

# **Kissing Doorknobs Study Guide**

**Kissing Doorknobs by Terry Spencer Hesser**

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# Plot Summary

Tara Sullivan, the narrator of *Kissing Doorknobs*, is a young girl who feels like she is taken over by 'tyrants' who make her think thoughts she can't control. It starts with the singsong 'Step on a crack, break your mother's back', which repeats endlessly, no matter what she is doing. As she pays too-close attention to the things around her, she begins to worry as well, and then her anxieties won't shut off. Things get worse and worse for Tara as her 'quirks' alienate her friends and exasperate her family, but she never feels like she can stop. She finally gets relief when a friend of father's tells her that she might have obsessive compulsive disorder, which is a condition shared by millions of other people. With a diagnosis, she starts to see a therapist, and get control over the 'tyrants' and the things they're always telling her.

Tara's story begins when she is in fifth grade and she starts to repeat "Step on a crack, break your mother's back," and then to obsessively count cracks in the sidewalk. She pushes her friends, Keesha, Anna and Kristin away, sometimes literally, when they interrupt her, but she cannot explain why she needs to count or why she is so impatient to be interrupted. There are light moments where it seems like Tara might be able to compensate for her strange habits, and when she tells her friends about them, they love her anyway, but the problems get worse and worse over time, and eventually she drives her friends away.

The biggest problem for Tara is her relationship with her mother, for her mother's nerves are completely shot with Tara's obsessive counting, and then with her habit of praying all the time. Tara can't stop this behavior, but her mother ends up trying to shake it out of her, or slap it out of her, and the low point of their relationship comes at the carnival when Tara's mother shakes her violently because Tara has been crossing herself all through a ride.

Things seem like they might be getting better for Tara in eighth grade, when she befriends a tough girl named Donna DeLuca, whose parents are never home. Donna doesn't judge Tara, so Tara doesn't have as many reasons for strange behavior with her, but her freedom only gives her more room to be anxious about things, and it doesn't sit well with her family, who are still upset about her compulsive behavior. Another low point comes at Christmas, when Tara needs everyone to sit in their accustomed seats—her father stalks out, and her mother and grandparents leave as well, and the meal is ruined.

Things turn around for Tara when her father's friend Mr. Jacobson comes over and recognizes some of Tara's behaviors. He tells her that she might have obsessive compulsive disorder, and he puts her in touch with a boy named Sam who used to wash his hands compulsively out of a fear of contamination. Tara gets help from Susan Leopardi, a therapist, and begins to overcome her fears and repetitive behaviors by imagining the things that make her most afraid, and trying to diminish their effect. In the end, Tara gets to prove her recovery by being the one who gives Sam encouragement

and advice when the death of his pet parakeet sends him back into obsessive behavior and fears.



# Chapters 1-2

## Chapters 1-2 Summary

In Chapter 1, Tara Sullivan starts to hear the catch phrase, Step on a crack, break your mother's back, all the time. At school, at dinner, during homework. She describes herself as someone who was normal until it started, but now she cannot get it to stop. She counts things compulsively, and when a girl named Emily interrupts her, she is mean to her. Tara's neighbor, Mrs. Scott, sees her fleeing from her friend, and calls to her and she doesn't hear, so Mrs. Scott comes over and grabs her. Tara sees Kevin and Richard, her classmates, watching her get reprimanded by her neighbor, and they laugh at her. This breaks her down, and she starts to cry. She runs home, and Mrs. Scott asks her where she's going, she says that she forgot something at home. Her classmates notice her confusion, and whatever certainty she had about herself dissolves. After a moment to try to compose herself, she heads off to school again, wondering what's wrong with her.

In Chapter 2, Tara Sullivan wakes up from a nightmare in which a monster has come from a block away to menace the neighborhood. Tara is about to be killed when she wakes up, but when she goes to her parents - who do not like her sleeping in their bed - her mother's kindness only fuels her fears. Tara's eczema follows her worries, manifesting on her skin in red itchy patches. She makes her mother tell her nicely and patiently that it was just a dream, and when she can see that there isn't any reluctance or impatience, she finally believes her.

Tara says that she spent a lot of time with her mother until kindergarten, but starting school was hard, and she was inconsolable when her mother dropped her off. Her friends, Keesha, Kristin and Anna, took care of her for a few months until she adjusted. But she says that she is still upset by certain things, like fire drills, and the threat of disaster in general. Tara is known as a worry-wart, but the adults generally believe she will outgrow her anxieties.

Tara says that she is sent to catechism classes starting in first grade, and she begins to worry over original sin, and the fate of unbaptized babies. She is scared by her role in Christ's crucifixion, and she makes long, detailed confessions to a bored priest.

She tells the priest about having gone into her parents' room after having a nightmare and when she rolled under their bed, they woke up and couldn't find her. She confesses to staying under the bed and letting them get hysterical.

Tara says that the lines outside her confessional were always long and she got a reputation for protracted confessions. She is compelled to confess 'Everything.'



## Chapters 1-2 Analysis

In Chapter 1, Tara Sullivan is having a hard time with voices in her head. She sounds sweet and funny, with a dry sense of humor and a self-deprecating way of putting things. In a voice that sounds much like a child's voice, Hesser has created a character who represents her fears from the inside, so the reader experiences Tara's confusion and frustration in the terms she herself uses. She doesn't have much control over things and one thing will often lead to another, so that her fears build on one another, and spiral out toward hysterical outbursts.

