

If I Stay Study Guide

If I Stay by Gayle Forman

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



Contents

If I Stay Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
7:09 a.m. - 12:19 p.m.....	4
3:47 p.m. - 5:40 p.m.....	6
7:13 p.m. - 9:07 p.m.....	9
10:40 p.m. - 2:48 a.m.....	12
4:57 a.m. - 7:16 a.m.....	14
Characters.....	16
Symbols and Symbolism.....	18
Settings.....	20
Themes and Motifs.....	21
Styles.....	23
Quotes.....	25



Plot Summary

If I Stay is a short novel by author Gayle Forman. The story follows one day in the life of seventeen-year-old Mia, who has been critically injured in an accident that took the lives of her parents and younger brother. As Mia has an out-of-body experience that enables her to observe all that is happening around her, she reflects on her. She is faced with the decision of whether she wants to fight to live or let go.

When the novel opens, an inch of snow has fallen overnight. Schools in Mia's Oregon hometown are closed for the day. Mia, her father (who is a middle school English teacher), and her younger brother Teddy are home for the day. Her mother takes the day off from work, and the family sets out on a day trip. Mia, a serious cellist and classical music lover, is blissfully listening to a sonata when a truck hits the family's car, killing her parents immediately and seriously injuring Mia and Teddy. Immediately following the accident, she is unconscious from a traumatic head injury, Mia begins having an out-of-body experience through which she is able to observe herself and everything around her without feeling pain. Initially, she believes that she is dead.

Mia and Teddy are rushed to a local hospital. Then, Mia is flown to a trauma center in nearby Portland, where she undergoes surgery and is placed in the Intensive Care Unit. Her grandparents and other relatives arrive, as well as her best friend Kim. Eventually, Adam, her boyfriend, drops in to see her.

As the hours pass, Mia goes back and forth between observing what is happening around her and reflecting on her life up to this point. Her memories include being present at the birth of her brother, her father's transformation from a hard rocker to a teacher, her friendship with Kim, her love for music and the cello, her ambitions to become a great cellist, and falling in love with Adam. Mia hears a nurse say that the young girl's life is not in the hands of the doctors or the machines. It is Mia herself who is in control of whether she lives or dies. Mia begins to consider what her life would be like if she stays. Eventually, she determines that although having her die will hurt those who love her, they will recover. It is too difficult to think about living in a world where she has suffered so much loss. However, before she can let go, Adam arrives and puts headphones over her ears, allowing her to hear a piece of music by her favorite cellist, Yo Yo Ma, whose concert they attended on their first date. This causes Mia to think about not only what she has lost, but also about what might still be ahead of her. She summons all of her strength to squeeze Adam's hand, signalling her choice to live.



7:09 a.m. - 12:19 p.m.

Summary

If I Stay, by Gayle Forman, is not divided into chapters. It is written as a continuing narrative taking place over a twenty-four hour period. The book opens at 7:09 a.m. as seventeen-year-old Mia, her eight-year-old brother Teddy, and their parents celebrate the fact that a snowfall of less than an inch has shut down school in their Oregon town. Since her father is a teacher, he has the day off. Her mother decides to take the day off from her job so the family can take a drive to visit friends and later have dinner with her grandparents. Mia is excited because tonight she will go to Portland to see her boyfriend Adam's up-and-coming band called Shooting Stars as they open for a concert. Mia is also a musician; but, unlike Adam, she plays the cello. She loves classical music, and she is waiting to hear whether she will be accepted to the prestigious Julliard School in New York.

At 8:17, the family gets into the car and a discussion over which music to listen to ensues. Mia's father was a rock musician until Teddy was born, when he realized it was time to grow up. He returned to college and now teaches middle school English. After closing her eyes for a moment, Mia suddenly finds herself standing on the road looking at the mangled wreck of the car and the bodies of her parents, who are obviously dead. Then, she sees her own badly-injured body and wonders if she is dead also.

At 9:23, paramedics arrive and begin frantically working on her as passersby watch the scene. She reflects on her first cello recital, recalling that she had terrible stage fright but her father encouraged her and afterward gave her a cello of her own.

At 10:12 Mia's ambulance arrives at a small hospital. She learns that her brother is alive, too. She briefly sees Willow, a nurse at the hospital and a close family friend, before she is loaded into a helicopter and flown to a trauma center in Portland, wondering if Adam has arrived in the city yet. She reflects on her first date with Adam, when he bought expensive tickets to a Yo Yo Ma concert and told her he was attracted to her because of her obsession with her music.

At 12:19, Mia watches the surgeons and other hospital personnel work on her severe injuries, which include a contusion on her brain. Still outside her body, she goes to the hospital waiting room and sees her grandparents, reflecting that Julliard had been her grandmother's idea. However, when her grandmother injured her foot and was unable to take Mia to San Francisco for her audition, her grandfather had taken her instead.

