara.

## **D**

Christa had a long term relationship with a man she referred to simply as "D." He was twenty years older than Christa and recognized that he was a father figure to her. He had a difficult time thinking in terms of committing to a marriage and children. Deep down Christa knew that D wasn't the right man for her. She moved in with him on several occasions but the relationship was rocky and when Christa was able to get through the worst throes of her grief, she was able to move on and ended the relationship.

## **Amma**

In her desperation to find resolution about Cara's death, Christa went to see Amma, a spiritual leader from India, who lived and worked in Manhattan. There were many New Age types that had shown up to see her. Others were sick and were hoping she'd perform a miracle for them. Christa was given a token that would allow her to share a hug with Amma. When Amma hugged Christa she pulled away and looked intensely at





Christa. She wanted Christa to watch the entire “hug” process so she would understand the emotional needs of the people.

## **Tony**

After Christa was able to clear herself of her Valium addiction, she was able to resolve the guilt and grief she suffered over Cara’s death. A friend fixed her up with a man named Tony. He had been a sniper in the Marine Corps during the First Gulf War and had written a memoir about his experiences. The two had their interest in writing in common and hit it off the very first night. Just three months later, they were married.

## **Josephine**

Cara and Christa’s grandmothers were both named Josephine. Their mother’s mother died before they were born. They had a close relationship with Josephine, their father’s mother. They both wanted to name a future daughter Josephine. They agreed that whoever had a girl first would use the name. Cara had no children before she died. Christa and her second husband, Tony, had a baby girl they named Josephine.



## Objects/Places

### New York City

Cara and Christa both lived in New York City on and off during their lives and careers. Christa taught photography classes there and Cara read excerpts of her memoir at a restaurant just before her death. After Cara got brutally raped, she relied on her sister and wanted to be with her all the time. Christa used to travel from New York City to upstate New York where Cara lived for a while to be with her. Christa moved in with her mother after the 9/11 terrorist attack because she didn't want to live in fear. After Cara's death, Christa moved back to New York to live with her then boyfriend in Brooklyn.

### Bard School

Cara and Christa were both very bright and did well in school. Their teachers in high school encouraged them to continue their education and helped them apply for various universities. They were both accepted at Bard College in New York and shared a dorm there which they decorated in their mother's style so that they would feel at home. They both majored in writing and the arts.

### Writer's Block

When the girls went away to school at Bard College, their mother made up special trinket boxes that she named "Writer's Block" for each of the girls since they were both pursuing a writing career. After Cara died, her mother retrieved the box and now has it nestled between photos of Cara on her desk.

### Holyoke

After leaving New York, Christa cautioned Cara not to move to Holyoke because most grad students lived in Amherst or Northampton. But the rent was cheap especially compared to New York City and there was open space and a feeling of freedom that was not possible in the City. Tragically, Holyoke was where Cara lived when she was brutally raped. She had been walking her dog in a wooded area when the rapist followed her, viciously beat her and raped her repeatedly. Cara was naturally traumatized by the assault and never fully recovered from it.

### The Meadows

Cara's drug addiction reached its nadir when she traveled to Sedona, Arizona, on vacation. As soon as she arrived, she collapsed in the airport and was taken into custody by local authorities. She was ultimately placed in the Meadows, a rehab center



in Sedona. Her family visited for Family Week during which they all were required to attend therapy sessions. Toward the end of Family Week Cara was thrown out of the facility when it was discovered that she had sex with another patient – something that was against the center’s policies and standards.

## **Burgos, Spain**

Christa took a job teaching photography in Burgos, Spain. She didn’t like being away from home and her husband Jedediah but they needed the money. He was writing a novel and had very little income. Cara came to visit Christa several times during her stay there. Cara enjoyed seeing her sister and took advantage of finding a local pharmacy that would supply her with as many prescription drugs as she wanted.