In Chapter 2, Tara seems to be tracing the history of her malady, but she is also just narrating a normal childhood, with strong images of the time she spent with her mother and the atmosphere of her youth. This draws the reader in and creates some sympathy with her character, so that her fears seem somewhat painful. The reader wants what Tara wants for herself: to be normal, to be free of her anxieties and the eczema that seems to be related to them.



# Chapters 3-4

## Chapters 3-4 Summary

Chapter 3 starts in fifth grade, which Tara says that is the best year of her life. She loves her family and her teacher and her friends. Tara says that her friend Kristin worries about her weight, and Keesha is black and "full of theatrical attitude" (p. 32). Anna is a "jock" and performs perfect dives at the pool. Tara is afraid of the germs in the pool, even though she says that she knows there is "enough chlorine to turn us all into summer blondes" (p. 32). When the girls share their fears, Anna says that she is afraid of Freddy Krueger. Keesha says that it's Dracula who scares her, and Tara says that she is afraid of her own thoughts. Her friends say they are afraid of her thoughts, and they laugh so that this only actually makes intimacy between them all.

In gym class, Tara's least favorite, Tara says that she is a daydreamer who uses humor to her advantage. Wendy, the captain of the volleyball team, screams at her when she misses a ball, and kicks her off the team, which she says is a relief. When Wendy asks her why she never hit the ball, Tara asks "what's the point? If I hit it back to them, They'll just hit it back to us. So why not just keep it, as long as they insist on hitting it over here?" (p. 36). Tara says that tests take her a long time, because she looks at all the options on a multiple choice test in exquisite detail, and she can never finish.

Tara begins to worry again, about things happening to her parents, and she is suspicious that she might be at fault for her fears, as if they are happening because she deserves to be punished for something. When her mother gets a note from her teacher accusing her of not paying attention when she is comforting herself by drawing pictures during class, Tara says, "I pay attention to lots of stuff...more than most of the kids! I Have to pay attention to all different stuff...at the same time! I think I have attention overload!" p. 39).

Tara says that she doesn't tell her mother that she worries all the time, but by January of fifth grade, school work is getting harder. Tara is still using humor to keep herself afloat, but she is not doing well. When Tara is talking about the lessons at home, she says that the teacher told the class to call the police if they saw their parents using drugs. Tara's mother says that she smoked pot when she was young, and now Tara is upset with her mother for having done something wrong. Tara says that she begins to keep her mother under surveillance, in case she is still taking drugs. She loses a lot of sleep worrying over her mother's drug use, and her tired appearance generates a lot of talk among teachers and her parents, but no one is doing anything about her worries, yet.

At the end of this chapter, someone says Step on a crack, break your mother's back, and Tara says that "my entire life changed." (p. 46).

In Chapter 4, Tara says that "invisible dictators had snuck into my brain" (p. 47) and repeated Step on a crack, break your mother's back, again and again. She cannot think



other thoughts. She invents excuses why she cannot walk with people, while she devotes all her attention to counting the cracks in the sidewalk. She watches people start to treat her like a freak, but she cannot stop counting. She starts to lie about her behavior, to cover up her counting, and then feels wracked with guilt for lying. Keesha asks her what's going on, and Tara confesses to counting the sidewalk cracks. She cries with Keesha and the other students confronting her, but her friends make light of her counting, and invite her to be the scorekeeper for their Little League games.

When Tara's mother asks her what happened to Mrs. Scott, Tara lies about forgetting her homework and coming home. When Tara doesn't really answer, her mother bursts out laughing, and dismisses the whole thing by calling Mrs. Scott a "nosy, presumptuous busybody" (p. 54).

## Chapters 3-4 Analysis

In Chapter 3, the misunderstanding that surrounds Tara - that her classmates and teachers think she is a class clown who wants attention - is almost tragic, for hiding what the reader can see is a deep anxiety about everything. This chapter gives the reader an inside portrait of a student who is struggling to keep up with every single thing her life throws at her, but the people around her are all telling their own stories about her, and about everything. They don't really notice just how dire Tara's fears are. This disparity, which comes from dramatic irony, makes Tara seem like a tragic figure, and it takes some of the reader's pleasure away, when she skates through harrowing situations. The dangers she confronts are never really addressed.

In Chapter 4, Tara's anxieties take on the magnitude they had when she started the novel: counting cracks, and splitting off from everyday society. The people around her make efforts to accommodate her 'quirks' but from the reader's vantage point of being inside of Tara's head. These efforts are still less comical than they are tragic, and the pressure is really starting to build for Tara. She needs to be understood and diagnosed so she can be helped, and the reader needs to see her taken care of. Her pain is hard to watch.





# Chapters 5-6

## Chapters 5-6 Summary

In Chapter 5, Keesha does not let Tara walk alone to catechism class, and calls her Count Taracula to make fun of her. When Tara thinks "Keesha is an a\*\*hole" the thought replicates, and she thinks Sister Margaret is, even God is. Now she is afraid of her thoughts for real, and feels the need to go to confession.

In Chapter 6, in fear of her sinful thoughts, Tara says that she begins to study religion. She begins to pray for people who curse, but this irritates her mother, who gets angry with her, and even threatens to kill her.