Analysis

The book's first section introduces most of the main characters and establishes the premise. Throughout the rest of the novel, Mia is unconscious because of the traumatic head injury she has sustained, but she has an out-of-body experience that enables her



to watch what is happening in real time, including moving from room to room inside the hospital, while also recalling memories that give the reader a picture of what her life was like before the accident. This technique enables both Mia and the reader to form an assessment of whether or not it would be worth the fight to live after sustaining such severe physical injuries and such a devastating emotional loss.

The first picture that begins to emerge is one of Mia's family life. It is clear that the family is very close, even though she sometimes feels that her somewhat serious nature and affinity for classical music makes her stand out. Losing her parents will be a devastating blow for her. The book's initial scenes paint a picture of a normal morning in the life of a normal family, with lighthearted teasing that is a stark contrast to the horror that is to follow. Likewise, Mia is

Discussion Question 1

Why does Mia feel that she is different from the other members of her family? How does this affect her relationship to them?

Discussion Question 2

In what ways is music the basis for Mia's relationship with Adam? What attracted him to her even though their tastes in music are so different?

Discussion Question 3

Why is it significant that the car radio continues to operate even after the horrific accident?

Vocabulary

standstill, bellow, retro, sartorial, sardonic, valiant, guffaw, volley, exuberant, sidelong, meteoric, marathon, boon, careen, cajole, stylistic, dominance, ignoramus, tableau, cosmic, eviscerated, protrusion, ravage, intact, preposterous, ricochet, ablution, perimeter, appraise, fluke, bequeath, vintage, verve, prodigy, ferocious, interject, gauche, lament, blaspheme, procure, ensconced, stanch, aficionado, relinquish



3:47 p.m. - 5:40 p.m.

Summary

At 3:47 p.m. Mia is in recovery, where she watches as a social worker tells her grandparents she is in grave condition. She learns that various relatives are on the way to the hospital, but there is no mention of Adam, whom she really wants to see. She recalls that after the night of the Yo Yo Ma concert, she and Adam were uncomfortable with each other for several weeks. Although she enjoyed seeing his band play, she stood off to the side and out of the way. After a month of dating, she took him to meet her parents and afterward they were alone in her room. She was a virgin, and he was not. Their first experience together did not involve intercourse. Each explored the body of the other as if they were a musical instrument. The awkwardness between them disappeared.

At 4:39 p.m. a large group of Mia's family has gathered in the waiting room. Mia is most happy when her best friend Kim arrives. Kim, who is Jewish, goes to the chapel and, as if she is talking to Mia, remarks about the religions that are not represented there. Kim asks Mia not to die. Mia reflects on the beginning of her friendship with Kim, including the fact that they hated each other until they had a fist fight on the playground in sixth grade. Since then they have been best friends..

At 4:47 p.m. Mia thinks about how time is irrelevant in the ICU because of the constant activity. The social worker reports to her family that Mia's vital signs are improving but questions remain about the extent of damage to her brain. The social worker takes her grandparents in to see her. A nurse encourages them to talk to Mia. She tells them that's important because Mia is the one running the show, not the medical personnel. Mia reflects on how she was an unplanned but welcomed baby, raised by her parents' community of musical friends because she was the only child among them. When she was four, her parents began trying for another child. Eventually, they gave up. Then, her mother got pregnant with Teddy, which caused them to cancel a planned trip to New York where Mia wanted to see Carnegie Hall.

At 5:40 p.m., as Mia's grandparents leave her bedside, they discuss whether or not Mia is really in control. She finally realizes what the nurse meant. Wondering why Adam has not come, Mia reflects on the Halloween before her junior year, six months after they began dating. Adam had worn a Mozart costume. Although she did not usually wear a costume, Mia got her mother's help to put together a rocker chick look and wore it to Adam's show on Halloween. It was the first time that she felt that she was fitting in with him and his rocker friends. On the way home, she asked if he liked her better this way. He assured her that he loved every part of her, taking away the insecurities she had always felt about him.



Analysis

In this section, the author continues to explore the book's central themes in greater detail. While the reader learns more about Mia's biological family, it also becomes clear that she has a much larger "family" that extends beyond her parents and brother, including:

- Adam, with whom she shares a sexual relationship, but also a deepening emotional connection that is nothing like she has ever experienced.
- Kim, who is established as a pseudo-sibling with whom she shares many characteristics but also a number of basic differences.
- Her grandparents, who have been instrumental in major parts of her life, including her decision to apply to Julliard and taking her to the audition.
- Aunts, uncles, and cousins who hold a vigil at the hospital.
- Willow, Henry, and other close friends of her parents, who actively helped parent her when she was the only child among their group and will continue to have a strong influence as the story progresses.