## **Venice**

Venice was Cara’s favorite place in the world. She had visited when she was very young and it remained one of her most cherished memories. When her sister, Christa, took a teaching job in Spain, she and Cara traveled by train and plane to Venice, Italy, on an extended vacation. Christa found the journey difficult because she was forced to put up with Cara’s worsening drug addiction. In one of the train stations, Cara spotted a dealer, bought heroin from him and snorted some in the station restroom. Cara asked Christa not to bug her about the drugs. She just wanted to have a good time in her favorite destination.

## **Payne Whitney Clinic**

When Christa nearly over-dosed on prescription pills, she was placed in the Payne Whitney Clinic’s personality disorder wing. It was at the clinic that she was interviewed by famed psychologist Otto Kernberg who was familiar with Cara’s story. He wanted to learn the similarities between the identical twins and how both had devolved into addiction. He found that she wasn’t borderline and, therefore, not mentally disturbed like Cara was. Christa was released shortly after her placement there.

## **Ouija Board**

In an effort to reach Cara after her death, Christa purchased a Ouija board which she brought along with her on a vacation to Hawaii. While her husband and mother, who accompanied her on the trip, were asleep, Christa worked the Ouija board and “talked” with Christa. When her husband asked her who she was talking to, she said she was talking to herself.

## **Cara's Ashes**

After Cara's death, Christa and her mother shared Cara's ashes. Christa was determined that Cara's ashes not be in one place. She dropped Cara's ashes in locales across the globe. It was her way of keeping Cara alive. Her mother threw the ashes that she had into the ocean while standing in the beach in Hawaii.



# Themes

## Identical Twins

Identical twins begin in the womb with a single egg and sperm when the fertilized egg splits. Both embryos are nourished but one takes from the other and becomes the larger dominant twin. Cara had been the larger baby and had drained Christa from the time of conception until her death. Cara was slightly larger and a few minutes older and was the more dominant sister. Christa often deferred to Cara's wishes but learned through the tragedy of Cara's death by drug overdose that Cara was much weaker than she had believed and that she was much stronger.

The girls enjoyed the same prank that many identical twins enjoy – changing identities. Christa and Cara only exchanged identities in seventh grade when they wanted to shake up their boyfriends who were ignoring them one evening. When Cara's boyfriend kissed Christa it was all over. Cara scolded her boyfriend for being duped and cheating on her.

Although there were more similarities between Christa and Cara there were differences. Cara was a little larger and always weighed fifteen or so pounds more than Christa. Christa's nose and feet were a little larger than Cara's. They teased each other about their differences. In the sixth grade, Cara was considered prettier. Christa was on the bony size which made her nose look even bigger than it was. Cara was more confident while Christa was the wallflower. Cara was named Queen of the Dance in the sixth grade.

When Cara died, Christa saw Cara everywhere. She had hallucinations of her dead sister; she saw her when she looked in the mirror. Christa felt more like Cara than herself. When Christa looked down on Cara's dead body in the funeral home, she felt she was truly looking at herself. Christa suffered through an identity crisis after Cara's death. Cara had been the most important person in Christa's life. They had been part of each other. Christa lost the person who looked exactly like her and had been part of her life from the moment of conception. It is understandable that such a loss is unique and all-encompassing – like losing an arm or leg.

## Psychic Powers

Cara believed in psychic powers and believed they could be used to connect with the dead. When Cara and Christa were in college they both got jobs as telephone psychics. They liked the jobs because they were able to conduct their business from their dorm room. Cara took to it more than Christa who did not feel comfortable scamming people for their money. They both held the jobs only a short time.

After Cara died, Christa recalled her sister's belief in psychics and the ability to connect with the dead. She was anxious to get in touch with her sister. Although she didn't fully



believe in the process, she went to a psychic to see if there was a way to talk to Cara again. She also tried to connect to Cara through a Ouija board. In both cases, she felt that Cara was speaking to her. But Christa was emotionally wrought with guilt and grief and the words she received from Cara may have been more wishful thinking than reality.