Tara's mother complains that the catechism is making Tara like this, but her father says that she herself is not acting very saintly in how she is dealing with her daughter. Tara asks her sister Greta if she is crazy, and Greta says she doesn't know—she is so unblinking that Tara is somehow reassured. Tara makes Greta laugh, and being grounded doesn't seem so bad.

Tara overhears her parents discussing her. Her mother wonders if her condition is their fault, but her father says that it's just a stage. When he returns the question to his wife, Tara is torn apart with anxiety and dismay. She says that she is afraid her parents will divorce on her account, and Greta offers to beat them up for her.

The family internist asks Tara questions, and comes up with a diagnosis of "Insecurities and self-esteem problems" (p. 64).

## Chapters 5-6 Analysis

In Chapter 5, the ability one has in language, to mix and match terms, is terrifying to Tara, and when she makes the leap from "Keesha is an a\*\*hole" to "God is an..." (p. 56) she is terrified by the fact that she lacks such restraint that she can even conceive such a thought. She is crushed with guilt, and needs to confess, and even though the reader knows that the 'imp of the perverse' that encourages these irreverent thoughts is normal, Tara's fear makes her seem more and more tragic as a character.

In Chapter 6, now that the problem starts to blossom in Tara's life, her attempts to compensate further complicate the problem, and she develops a religious language for the emotions that accompany her torturous mental life. This language both gives her strength as the routine of prayer organizes her feelings and isolates her inside of a ritual her mother, for one, does not share with her. This conflict between Tara and her mother leads to some profoundly hard feelings between them at the same that it ends up sending her to an internist for psychological evaluation. But the internist does not reach the actual problems, and sends her away with a bland diagnosis, which strikes the reader as insufficient, given Tara's ongoing anxieties, fears, and mental workings.



## Chapters 7-8

### Chapters 7-8 Summary

In Chapter 7, Tara says that the summer between fifth and sixth grades was almost normal, although she would not go places with her friends—she would always meet them there, so she could count the sidewalk cracks on the way. When a girl makes fun of her after the school year starts, Tara's sister Greta knocks the girl down. Tara says that Greta was not bothered by being suspended. Another time, some boys harass Tara, and grope at her. The next day Greta comes to school with Tara, and when Tara points out the boy, Greta bloodies his face before she threatens to kill him.

Tara says that looking at magazines with Kristin and Keesha, Kristin exclaimed about how good the models looked, but Keesha argues with her about the models' thin, bruised-looking faces. Keesha says that she doesn't need to starve herself to feel special, she feels special just to be alive. Kristin asks if she could model, but Keesha says that she is going to be a fat woman—"I'm gonna honor it as a family tradition." (p. 75).

In Chapter 8, Tara says that her parents fight about her all the time—they "release their anxiety by fighting about money, movies, friends, the news." (p. 78). Her father spends more and more time and energy transforming the American Legion into "a community center filled with life, laughter and piles of cash." (p. 79). When he takes her there, Tara is happy with the routine, they get into, of eating at Cavaccio's beef stand. Tara's mother gets a job at a department store, and when her parents are gone, Tara is consumed by certainty that terrible things have happened to them. She calls her father repeatedly at the Legion, to tell him that she is scared. Until her parents come home, she pray to the Virgin Mary, the same prayer, five times, then she walks out into the street. When her parents don't get home till late, Tara goes sleep in with Greta. By midnight, Greta gets impatient with Tara's anxiety.

Tara's parents send her to a psychiatrist who is very untidy. The woman does not make much effort to understand Tara and makes a diagnosis of Attention Deficit Disorder, and Immaturity.

### Chapters 7-8 Analysis

In Chapter 7, Greta emerges as a protective heroine in this chapter, although it remains to see how Tara's condition really affects her. But she rises to the challenge of defending her sister, and this is deeply satisfying—Greta will protect her as much as possible. This chapter steps back from Tara's 'quirks' and dramatizes her friendships with Kristin, Keesha, and Anna. They all three of them have anxieties, although they are normal girl anxieties, about being fat, or getting married, or divorced. When they turn to Tara, she is counting, and she says that her friends don't know what to make of her. But,



she says, they are already living with their parents' crazy lives. These issues are all normal, and this chapter serves as a respite between episodes of problems caused by Tara's OCD.

Chapter 8 brings us back to the problems Tara's condition is making in her family. While her sister was a heroine in the last chapter, in this chapter, she is impatient with Tara's anxiety when their parents do not come home. The novel only shows the toll this is taking on the parents indirectly, but their drinking, and staying out, and fighting, shows the reader that Tara has things to feel guilty and upset about not only inside herself, but everywhere around her. The apathy of the psychiatrist is disappointing to the reader, who is waiting for the correct diagnosis to liberate Tara from her own mind.



# Chapters 9-10

## Chapters 9-10 Summary

In Chapter 9, by seventh grade, Tara's friends are sick of her 'quirks.' Anna is on a volleyball team, and Kristin has been hospitalized for anorexia—but she was signed by a modeling agency right in the hospital waiting room. Tara is still counting cracks, and Keesha finally gets sick of her, and interrupts her counting, so that Tara is filled with hatred for her. She pushes her and Keesha is surprised and upset, and this makes Tara sit on the sidewalk and cry. Keesha says that she misses Tara—all her friends do—and Tara says that she misses herself too. Has tries to comfort her, but all Tara can do is wail.