This section also clarifies the book's primary premise of the fact that the choice to live or die lies not with the doctors and nurses who are caring for her. It lies with Mia herself. This idea is presented by one of her nurses. Although it takes some time for Mia to process the information and begin to think about her choices, other characters such as her grandparents and Kim seem to grasp the concept and act on it.

The depth of Mia's connection to Adam is also further explored in this section, particularly in her recollection of their first Halloween together. His selection of a Mozart costume and hers of a rocker chick outfit help solidify their relationship by bowing to their recognition of and respect for their differences as well as the traits they share.

Discussion Question 1

What is the significance of Mia's rocker girl Halloween costume? How does it affect her relationship with Adam? How does it affect Mia's feelings about herself?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss Mia's grandmother's belief in angels. How is it significant to Mia's realization that choosing to live might be up to her?



Discussion Question 3

Discuss the symbolism involved in Mia and Adam's first sexual encounter in her bedroom.

Vocabulary

cadre, taciturn, perpetually, metronome, pertinent, notion, platonic, stilted, aloof, skitter, chide, harmonic, quaver, magnify, ominous, tendril, droll, plush, renegade, gloat, mediocre, nemeses, elicit, gauntlet, dire, trifecta, loiter, mesmerized, amiss, repelled, euphemism, intact, adamant, foundling, contemplate, aversion, imbue, brazen



7:13 p.m. - 9:07 p.m.

Summary

At 7:13 p.m. Mia sees Adam arriving at the hospital with Kim. She realizes that she should have known her friend would go to him and bring him here. Out-of-body Mia returns to the ICU for Adam's arrival, but the nurses will not let him see her because he is not immediate family. As he buckles to the floor, Kim supports him, and they walk away. Mia reflects on the fact that she and Kim had both assumed neither would have a boyfriend until they got to college; so, Adam was a surprise. Kim was very supportive of the relationship; but, she and Adam never became close friends, which bothered Mia. Kim tried to explain that she and Adam were from different parts of Mia's life. Mia never understood Kim's idea that they were somehow bound together through her until now.

At 8:12 p.m. Mia finds her family in the cafeteria and learns that Mr. Dunlap, the driver of the truck that hit them, had only a few cuts and bruises. She realizes that his life has also changed forever. She watches Kim and Adam go into a supply closet, where Adam hopes to find some sort of hospital garb that will enable him to sneak into the ICU. Finding nothing, he announces that he has another plan. Mia reflects on the fact that she once considered quitting the cello and taking up another instrument that was not such a solitary pursuit. However, she had changed her mind when Kim suggested to her parents that Mia attend a music camp in Vancouver, proving that Kim knew her even better than she knew herself. Prior to going to camp, she had always played by herself or with another student. At the camp she learned that being part of an orchestra and competing with other musicians were means of improving. She loved her experiences at the camp.

At 9:06 p.m. pop star Brooke Vega, for whose concert Adam's band was supposed to open that night, arrives at the hospital along with members of her band and Adam's. They stage an ill-fated attempt to create a distraction to enable Adam and Kim to get in to see Mia, but they are forced to leave. As Adam and Kim are being taken to the security office, Willow, Mia's family friend, arrives and intervenes. Willow is a nurse at the small hospital where Mia and Teddy were taken first. Although Mia is thrilled to see her, her presence causes a revelation. Knowing that Willow would never leave Teddy and realizing that all her family members are here, Mia realizes that Teddy is dead. Mia then reflects on the fact that she was present for Teddy's birth. She was the first person he saw. That gave them a special relationship.

Analysis

This section explores Mia's relationship with Kim and Adam in more depth, continuing the idea that they are members of her extended family. As is sometimes the case with members of a biological family, Kim and Adam do not have much in common and have not become good friends despite the fact that both are very close to Mia. However, just



as her biological family has gathered at the hospital to support her, Kim and Adam are naturally drawn together through their love for Mia and their desire to see her live.

One of the book's more heart-wrenching moments comes when Mia sees Willow at the hospital and realizes what her presence means. Willow is a force of nature, taking charge of the situation even though she does not work at this facility and is not an immediate family member, again pointing out that family extends beyond biology. Mia has not considered the idea that her brother might be dead. Initially, she is thrilled to see Willow, knowing that she will help Adam and Kim get out of the trouble they have caused. Mia also realizes that Willow brings a strong but calm presence. It is only when she realizes that Willow would not have left Teddy at the other hospital, coupled with the fact that all her family members are here rather than being split between the two hospitals, that she realizes that her entire family is gone. It is this knowledge that will bring her closer to making the decision to stop fighting and die as the book progresses.