Christa went to see a psychic in hopes of contacting Cara. She needed to have resolution about Cara's death, the guilt she felt about it and the direction of her own life. The psychic claimed that she made connection with Cara who assured Christa that she had done everything she could to turn her life around; her death was not Christa's fault. She knew how much Christa loved her.

The psychic said that Cara was aware of the pain she caused her family and others. She realized that she lived a self-centered existence. Cara wanted Christa to live a full life and to be happy. Christa said she would be happy when she has a family and a full life.

While Christa probably did not fully believe in what she was hearing, the words were soothing and helped her to see her way through her grief. An individual like Christa who is going through the crisis of loss, will often reach out in ways they would have never imagined to find a measure of peace.

## Denial/Not Letting Go

Denial is one of the stages of grief after the loss of a loved one. Christa was stuck in the phase for quite a long time after Cara's death. Christa found it difficult to emotionally let go of her sister who had been the most important person in her life and represented her closest relationship. But letting go of her ashes, those final remnants of Cara's physical being, was just as difficult. Christa dispersed Cara's ashes around the world. It was Christa's choice that Cara had no permanent resting place. If she maintain some of her ashes, the physical Cara was still with her.

Christa left her sister's ashes in California, Germany, Hawaii, Thailand and Germany among other locales. On special assignment to photograph the fading rock group Poison, she found the musicians sympathetic to her struggles with the loss of her sister. She and Cara had loved the band as young teens. Being with the band brought Cara back to life. While riding on the back of the motorcycle of one of the band members, she tossed some of Cara's ashes in the wind as they drove. Cara would have loved that!

Christa and a friend left some of Christa behind in a trout stream. Christa even mixed some of Cara's ashes with her eye shadow and "wore" Cara. When she was on a trip Venice, Cara's favorite place in the world, she left more ashes there in the city's famous canal system. Venice was exactly as Christa remembered when she vacationed there with Cara years before. It was an emotional trip for Christa.

Christa tried to reconnect with her sister on a number of occasions. She had hallucinations of her sister. She tried to talk with those fleeting images. She attempted to



reach Cara using a Ouija board and went to a psychic who assured Christa that Cara was there conveying messages of hope and forgiveness. After Cara's passing, Christa wanted to "become" Cara as a way of having her back. When she dressed in her clothes, laughed like her and dated Cara's boyfriends, it was all a way of denying Cara's passing and trying to bring her back to life.

## **Guilt**

Guilt is a stage of grief. The guilt that Christa felt when Cara died of a drug overdose at the age of 28 was more profound because of their relationship as identical twins as well as other factors. Cara had been the dominant twin. She was more demanding than Christa and was self-centered and self-indulgent while Christa was more willing to cede to her sister's demands.

Christa had been aware of Cara's drug addiction for many years. She tried to discuss the problem with Cara but Cara turned a deaf ear to her concerns. Christa knew that Cara was heading down a very dark pathway but she felt powerless to help her. She saw her sister through many ordeals including a brutal rape, close-call overdoses and rehab failures. When Cara died, Christa was overwhelmed with guilt. Why didn't she do more? Why wasn't she able to save her.

The last time Christa saw Cara was at her house. Cara had come to stay with her for a while. As soon as she arrived she began shooting up heroin in Christa's bathroom. Christa had to draw the line there. She didn't want anything more in the world than for her sister to be cleansed of her addiction. However, she was not going to allow Cara to flaunt her addiction and carry on in her home. Christa packed Cara's bag and demanded that she leave.

That last scene would echo in Christa's memories for years. She blamed herself for Cara's death which occurred soon after she left Christa's house. Had she not thrown her out, would Cara still be alive. Christa was eventually able to achieve resolution about her sister's death and her role in her sister's life and death. While she was able to rationally conclude that it was Cara's bad choices that led to her death, she knew that a remnant of guilt would remain in the twin who was left behind.