In Chapter 10, Tara's father has a heart attack, and Tara says that she is in pain herself because of it. She doesn't want him to die, and visits him in the hospital. She stops seeing her friends, and even after her father comes home, she dreams that he has died. Her mother becomes testy. When she curses, Tara prays, and this frays her nerves further. Tara's father says that she has PMS, "which he defined as Periodically Mean Syndrome." (p. 97). To relieve some stress, Tara's family goes to the St. Francis of Rome carnival in town. They go and win stuffed animals, and then go on the rides. Tara's mother says that if she prays, she will kill her, and when Tara does cross herself throughout the ride, her mother pushes people out of her way to get to her, and she shakes her violently in front of everyone, before running to Tara's father, to cry against his chest. "I wanted to run to her and stroke her hair and tell her it was only a bad dream. But I knew that it wasn't. It had happened. It had happened in front of the whole neighborhood." (p. 100).

Tara sleeps on the floor beside her parents' bed that night, and even though her mother is really nice to her, out of guilt, she becomes even more anxious when she realizes that her mother was having her own thoughts behind her eyes. She could be saying 'good morning' and mean 'I hate you,' or ask 'How was school?' and mean 'I'm leaving'. This makes Tara even more sensitized, paralyzed, helpless, afraid, and alone.

## Chapters 9-10 Analysis

The emotion in Chapter 8 is palpable and both Keesha and Tara's helplessness is hard to watch. Neither one of them has any control over a situation that makes them both unhappy, but at least they have a hard time being angry with one another, and as soon as Tara pushes Keesha, she starts to realize what she's done, and begins to cry. There's still no end in sight, though so her crying feels like a bond between them, when really it's a sign that things continue to be bad.

In Chapter 10, Tara reaches rock bottom. For Tara, it will be the worst thing she goes through: being shaken by her furious mother in front of everyone. Obviously, her mother



is losing control of herself in response to Tara's problems, which only, of course, makes things worse. The experience only teaches Tara that people have their own inner thoughts, and that they might be critical even when they are being polite, so now she is truly in hell. She can't believe anything anyone says. The voices inside her own head make it impossible for her to hear anything nice.



# Chapters 11-12

## Chapters 11-12 Summary

In Chapter 11, Tara meets Donna DeLuca, who is thirteen, the same age as Tara, but she already has breasts, and goes to St. Francis School. Donna has had surgery on her eye, and has taken to wearing sunglasses all the time. One day, she asks Tara if she has a match, and when Tara says no, Donna says she got it wrong: she should have said, "Yeah, I got a match. Your face and my ass." (p. 106). Donna tells Tara to relax, and this cracks Tara up, which dumbfounds Donna. Donna says that she's heard that Tara's family outings are as bad as hers, and this shows Tara "the kindness and generosity underneath the tough-girl act." (p. 108). Donna says that she called Tara a twinkie because she looked spongy and blond—"not in a bad way...like you could bounce back." (p. 108).

Tara asks Donna how she can smoke after going to Communion, and Donna says that, "if I'm not shooting heroin and getting pregnant with aliens," she's honoring her parents "more than they deserve." (p. 109).

In Chapter 12, Donna and Tara begin to spend time together in Donna's house, where her parents are never home. Tara tells her everything about her quirks, all the counting and praying and little fears, and Donna seems to be no more than amused by this. Tara says that she has to warn Donna against boys, but Donna continues to attract them and she goes from one to the next frequently. Tara is always with her, though, a third wheel. When Tara runs into Keesha, Keesha is angry that Tara isn't hanging out with her anymore, but she's spending time with Donna. When Tara asks Donna why she hangs out with her, Donna says that she admires the way Tara can get lost in her head.

When school starts again, Donna and Tara spend nights in homework and gossip. Donna asks Tara whether she has ever stolen anything, and she and Tara begin to steal little things from stores. One day Tara steals mascara, but she sees herself in the mirror on her way out of the store, and sees herself as a thief, so she goes back in and confesses her theft. Then she heads off to church, where "poor, bored Father O'Malley was almost glad to hear that I finally had a sin worth confessing." (p. 116).

## Chapters 11-12 Analysis

After the low point of the Chapter 10, this encounter with Donna is an interlude that relieves the tension of the plot's descent toward complete crisis. Donna is a fellow-outcast, whom Tara recognizes as an injured person who has undergone surgery on her eye, and whose toughness hides real vulnerabilities. Now the reader and Tara can believe that Donna might bring some toughness and survival skills to the book, and help Tara live with all the things she can't bear.



In Chapter 12, the danger of Tara's behavior runs in a different direction now, although it doesn't run far. Donna is obviously a complicated influence on Tara—she both accepts her and lives in a completely different world from her, but their friendship works because they both have company, and Donna has protection against the boys who are always after her. Tara is not really getting better, during this time, but her quirks aren't as much in control of her mind. She does suffer the tragic misunderstanding with Keesha, though, when Keesha is hurt to see that Tara is not at home, nervous, as she said, but hanging out with Donna all the time.