The importance of music in Mia's life and the influence others have had on her are explored. As she continues to decide whether to live or die, she remembers her love of the cello and the impact of her first music camp. Just as her grandmother initiated the idea of applying to Julliard, it was Kim who suggested that she attend music camp as a means of encouraging Mia to continue with the instrument she loved. While her family and friends have always been supportive of Mia's passion for classical music, at camp she met other like minded teenagers for the first time. She had found that playing the cello need not be the solitary pursuit it had always been for her. It could connect her to others who shared her passion and pushed her to improve.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss Kim's relationship with Adam. Why is it important to Mia for Kim and Adam to be good friends? Why does Kim think it is not important? Why is it important to Mia that Kim has brought Adam to the hospital?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Mia wish she could visit Mr. Dunlap, the truck driver?

Discussion Question 3

What is the significance of Willow's arrival at the hospital?

Vocabulary

reverie, cajole, emancipation, intimidating, vigil, circadian, frenetic, revert, reverberate, metaphoric, spiel, seminal, myriad, devise, diatribe, blasé, bemused, cordial,



manipulate, catastrophic, superficial, irrevocably, stupor, dissuade, agape, invigorating, semblance, ruse, rebuke, resilience, imminent, protocol, brandish, formidable, taut.



10:40 p.m. - 2:48 a.m.

Summary

At 10:40 p.m. out-of-body Mia runs to the hospital's pediatric unit looking frantically for Teddy, even though she knows she will not find him there. Returning to the ICU, she watches as "live" Mia enters a crisis and eventually is wheeled off for emergency surgery. She begins to wonder what it would be like if she stayed. She reflects on the only funeral she has ever attended, which was for a musician friend of her parents and Adam, who had died suddenly at age thirty-two. Afterward, there had been a discussion about what each person would like for his or her own funeral. Mia wonders if her parents' funeral will also be hers.

At 2:48 a.m., Mia has returned to the ICU following her surgery. Willow comes in and has a conversation with the nurses. It is apparent that she is now in charge. She brings in Mia's grandparents. Mia's grandmother begins babbling as she often does, telling Mia mundane news. This relaxes Mia, but suddenly she forces herself back to consciousness because she is not yet ready to go. She wishes that someone else could decide for her. Later, only her grandfather is there, weeping over her. He says that although he wants her to stay, he will understand if she wants to stop fighting. Mia is grateful. She reflects on how her father gradually changed after Teddy's birth, giving up his punk rock wardrobe and eventually quitting his band. She was puzzled that her grandfather seemed upset by the changes, and he told her that he missed his son's music. Mia learned for the first time that her father wrote song lyrics.

Analysis

The book's lengthy passage in which Mia recalls going to Kerry Gifford's funeral is significant because that experience has been Mia's only brush with death until now. Kerry had been an important member of her extended "family." He was not only an old friend of her parents and their musician friends, but he had become a friend of Adam's as he began to rise in the local music scene. Kerry had connected various parts of Mia's world. His funeral was important to Mia's experience primarily because of the intense discussion that took place among Mia, her parents, Adam, Willow, and Henry following the service. Mia's mother, in particular, was upset because the service bore no reflection of Kerry's personality. It had been planned by a family who did not understand the real Kerry. This recollection again reinforces the idea that family often extends beyond biological connections, as Mia's parents and their friends were closer to Kerry and understood him far better than his biological family. They also understood the need for his funeral to reflect who he was rather than who his parents wanted him to be. The ensuing discussion about what each person would like for his or her own funeral prompts Mia to delve deeper into the concepts that will eventually influence her decision as she considers the knowledge that her parents' funerals are now imminent and the very real possibility that hers might be also.



The strong influence of Mia's grandparents is also evident in this section as they sit by her bedside. Each gives her something she needs. Her grandmother gives her a sense of peace and familiarity as she rambles about everyday things just as she has done in the past as they garden or do other activities together. This is important to Mia because it has a calming effect after the traumatic experience of Teddy's death. It also makes her realize that although she is leaning toward giving up the fight to live, she is not yet ready to go. Her grandfather's private words to her make Mia realize that everyone who has spoken to her since the accident has avoided the delicate subject of her family's deaths and her own dire medical situation. She considers his words a gift as he not only acknowledges everything she has lost and the huge fight she faces if she lives, but he also gives her permission to go while encouraging her to stay. In making her decision to live or die, it is important that she knows that she has support no matter what she chooses.

Discussion Question 1

What is the significance of the lyrics to Mia's father's song "Waiting for Vengeance" to the story? Why was Mia so attracted to the song when she first heard it?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss Mia's father's decision to change his appearance and quit his band. How did these changes affect Mia? How did they affect her grandfather? How does her father's decision parallel the one Mia must now make?

Discussion Question 3

Why did Mia's mother become so upset at Kerry's funeral? How does the ensuing discussion about death affect Mia now?

Vocabulary

careen, pediatric, neonatal, oncology, SWAT, cauterize, perforated, gurney, maze, traditional, boycott, connoisseur, impostor, avowed, generic, repudiate, sallow, musty, momentous, proxy, afoot, impeccable, unilaterally, metamorphosis



4:57 a.m. - 7:16 a.m.