## **Abandonment**

A theme that runs throughout "Her," the story of identical twins, Cara and Christa Parravani, who were parted with the death of Cara at 28 from a drug overdose. Christa felt like she had lost a physical, mental and emotional part of herself. It was as though her sister abandoned her in the primes of their lives. Although Christa experienced profound grief and debilitating guilt over her sister's passing, she also felt the anger and pain of abandonment. While Cara didn't intentionally abandon Christa, she was gone for her life and Christa felt the resultant emptiness and desertion.



Both girls had experienced abandonment in their younger years. Their mother was a loving and caring parent; however, their father never wanted them. He didn't want any children at all but if he had to have one he wanted a son. When the twin girls were born, it wasn't long before he left the family. He had a relationship with the girls until they were five. When he used them to get back at his ex-wife by "kidnapping" them to Florida with their mother's knowledge, it was the beginning of the end of their relationship. Their father abandoned them as a parent and he exploited the close relationship they had with their mother for his own purposes.

Both marriages of the twins ended in divorce. Their relationships were challenged by Cara's addiction and neediness to have Christa to herself. The girls abandoned their young husbands for the sake of each other. Cara needed Christa and Christa could not say no to the needs of her twin.





# Styles

## Structure

"Her" is separated into three main sections. Part One describes the close and unique relationship of author Christa Parravani and her identical twin sister, Cara. The section begins with Christa declaring that she used to be an identical twin. Cara died of a drug overdose when the twins were 28. The first part describes their somewhat difficult childhood. They had a father who didn't want them and later a step-father who was harsh and distant. They were both happy when he left. Their mother was their beacon – she was always there for them and the three had a close and loving relationship. The first section covers their high school and college years and their marriages. It also delves into the drug addiction that eventually ended Cara's life.

Part Two covers the struggle that Christa experienced after Cara died. As an identical twin, Christa felt she had lost a living part of herself. In a sense, she felt she had died and that Cara, always considered the dominant twin, had taken over her body and mind. Christa's own spiral into prescription drug addiction is depicted in this section which were intertwined with her grief and the guilt she felt about her sister's death.

In Part Three Christa recovers from her journey into addiction and through self-imposed withdrawal she kicks her drug habit. She sees life clearly and is able to pursue a successful career in writing and photography. She was also able to see more clearly her relationship with her sister and gain a deeper understanding of Cara and of herself.

Author Christa Parravani intertwined excerpts from the unfinished memoir that Cara was writing before her death so that Cara's presence was felt in the book.

## Perspective

The memoir, "Her" by Christa Parravani is written in the first person. While the book is authored by Christa, the voice of her identical twin, Cara Parravani is also present. Before she died, Cara was working on her own memoir. Christa found passages from Cara's book that she included in this book. By doing so, she allowed both voices to be heard. Identical twins are generally the closest relationships between two siblings. However, as Christa learned in her grief over the passing of her sister, they are not the same people.

The book therefore is from the perspective of both Christa and Cara. They were two individuals who saw things differently although they were so much alike in many ways. Christa explains how the dominant twin is usually the one that is born first and is a little larger than the other twin. Christa always felt that Cara was the strong sister but she realized that it was she who was able to survive the ordeal of her sister's tragic ending, to avoid the same end and to survive to live the full life that she'd always dreamed of.



The excerpts from Cara's unfinished book are in italics and, after reading Christa's writing, Cara's writing style is distinguishable from her sister's. Writing the book was part of Christa's recovery from her grief and a way to help understand Cara and gain a better understanding of herself.

Both sisters were professional writers and applied their skills in both writing and in teaching. In addition to her writing career, Christa taught photography at Dartmouth, Columbia and the University of Massachusetts. She earned an MFA in visual arts from Rutgers.