# Chapters 13-14

## Chapters 13-14 Summary

In Chapter 13, in eighth grade, Tara says that she is more normal, and gets better grades. Even her parents admit that Donna's influence has been good, in spite of her wildness. Donna, though, begins to change, and to use drugs, and become remote. Tara has a small part in the Christmas play. She says that the pageant is painful, with parents groaning aloud at their children's performances. Looking out at the audience, Tara recalls a story about her grandmother and mother freezing onstage at an amateur night. Standing on the stage, Tara says that she feels completely alone, and that time has been passing her by. She gets so lost in her panic that she forgets her lines, but at least she doesn't start praying on stage. Tara feels humiliated, but at least no one humiliates her in public.

In Chapter 14, Donna and Tara spend Christmas day making snow angels. Tara has new green shoes she's proud of. When she asks Donna if she believes in God, Donna is rude, at first, but then she says she does believe—in God and in goddesses, "all of them...and then some." (p. 124). Together they go into an alley so Donna can smoke, and Tara says that she's nervous about Donna's smoking. Tara's mother calls them in for dinner, but no one is sitting in the seats Tara wants them to sit in, and when she breaks down and tells everyone where to sit, her parents grab some alcohol and head out of the dining room.

Tara and Greta clean up, and Tara asks Greta why she doesn't get mad, and Greta says that she's been suspended three times for fighting to protect Tara. "I get mad {at home}. I just act mad outside." (p. 131). Greta says that Tara couldn't be crazy, because she can't help being how she is, and "why would you act crazy if you could help it?" (p. 132). From the window, Tara looks out at the snow angels, which she says look like warrior angels. But there is an odd number of them and Tara runs outside in her nightgown to make the number even by making one more.

## Chapters 13-14 Analysis

In Chapter 13, things seem like they might be on the rebound for Tara in eighth grade—the voices in her head are less demanding, and she is getting better grades, even though she is hanging around with Donna, who is starting to do drugs. But the Christmas play puts a stress on her that she can't bear, and when she forgets her lines, she and the reader return to the world of her tyrants. This isn't something that will just go away—it will have to be defeated somehow.

Chapter 14 doesn't describe a crisis like the carnival, but the interruption at Christmas dinner sends Tara's parents over the edge, and the meal is ruined when her father stalks out. Greta helps Tara put her condition in perspective, and her question is





practically heartbreaking, 'why would you act crazy if you could help it?' But Tara still hasn't got any support or foothold on her condition, and when she comes in wet and cold from making the even-numbered snow angel, she seems just as compulsive and pathetic as ever.



# Chapters 15-16

## Chapters 15-16 Summary

In Chapter 15, after Christmas, Tara begins to freeze in front of closed doors—she doesn't feel she can open the door until she has repeated a routine in which she places all ten fingers on the doorknob with the exact same pressure, then brings her fingers to her lips. Her mother is in despair when she sees her doing "the doorknob thing" and slaps her to try to discourage her. (p. 137). Her mother finally gives up slapping her, and threatens to take her to another doctor—or have her committed. The doctor doesn't give Tara his diagnosis, but her mother seems consoled, and treats Tara well after the visit.

In Chapter 16, at a Chinese restaurant, Tara's family reads their fortunes. Tara's father receives a fortune that says "You will receive important news from an unusual messenger." (p. 140). Tara does not eat—she is too busy arranging her food on her plate in a pattern that satisfies her. Tara is beginning to count cracks again, on the way home, and Greta reads her her fortune: "Good things are coming to you soon." (143).

When she describes the scene to a doctor, she is nervous and describes her compulsion as clearly as she can, but the doctor diagnoses her as 'borderline anorexia...anger issues.' (p. 146).

## Chapters 15-16 Analysis

In Chapter 15, Tara is sliding back into neurotic behavior and when her mother is powerless to stop it, things begin to deteriorate between them—and in the entire family. Yet another visit to yet another doctor is useless in helping Tara, although it does make Tara's mother feel better. But the doorknob kissing, compared to counting or praying, does seem like the strangest, and most disturbing compulsion Tara has had, so the condition only seems to be worsening over all.

In Chapter 16, more and more doctors miss the point of Tara's condition, and see her as suffering from other, unrelated things, so it is easy to see how Tara's parents would be exasperated with a condition no one can solve, or even make any progress with. The despair is getting violent, and the consequences of her condition going on for much longer are starting to seem depressing and dangerous.



# Chapters 17-18

## Chapters 17-18 Summary

In Chapter 17, one night, on her way out the front door to meet Donna, Tara does her doorknob thing, and her father asks her whether he's made her unhappy. He starts to get angry at her since she won't stop counting, when there is a ring at the doorbell. It's Mr. Jacobson, a friend of Tara's father's. Tara's father opens the door for him, and Tara is standing there counting and she bursts into tears. Mr. Jacobson asks Tara questions no one has ever asked her. "What does it feel like?" and "Do you do it a certain number of times?" (p. 150). He says that he has a boy in his class with a similar problem. Tara says that she doesn't enjoy the things she does, she just has to do them. Mr. Jacobson tells Tara and her parents that he thinks she might have obsessive compulsive disorder. Tara's mother is not convinced, but Mr. Jacobson tells her that it is often misdiagnosed. Tara says that the fortune cookie was right: she received important news from an unusual visitor.