Summary

At 4:57 a.m. Mia is thinking about her father's song "Waiting for Vengeance" and wondering if her parents are sending her a message. Adam receives permission to visit Mia and is shocked by her appearance. He tries to warm her cold hands as he always does. Mia reflects on their relationship and the fact that tension has arisen between them recently over her decision to attend Julliard. She recalls talking with her mother about the situation.

At 5:42 a.m. Adam is gone, having rushed out after saying he had forgotten something important and would be back. Willow parades a series of relatives in to visit Mia, followed by Kim, who relates everything that happened overnight. Mia thinks that although it will be hard on her when she dies, Kim will be OK. Kim lists all the people who have come to the hospital, telling Mia that she still has a family.

At 7:16 a.m. a new shift of nurses arrive in the ICU. Mia has decided to let go, but she is waiting for Adam to return first. When he arrives, he begs her to stay, saying that if she does, he will do whatever she wants. He will move to New York with her, or she can let go if returning to her old life would be too painful for her. Then, he puts headphones on Mia's ears and turns on a favorite cello recording by Yo Yo Ma. As she hears it, she begins to fully experience her physical pain as well as all she has lost and all that her life might still hold. Her mind and body are one again. As she feels Adam holding her hand, she summons all her strength and squeezes his hand back.

Analysis

Her father's lyrics to the song "Waiting for Vengeance" are significant because they mirror Mia's situation and seem to be a sign from her parents. Although the song was written nearly a decade ago, its overall theme as well as each individual passage seems to have been written specifically for Mia. Various lines speak to the passage of time, the light going from her parents' and Teddy's eyes, lives passing by, decisions to be made, running out of fight, and other elements that now have special meaning for her. It is easy to see why Mia becomes obsessed with the song since she senses that it is being held out as a road map for her.

The book's theme of family is central to this section as Willow encourages Mia to stay by bringing in various aunts, uncles, and cousins who will continue to support her. Kim provides her with a list of all the specific people who will now comprise her family. As her condition continues to evolve, Mia begins to lose her ability to move from place to place within the hospital, signaling that her out-of-body experience is about to end as her spirit is being reunited with her physical body. The process is complete when she begins to experience physical pain for the first time since the accident, giving her a



sense of what she will face if she lives and solidifying her decision to leave. However, Adam gives her the ultimate gift by letting her hear the music that means so much to her, prompting her to visualize a series of scenes from her past as well as possibilities for her future -- the sadness of being called an orphan and the happiness of being with Kim in New York, spending time with Adam and playing the cello. Throughout the book, the author focuses attention on the importance of the characters' hands -- Mia playing with Teddy's curly hair; Adam and Mia playing the body of each other like musical instruments during their first sexual experience; Mia's hands on her cello; and Adam's habit of warming her perpetually cold hands. In the book's final scene, when Mia squeezes Adam's hand she begins to regain consciousness. This signals her decision to live. It is also significant that the final scene takes place twenty-four hours after the first scene, signifying that Mia has come full circle in her decision and will continue the cycle of life despite the physical and emotional hardships she faces.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Mia have conflicting feelings about seeing Adam?

Discussion Question 2

What is the significance of Mia agreeing to play the cello at the Labor Day picnic? How does this mirror her current situation?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the book's final scene. What decision has Mia made before Adam arrives? Why does his visit have such a profound impact on her? Name and discuss at least three factors that influence her final decision to stay.

Vocabulary

livid, contemplate, steely, wisp, vulnerable, absurd, primal, tacit, transcendent, premonition, extricate, relegate, sullen, defuse, stilted, decrepit, feign, lament, orifice, visceral, placate



Characters

Mia

Mia, the book's main character, is a seventeen-year-old high school senior. She lives with her parents and eight-year-old brother in a small town near Portland, Oregon. She is an avid music lover and accomplished cello player who is awaiting acceptance to the Julliard School of Music in New York. She is part of a close-knit family and has fallen in love with Adam, a fellow musician and guitarist in a punk rock band. She spends time with Kim, her closest friend.

Throughout most of the book, Mia's life hangs in the balance following a devastating car accident that killed her parents and her brother. As she lies in the Intensive Care Unit, she comes to the realization that whether she will live or die is her decision. She examines her life through reflections and out-of-body experiences in which she observes everything going on around her in a detached way.

Mia's Parents

Mia's parents, whose names are never given, die in a car accident early in the book. They are major characters because of Mia's memories and reflections. Her mother is a travel agent, and her father is a middle school English teacher. Prior to becoming a teacher, her father spent many years as a rock musician. He chose a different lifestyle after his children were born. Both parents remain free spirits with strong ties to their unorthodox past, although they are fiercely committed parents to Mia and Teddy.

Teddy

Teddy is Mia's eight-year-old brother. Although he dies shortly after the accident, Mia reflects on him throughout the book, including the fact that their strong relationship stems from the fact that she was present at his birth. She was the first person he had seen.