## Tone

Christa Parravani tells the story of the death of her identical twin sister, Cara, and her own struggle through the guilt and grief following her loss. It is an emotional story and was written not only to tell Cara's story but to provide Christa a way to vent her feelings and find resolution about the biggest tragedy of her life. Christa writes in a direct and non-judgmental manner about her sister and the ill-advised choices she made that led to her death.

Both sisters were writing memoirs about their lives when Cara died. Christa wanted to have Cara's voice in her book and included excerpts from Cara's unfinished book. There is honesty in Christa's writing. She doesn't seem to pull many punches about her sister's deterioration and her personal struggle and subsequent decline after losing her sister.

Christa gives the reader insight into the special relationship between identical twins. While each sister had her separate identities they had been so close all their lives that upon losing Cara, Christa began to feel like she lost part of herself. In an effort to keep Cara in her life, she describes how she wore her clothes, laughed like her and dated her sister's old boyfriends even though she herself was married. Only an identical twin could fully understand that unique relationship but Christa shares the joys and sorrows that was part of their special relationship.



## Quotes

My reflection was her and it wasn't her. I was myself but I was my sister... I learned... that one is looking upon their dead twin when really they are looking at themselves – is a common experience among identical twinless twins. It is impossible for surviving twins to differentiate their living body from their twin's; they become a breathing material for their lost half.”

-- Christa (chapter 1 paragraph 6)

**Importance:** Christa describes what almost hallucinations were after her twin sister, Cara, died. It underscores the unique closeness that twins share.

Mom put us first but also put us in the way of whatever moved her and, so, avoided the anxiety of the unknown, the fear of failure, the pain of opening up her heart and feeling her losses. Her selflessness was also her selfishness.”

-- Christa (chapter 5 paragraph 53)

**Importance:** Christa's mother gave up on her personal life and focused on her daughters. While she gave her children her attention and love she used them to avoid life.

I try to understand the truths and see how what-ifs and if-onlys have altered my memories. I remember in plain terms what I could have done and didn't, what I did and fumbled. I see my sister's life through the veil of my failure to save her.”

-- Christa (chapter 10 paragraph 1)

**Importance:** This quote captures the guilt that Christa felt over the death of her identical twin. The angst she experienced over her loss blocked her from seeing Cara's life as it actually was.

The doctor at Westfield said Cara had post-traumatic stress disorder with borderline features. He said being borderline meant teetering: she could alternate between composure and the terror of being left. She might make frantic efforts to avoid being alone. This fear might be so strong that she'd want to die.”

-- Christa (chapter 12 paragraph 50)

**Importance:** A doctor at one of the rehab centers where Cara was placed explained her condition. He also alerted Christa to the dangers that were inherent in the trauma that she was dealing with after being raped.

I don't care to write anything that sounds beautiful. Relapse. I'm a drug addict: veins dead, bitter, drunk on powder. I'm the twin to be ashamed of. Sister would never do such things.”

-- Cara (chapter 15 paragraph 12)

**Importance:** Cara expresses her innermost feelings in this diary entry. She admits



being an addict which she didn't clearly express to her family. The mention of her sisters illustrates the closeness of twins and how in the depth of addiction she still feels in completion with Christa, her twin.

Later, after Cara died, I'd see how easy it was for Jedediah to turn away from me, too. After we'd divorced I'd often think of this moment in his study. He'd been unwilling to help my sister through her brutal and terrible ordeal, and when it was my turn for mental collapse he'd eventually be unable to help me."

-- Christa (chapter 16 paragraph 61)

**Importance:** Christa unfairly expected her husband to help Cara find her way out of her heroin addiction. It was an impossible situation that Christa tried to pawn off on her husband. No one could help Cara other than professionals trained in dealing with addicts.

I thought: When Cara dies I'm going to get a divorce. When Cara dies, I'm going to move to New York City. When Cara dies, I'm going to be very thin."