Chapter 18: Mr. Jacobson calls his student, a boy named Sam, and Sam calls, and promises to come over the next day. Tara says that she couldn't sleep all night, anticipating meeting someone who has what she has. When he rings the doorbell, she greets him with the question, "Do you...kiss doorknobs" which is a charming way of breaking the ice. Tara's mother introduces herself as well, and Sam sits down with Tara's family to tell them what he knows about OCD. He explains that he was afraid of germs, and would wash his hands till they bled. "Over and over and over and over. I didn't know why. I just had to do it. And I couldn't be interrupted." (p. 155).

Sam says that he is on medication now and he agrees with Tara that it's like having a tyrant in his head. Sam describes the varieties of obsessive compulsive disorder, and Tara says, "Oh my God! You know what I have! You do have what I have!" (p. 156). Sam explains that he and Tara didn't catch this, they were probably born with it. He says that it comes from a gateway in the brain that is supposed to close when an act is finished, but because of a chemical imbalance, it stays open. He says that there are millions of people with OCD. Tara's mother apologizes for everything she did, not knowing what Tara was actually suffering.

Sam explains the treatment for OCD: exposure and response prevention therapy, which involves exposing yourself to the thing you are most afraid of, and realizing that it is irrational. On the way out, Sam tells Tara that she can be like she was before the tyrants moved into her head. After he leaves, though, she is so full of feelings that she starts counting, and doing the doorknob ritual.



## Chapters 17-18 Analysis

In Chapter 17, finally the evil spell of Tara's condition starts to break. It gets a name, and with the name, a description of its characteristics. The stranger is the one who delivers the news, as in many legends or myths: the information was not available to the people within the situation. All that remains to be done now is to get the diagnosis, and start to see what treatment will look like.

Chapter 18 is what Tara and the reader have been waiting for. Tara's condition has a name. It is obsessive compulsive disorder and she is not alone in having this condition. There is help for her and she will have to work hard to overcome her fears, but she is no longer afraid that she might be crazy. Sam identifies with her, and her realization that her experience might be visible is the best thing that's happened to her since she was four. The reader can breathe a sigh of relief, and look forward to the treatment with some trepidation, since fears are hard to overcome, but now that the condition has a name, it should be much easier.



# Chapters 19-20

## Chapters 19-20 Summary

In Chapter 19, Susan Leopardi asks Tara about her condition. Tara says that she looks like a "cheerleader for crazy people" (p. 163). Susan Leopardi tells Tara's parents that she's sorry they had to watch Tara do strange things for so long. Susan Leopardi explains that the condition is a disease of the brain, not a personality disorder, and that it has been around since the beginning of history. She explains that Tara will have to do some hard work, because she has adjusted to her behavior, and will have to unlearn it. She says that she knows people who have had this for twenty years, and they have a difficult time unlearning their 'quirks'. Tara's mother inquires about medication, but Tara says that she is afraid of medication, and wants to start without it, which Susan Leopardi says is fine. Sam calls Tara that night, and tells her that if she doesn't get over her fears, they will get bigger and bigger till they ruin her life. She says that this scares her, and Sam tells her "Good. Deal with it." (p. 168).

In Chapter 20, Tara makes a list of the rituals she wants to stop. Susan Leopardi tells her to think about her parents being dead, three times a day for five minutes. Susan Leopardi seems to know how Tara avoids doing things she doesn't want to do, and she asks Tara if she wants to be a slave for the rest of her life, so Tara starts to imagine her parents' deaths. This makes her hysterical, and she starts to cry as if there's no end of crying, and she says she hates Dr. Leopardi, but Susan Leopardi says, "that's okay. It's not important." (p. 172). Tara recognizes that she had been making vows all the time as the slave of her condition, and now she will have to make thousands of vows every day as the master of them as well.

When Tara sees Donna, Donna says that she's has sex with a boy named Chuck and this makes Tara upset - she wants to protect Donna from her own decisions. Donna says that she'll help Tara with her obsessiveness homework, but she says that she gets too much pleasure from imagining her parents dead. Tara takes Donna to the drug store to buy a box of condoms. The pharmacist won't sell them condoms because they are under age, but Tara yells at him that he's making the wrong decision, and this gives her a good feeling—she has stood up to her first bully, and feels strong enough to stand up to the bullies in her head.

## Chapters 19-20 Analysis

In Chapter 19, now the reader begins to get more terminology from Susan Leopardi and from Sam, and Tara's mother's temperature starts to come down a little as she realizes that this is treatable. Tara gets a glimpse into possible futures, though, where her fears might have taken over completely, and this is terrifying, so she is very motivated to go through therapy and recover, if at all possible. Now that the tension has broken, these



glimpses do not have the same power as the visions Tara had, of her own behavior, when she did not know what it was or how to stop it.

In Chapter 20, there is finally some hard evidence of progress. While it's difficult for Tara to perform the exercises with Susan Leopardi, when she goes out with Donna, she is fearless, and speaks right up to the pharmacist. Finally she and the reader can see that she's got what it takes and that there's some strength in her and she might be able to overcome her own condition.