Adam

Adam is Mia's boyfriend. They met in high school, but he now attends college part time and plays guitar in an up-and-coming punk rock band called Shooting Star. He is very supportive of Mia's music, even though it is very different from his own. Adam is a strong influence in Mia's life.



Kim

Kim is Mia's best friend. Although they seem different in many ways, they have been close for many years. They are very supportive of each other.

Mia's Grandparents

Mia's paternal grandparents are close to the family and a major influence in her life. Her grandmother, in fact, is the person who suggested that Mia apply to Julliard. Her grandfather took her to the audition.

Willow

Willow is an old friend of Mia's parents and a nurse at a small town hospital in Oregon. After the accident, she is instrumental in getting friends and family members in to see Mia while she is unconscious.

Henry

Henry is an old band mate of Mia's father who is now married to Willow.

Nurse Ramirez

Nurse Ramirez is one of the ICU nurses in charge of Mia's care. Her insights influence Mia's thought process as Mia contemplates whether to let go and die or fight to live.

Brooke Vega

Brooke Vega is a rock star who comes to the hospital as part of an ill-fated attempt to get Adam in to visit Mia.



Symbols and Symbolism

Cello

Mia is a serious student of classical music, and she excels as a cellist. Her cello is a symbol of all that music means to her past, present, and future.

Halloween Costumes

Punk rocker Adam dressed as Mozart for Halloween, while classical musician Mia dressed as a rocker chick. Their willingness to dress completely out of character is proof that they respected and embraced their differences as well as their similarities.

Car Radio

Even though the car was destroyed in the accident, the radio continued to play. This symbolizes the role music played in the lives of Mia's now-dead parents and the role it would continue to play in her own life.

Waiting for Vengeance Lyrics

Mia's father once wrote a song called "Waiting for Vengeance." The lyrics meant a lot to her when she first learned them, but they come to mean even more as she wrestles with her decision to live or die. They seem to be a sign that her parents are providing a road map for her.

The Music of Yo Yo Ma

The music of cellist Yo Yo Ma is an important symbol in Mia's life for a number of reasons. In addition to symbolizing the level of playing she hopes to achieve, Adam spent a great deal of money for Yo Yo Ma concert tickets on their first date. Adam plays Yo Yo Ma's music for Mia as she struggles with the decision of whether to live or die.

Labor Day Picnic

Mia reflects on an impromptu Labor Day picnic her parents recently held. It is important to her because it was the last time the people she loved were gathered together. Also, it was the first time she played her cello along with her father, Adam, and other musicians. Several kinds of music were blended, just as her extended family was a blend of very diverse types of people.



Julliard School of Music

The prestigious Julliard School of Music in New York City symbolizes the excellence to which Mia aspires and the bright future she envisions for herself.

Angels

Mia's grandmother has always had a strong belief in angels, which helps influence Mia's thought process as she contemplates her decision.

Music Camp

Mia had always played her cello solo until she began attending a summer music camp, where she discovered the joys of playing with an orchestra. This broadened her love for music.

Wind Beneath My Wings

"Wind Beneath My Wings" is a song played at the only funeral Mia has attended. The song was inappropriate for the deceased, leading to a lengthy discussion about funerals and death that impacts Mia as she contemplates her decision.

Settings

Oregon

The characters in *If I Stay* live in a small town near Portland, Oregon. The accident takes place on a rural road outside the town. Mia's reflections on her life bring in a number of other locations within the vicinity.

Intensive Care Unit

Following the accident, Mia is taken to the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) of an unnamed hospital in Portland. Although this is technically the setting for the remainder of the book, Mia's out-of-body experiences and reflections on her life take the reader to other parts of the hospital and other locations where she had experiences.



Themes and Motifs

Choice

The primary theme of *If I Stay* is the concept of choice. Although she is physically unconscious throughout the story, Mia is faced with the most important decision she will ever have to make -- whether to succumb to her injuries or fight to stay alive. The idea is initially suggested by Nurse Ramirez, who provides not only physical care but also serves as emotional support for Mia. She seems to have a stronger connection to Mia than her other caregivers. As Mia considers her choice, she sometimes wishes that someone would make it for her by giving her an overdose of morphine or removing her ventilator. However, in the end she realizes that she must make the decision herself. Other members of her extended family seem to grasp the concept; but, only her grandfather gives her permission to choose death if that would be better for her. In the end, Adam also offers her an alternative by saying he is willing to back away if returning to her old life would be too painful.

The theme of choosing is also found in the story of Mia's father's personal evolution. After Teddy's birth, he gradually changed his style of dress, first giving up his rocker t-shirts, then his jeans, and finally his beloved leather jacket. Then, he made the ultimate decision to quit his band and go to college, eventually becoming a teacher. Although his decisions baffled and dismayed others like Henry and his father, he explained to Mia that the decision was not difficult because his old life had played itself out, paralleling the fact that Mia's old life is now behind her. It is time to begin her next chapter.