-- Christa (chapter 16 paragraph 69)

**Importance:** Christa had thrown Cara out of her house warning her to get clean or she'd never have anything to do with her again. Her thoughts above that Christa had put her life on hold because of her sister's problem. It also reveals that she had a premonition about her sister's demise.

I fell to my knees before her in thanks, rested my head in her lap. She'd returned to me, just as we'd both promised. When we were girls we'd made a pact: If one of us died first, a sign should be given from beyond, a gesture to say we'd made it, we were safe: a flick of a light switch; a vase pushed from the mantel; a door blown open; a ringing phone; a visit must be paid. That was the rule."

-- Christa (chapter 19 paragraph 4)

**Importance:** Christa hallucinated after Cara died. She thought Cara had come back to her to fulfill the pact they made as young girls. When they were young, neither could imagine being without the other. Christa was finding that the same thing was true for her as an adult.

If you are a twin, you watch yourself live two lives – yours and hers."

-- Christa (chapter 21 paragraph 19)

**Importance:** This captures the unique closeness that twins share. It was especially poignant because Christa's twin, Cara, died so young.

If I have a soul, it was floating just outside my body, an inch or so above my shoulders, kept from traveling to the ceiling only because anxiety, rage, and panic had frozen me in place. Hours, days, and years had brought me to this: sisterless, divorced, and without a clear idea of where I'd escape to fix myself. I must die, I thought. Even if I had to do it by my own hand."



-- Christa (chapter 26 paragraph 6)

**Importance:** Even more than a year after Cara died, Christa was struggling with her loss. This passage illustrates the desperation that Christa was experiencing and how close she came to mimicking her sister's end.

There was simply no place to leave her, so I took her everywhere.”

-- Christa (chapter 29 paragraph 3)

**Importance:** Christa was referring to how she left Cara's ashes to destinations all over the world. It emphasizes how difficult it was for Christa to part with all of Cara and how it was emotionally crucial for Christa to feel that her sister was still with her.

Sometimes tragedy alters the course of our lives and we are freed in our traumas to live according to our true passions and desires.”

-- Katherine (chapter 30 paragraph 6)

**Importance:** Katherine, Christa's therapist, discussed the “good” side of personal tragedy. She herself had been a dancer but an injury ended that dream. However, it led her to a career as a psychologist which she loved as much as dancing.



# Topics for Discussion

## 1

What incident happened that turned Cara's life and subsequently those of her close family members apart? Did Cara exploit the incident to gain the undivided attention of her sister and others or was her reaction an emotional one that she had no control over?

## 2

Why did Christa take prescribed medications? What medications was she prescribed and how did it ultimately impact her life in a negative way?

## 3

Explain the unusual relationship of identical twins. After Cara's death why did Christa sometime comment that she felt she was Cara? Was Cara's death a loss of Christa's identity? Explain.

## 4

How did the relationships that the girls had with their father and step-father impact their later lives? How does abandonment play a role in how the girls viewed these men?

## 5

Why did the girls' father take them to Florida? Why was Christa trying to reconcile with him and why did those efforts end with Cara's death? Why did Christa exclude her biological father from Cara's funeral service?

How did the relationships that the girls had with their father and step-father impact their later lives? How does abandonment play a role in how the girls viewed these men?

## 6

What importance did the name "Josephine" have for Christa and Cara? Why was Christa happy that her daughter didn't resemble anyone and only looked like herself?



## 7

What was the family of patients at the Meadows required to participate in during Family Week? Christa was thrown out of the Meadows rehab center because she broke a rule by having sex with one of the other patients. Explain why the Meadows had this rule and why breaking it could have negative results for the patients and the center.

## 8

What caused the end of Cara's marriage? Why did she feel hurt when Kahlil told her that he was expecting a child with his new girlfriend?

## 9

What appeal did D have for Christa? Why caused the break-up with him?

## 10

Describe the ways that Christa tried to keep Cara "alive." Why did Christa take on elements of Cara's personality after her passing?