# Chapters 21-22

## Chapters 21-22 Summary

In Chapter 21, Tara says that she's studying the Civil War in school. It makes her think that her family has been torn apart by a civil war as well, with the tyrants in her head. She says that therapy has been difficult, and she is still performing her rituals enough to make herself wonder whether she's getting any better. When she asks her teacher whether the slaves might have preferred how it was before the Civil War, her teacher imagines that the slaves probably were afraid, since they couldn't go back to how anything was before slavery. Keesha is in the class, and she sees the point in Tara's question. She says that the slaves did it, even though it was hard. After class, Tara asks Keesha and Anna to walk home with her. She steps on every crack, but when Keesha says "damn!" Tara says the Lord's prayer, although then she makes fun of herself. "Maybe I'm doing cracks first," she says. (p .180). Tara takes her friends into the hardware store, and shows them her doorknob ritual. She asks how Kristin is doing, and Anna says that she's in New York modeling, but still thin. This makes Tara nervous, so she counts cracks and prays all the way home.

In Chapter 22, six weeks into her therapy, Sam comes to Tara's house, and they replay the scene of their first meeting. He brings her a gift of a crystal doorknob in a box full of chocolate kisses. "It's a celebration. Of your challenge. And your strength. And of your options." (p. 184). Sam asks her to take a bite of one of the chocolate kisses, and then give him the rest—as therapy for his own contamination fears. While Tara admires the doorknob gift, Sam says that this is the one-year anniversary of the first time he could be hugged. He asks Tara about her therapy, and she says that she hates it and Susan Leopardi, and he says that they should get ice cream floats and toast to hating the woman who gave them free will. On the way to the ice cream store, Tara and Sam see the pharmacist in front of his store. It turns out he is Sam's Uncle Joe, and he recognizes Tara, and looks at her disapprovingly. She looks right back at him, and he looks away first. After ice cream, they lie down in the park on the way home, and ask each other their thoughts—though neither of them tell. Then Sam kisses Tara. She asks him if this is part of his contamination fear therapy, and he says that it is, and she asks him with a straight face whether he will have to keep doing this, and he answers with a straight face that he will.

## Chapters 21-22 Analysis

In Chapter 21, Tara begins to have fun with her therapy and to push her own boundaries. She is clearly someone who wants to heal herself, and not give in to the tyrants in her head. She speaks up in class and invites her friends to walk home with her, and laughs at herself. When she shows her friends her doorknob ritual, it seems like her compulsiveness might be broken one day. Being afraid for her friend Kristin makes her both nervous and more powerful, as she realizes that she is not the only one

with problems, but it does make her focus more on herself, so that she is not the one being chewed up by her condition.

Chapter 22's high point has not been foreshadowed by anything in the book, so it comes as a real pleasure, on Tara's behalf. Her relationship with Sam is suddenly friendly and even intimate. In addition to being understood, she is in control of more of her life than ever, and she can share it with someone she likes.





# Chapters 23 and Afterword

## Chapters 23 and Afterword Summary

In Chapter 23, Tara says that she has figured out the dream she had at the beginning of the novel: The monster she was afraid of was her OCD itself, threatening to destroy her family. She couldn't flee from it in the dream, but now she can face it, and it isn't as dreadful. She says that "when I finally faced my fears and doubts, unbelievably, they became boring and then they went away." (p. 190). She realizes that she didn't choose her OCD, it was always just part of her. She realizes that other people have their issues too, and she says that "I'm proud of Kristin, despite the sacrifices she's making that I don't agree with." (p. 190). She says that her parents' relationship is a little worse, now that they don't have her to fight about. But Tara says that she tries to stay out of her parents' thoughts, since they can deal with them themselves. Greta is freer, now, because of Tara's therapy.

Tara says that Donna got pregnant and is in another school for expectant students. She visits her at what used to be a convent. Tara says that she doesn't blame herself for Donna's pregnancy—she blames Uncle Joe, and they laugh about it.

Tara says that she has stopped praying and counting, and doesn't do the doorknob ritual any more, and she still had Susan Leopardi for support. She says that a few days after he kissed her, his parakeet died, and he reverted to his nervous state: he thought he had contaminated the bird. When she goes to visit him, he's wearing gloves and a mask, and he says that "he never knew that OCD would come back this bad." (p. 195). She says that he can beat it, and gives him the encouragement he gave her. Tara tries to talk to him, but Sam says that he's having a hard time, and finds it hard to have a sense of humor about it. Leaving his house, Tara tells him "you have to risk being afraid. You know that. And you have to do it because if you don't, the fears will get bigger and bigger." (p. 197). He slams the door in her face, but then opens it, and they put their hands on either side of the screen together. "With this small gesture, we were fighting back. We weren't paralyzed or crushed by the monster. We didn't fold or drop out." (p. 198).

In the Afterword, A. J. Allen, M.D. and Ph.D., says that this is a moving portrait of OCD. He says that his afterword will try to answer questions about the condition. The most common fears are of dirt or contamination, or doubting one's memory or senses, fear of harm, or a need to do things 'just so.' Many OCD sufferers have multiple obsessions, and the rituals change over time. Allen says that the defining characteristic of OCD is that it infringes on a person's life, so that they want to stop, but cannot. Allen says that OCD affects about 1% of the population in children, and 2.5% of adults. Allen says that Sam's explanation of the chemical causes of OCD in the novel is accurate: it is an imbalance in the basal ganglia. He says that the preferred treatment is exposure and response prevention therapy. "In the course of an hour or so, the OCD will 'tire out' and the anxiety will fade away." (p. 204). Allen says that OCD sufferers can also use



cognitive therapy, in which the person learns to recognize the irrationality of the fears, and it usually brings progress in a month or two. There are also a number of medications for OCD, but Allen says that living with OCD is a complex problem since by the time it manifests, it almost always involves family members in the rituals and then in the shame that goes with them, and the family adjusts to the pathology of the condition. The rest of the afterword is a list of resources for OCD sufferers and their families.