Family

The concept of family is one of *If I Stay*'s central themes. Mia's immediate family is a typical one -- two parents and two children who share many similarities as well as numerous differences. Throughout her life, she has also been supported by a large extended family. This includes biological relatives including her grandparents and an assortment of aunts, uncles, and cousins, as well as her parents' close group of friends. Later, Adam and Kim became important people in her life, blending into her biological family as well.

It is when her parents and brother are suddenly taken from her that Mia must rethink her concept of what constitutes a family. The idea of continuing to live without her mother, father, and Teddy is inconceivable to her, but throughout the 24-hour period in which the book takes place, she is given numerous reminders that her family consists of more than the members of her immediate household. Her grandparents have been a constant support system and will continue to be one. Kim and Adam make it clear that they will continue to be her family. Willow arrives at the hospital and immediately assumes charge, making her the new mother figure in Mia's life. A major part of Mia's eventual decision to live is the realization that although her parents and brother are now gone,



she will be embraced by a large network of other people who will now comprise her family.

The Power of Music

Throughout her life, Mia has been surrounded by music and its power is central to her eventual decision to fight for her life. She grew up with music as her father played in a rock band and she spent a great deal of time with his musician friends, who became an extended family for her. Mia took a different path by choosing classical music and the cello, which became an obsession for her and pointed her in the direction of a career in music and shaping her personality. Even after the car was completely destroyed in the accident, the radio somehow continued to play, signaling that Mia was alive and still able to experience music. Although Kim is not a musician and does not share Mia's passion, it is she who prompts Mia to attend music camp, where she learns the joy of playing and competing with other musicians. It is her non-musical grandparents who make it possible for her to attend Julliard. Music is also central to her relationship with Adam, as it is what first draws him to her despite the vast differences between their preferences. As the book concludes, Adam's deep understanding of the importance of music in Mia's life leads him to use a recording of Yo Yo Ma to reach her soul and convince her that her life will continue to have meaning despite everything she has lost.

Styles

Point of View

If I Stay is written in the first person from the point of view of Mia, the main character. The entire story takes place in Mia's mind as she lies unconscious in a hospital following a devastating car accident. As the book's narrator, Mia switches back and forth between the present tense, which she uses when talking about what she is currently thinking or what is going on around her, and the past tense, which she uses when she reflects on her life and relationships.

Using a first-person narrator means that the reader always knows exactly what Mia is thinking and feeling, including during her reflections on previous experiences. However, we only see the other characters through her eyes with no opportunity to get information from their own perspectives.

Language and Meaning

If I Stay is told from the perspective of an American teenage girl, so the book's language reflects that. However, the lead character is highly intelligent and well-educated, so there is not a preponderance of slang or urban terms that are sometimes found in other books depicting teens. Although the narrator is in a coma throughout the novel, she provides dialogue throughout the book both through Mia's observations of the medical personnel and visitors in the hospital and through her frequent reminiscences of her life up to this point.

While the book is easy to read, the author includes a fairly large number of words that might challenge younger readers.

Structure

If I Stay is not divided into numbered or titled chapters. Instead, sections are divided by the time of day at which each takes place. The book opens at 7:09 a.m. on the morning of the car accident that kills Mia's family and gravely injures her. Subsequent sections take place at varying intervals throughout the next twenty-four hours as Mia struggles with her decision about whether to live or die. The final section takes place at 7:16 on the morning following the accident.

Narrated by Mia, the book weaves back and forth between the present tense -- events Mia witnesses and her real-time thought process -- and the past tense, which the author uses to paint a strong picture of Mia's life before the accident. Using this style gives the reader vital insights into Mia's family life, her relationship with Adam and Kim, and the development of her love of music. These insights make it possible for the reader to

better understand why Mia struggles with the decision about whether she should stay or go.



Quotes

You wouldn't expect the radio to work afterward. But it does.

-- Mia (8:17 a.m.)

Importance: Music is an integral part of not only Mia's life, but also that of her parents. The fact that music continues to play after her parents die and as Mia struggles for life demonstrates that the link continues.

I stopped walking. I could hear the water lapping below. "Why?" I asked. "Why me?" "I've never seen anyone get as into music as you do. It's why I like to watch you practice. You get the cutest crease in your forehead, right there," Adam said, touching me above the bridge of my nose. "I'm obsessed with music and even I don't get transported like you do.

-- Mia and Adam (10:12 a.m.)

Importance: This exchange takes place on Mia and Adam's first date and underscores the role music plays in both of their lives and its role in bringing them together.

And I didn't know how to rock-talk at all. It was a language I should've understood, being both a musician and Dad's daughter, but I didn't. It was like how Mandarin speakers can sort of understand Cantonese but not really, even though non-Chinese people assume all Chinese can communicate with one another, even though Mandarin and Cantonese are actually different.

-- Mia (3:47 p.m.)

Importance: This demonstrates that Mia and Adam, although drawn together by a mutual love of music, had vastly different musical backgrounds and interests. They are similar at their cores.

You might think that the doctors or nurses or all this is running the show," she says, gesturing to the wall of medical equipment. "Nuh-uh. She's running the show. Maybe she's just biding her time. So you talk to her. You tell her to take all the time she needs, but to come on back. You're waiting for her.

-- Nurse (4:47 p.m.)

Importance: Hearing this comment from her nurse gives Mia her first understanding that the choice to live or die might be up to her.

But now that Adam is here, I'm paralyzed. I'm scared to see him. To see his face. I've seen Adam cry twice. Once when we watched *It's a Wonderful Life*. And another time when we were in the train station in Seattle and we saw a mother yelling and swatting her son who had Down syndrome. He just got quiet and it was only when we were walking away that I saw the tears rolling down his cheeks.

-- Mia (7:13 p.m.)



Importance: This passage adds power to the book's final scene in which Adam sobs at Mia's bedside.

Why? I mean what can you do in a second?" "Adam pauses for a second. His eyes, which are normally a kind of mutt's mixture of gray and brown and green, have gone dark. 'So I can show her that I'm here. That someone's still here.

-- Kim and Adam (8:12 p.m.)

Importance: This quote demonstrates that Adam understands the enormity of the loss of Mia's family and the importance of letting her know that she is not alone in the hope that she will want to recover.

I'm so busy celebrating Willow's arrival that the implication of her being here takes a few moments to sink in, but when it does, it hits me like a jolt of electricity.

-- Mia (9:06 p.m.)

Importance: Seeing that Willow is at the Portland hospital with her lets Mia know that her brother, who had been at the hospital where Willow is a nurse, has died.

I'm only ten years older than him, but it's like I've already had so much more life. It is unfair. If one of us should have been left behind, if one of us should be given the opportunity for more life, it should be him.

-- Mia (10:40 p.m.)

Importance: The impact of her brother's death at such a young age is beginning to affect Mia's decision to stop fighting and die.

In the quiet corner of the ICU I start to really think about the bitter things I've managed to ignore so far today. What would it be like if I stay? What would it feel like to wake up an orphan? To never smell Dad smoke a pipe? To never stand next to Mom quietly talking as we do the dishes? To never read Teddy another chapter of Harry Potter? To stay without them?

-- Mia (10:40 p.m.)

Importance: In this passage, Mia finally begins to come to terms with everything she has lost and the life that awaits her if she stays. She takes another step toward making a decision.

For the first time since I realized that Teddy was gone, too, I feel something unclench. I feel myself breathe. I know that Gramps can't be that late-inning pinch hitter I'd hoped for. He won't unplug my breathing tube or overdose me with morphine or anything like that. But this is the first time today that anyone has acknowledged what I have lost. I know that the social worker warned Gran and Gramps not to upset me, but Gramps's recognition, and the permission he just offered me -- it feels like a gift.

-- Mia (2:48 a.m.)

Importance: Having her grandfather tell her that it's okay if she wants to go gives Mia a



sense of relief that she will not be letting down her loved ones if she decides to stop fighting. Rather than shielding her from the truth that she already knows, he gives her the gift of the freedom to make her own choice.

Dad sighed. 'It wasn't hard to do. I'd played that part of my life out. It was time. I didn't even think twice about it, in spite of what Gramps or Henry might think. Sometimes you make choices in life and sometimes choices make you.

-- Mia's father (2:48 a.m.)

Importance: Underscoring the book's theme about making choices, Mia's father explains why the seemingly-difficult choice of giving up his band and changing his style of dress was, in fact, simply an evolution rather than a conscious choice.

I try to stand up to get away, but something has happened to me since I went back into surgery. I no longer have the strength to move. It takes all my effort to sit upright in my chair. I can't run away; all I can do is hide. I curl my knees into my chest and close my eyes.

-- Mia (4:57 a.m.)

Importance: This passage demonstrates that out-of-body Mia is gradually being integrated back into her own body.

Please, Mia," he implores. "Don't make me write a song.

-- Adam (4:57 a.m.)

Importance: This quote refers to a conversation in which Mia complains that Adam never writes songs about her. He replies that he is not good at writing sappy love songs, adding that if she wants a song, she will have to cheat on him. His comment here is his way of asking her to live so he will not have a devastating incident about which he can write.

She stops now. Leans over me so that the wisps of her hair tickle my face. She kisses me on the forehead. "You still have a family," she whispers.

-- Kim (5:42 a.m.)

Importance: Kim is Mia's best friend. In this passage, she demonstrates that she understands that Mia's loss is devastating. However, if Mia decides to live, she will not be alone.