## Chapters 23 and Afterword Analysis

In Chapter 23, Tara begins to sum everything up, in the denouement or disentanglement of the plot. She's recovered, and now she has strength to give Sam, when Sam relapses into his fears. This gives the story an uplifting ending where the girl who was so traumatized has become the person who offers strength to others—but there is a somber, realistic note, when she acknowledges that this kind of relapse might happen to her as well. The ending leaves room for her to ask Sam for strength if it does ever happen to her, and the smallness of the gesture between them is offered as proof that she'll still have some power, even if she becomes terrified again.

The afterword turns this book from just a novel to a resource for people like Sam and Tara, who have OCD and are scared about their condition. Dr. Allen describes the biological reality behind the condition and describes the different treatment options that are available. He also refers the reader to other resources, so that they can get help if they want or need it. Allen makes OCD sound somewhat manageable, although he concedes that the problems get complicated once they affect the family and school environments.



# Characters

## Tara Sullivan

Tara Sullivan is the main character of *Kissing Doorknobs*. She starts out relatively normal, but begins to hear the phrase, "Step on a crack, break your mother's back" all the time. She begins to count cracks in the sidewalk obsessively and gets furious when she is interrupted. This behavior is compounded by compulsive praying, and exorbitant fears. Finally, she is diagnosed with obsessive compulsive disorder and she learns to recognize and even starts to overcome her disability.

## Greta Sullivan

Greta is Tara's younger sister and she takes a protective role, beating up the boys who harass Tara because of her obsessive quirks.

## Mother

Tara Sullivan's mother has an increasingly difficult time with Tara's 'quirks' and she ends up shaking her violently at the town carnival to try to get her to stop praying compulsively. Finally, when Tara's OCD is diagnosed, she apologizes for all the things she did without knowing what it was.

## Father

Tara Sullivan's father is upset by his daughter's obsessive behavior. He cannot tell what he did to deserve her compulsive behavior and he ends up stalking out of Christmas dinner rather than be subject to her obsessive demands.

## Keesha

Keesha is one of Tara Sullivan's friends from school. She is black and she has a no-nonsense personality so she talks straight to Tara. She makes light of her quirks without ignoring them.

## Kristin

Kristin is a friend of Tara. She is concerned with her weight and when she shows up on the cover of magazines, Tara is worried about the sacrifices she is making in her health.



## **Anna**

Anna is a friend of Tara. She is a jock and performs dives that are perfect arcs, which the others all admire.

## **Donna DeLuca**

Donna is Tara's friend in eighth grade. She has had an operation that required a needle to be inserted into her eye. Donna he has already started to develop physically, so she is a bit rougher than Tara, but their senses of humor line up, and they get along. Tara tags along with Donna on her dates and worries about her getting pregnant, which she ends up doing anyway.

## **Mr. Jacobson**

Mr. Jacobson is the family friend who shows up at Tara's house and recognizes her behavior as a form of obsessive compulsive disorder. He puts her in touch with Sam, who tells her more about it.

## **Sam**

Sam is the first person Tara meets who also has obsessive compulsive disorder. He becomes her friend and something of a mentor, telling her what it's going to take to recover.



## Objects/Places

### Sidewalk cracks

Tara counts these as she is walking. It becomes very important for her to keep count and not be interrupted.

### Condoms

Donna and Tara go into the pharmacist to buy these when Donna tells Tara that she is having sex with Chuck.

### Doorknobs

One of the things that Tara feels compelled to do is to touch doorknobs with all ten fingers with exactly the same pressure and then kiss her fingers. At the worst point, she would need to do this thirty-three times exactly before she could leave the house.

### The Carnival

This is where one of the low points of Tara's life takes place when her mother sees her crossing herself compulsively and knocks people out of the way at the end of the ride to shake Tara until they were both crying.

### The tyrants

These are the voices or the compulsions that Tara feels inside her, which she cannot control. They make her do the compulsive things, like counting sidewalk cracks, praying, and her doorknob ritual.

### Confessional

This is where Tara goes to confess to "poor, bored Father O'Malley" (p. 116). Other parishioners get irritated with Tara for confessing in such detail.



# Themes

## Friendship

Much of Tara's relation with her own obsessive compulsive behavior is shown through her friendships with Keesha, Anna and Kristin, and then her interaction with Donna DeLuca in contrast. Tara has good, funny, loving friends in Keesha, Anna, and Kristin, and in spite of their differences, they are close and supportive, even when Tara tells them about her 'quirks'. Keesha in particular is outspoken about keeping Tara sane, and calling things what they are. Tara would have done much better if she could have internalized Keesha's strong and self-confident voice.

The tragedy of Tara's condition is shown in terms of the rage she directs at Keesha and the others since she cannot stand herself on account of her condition and she can't bear to be interrupted. So she gets angry at them and even pushes Keesha. When she befriends Donna DeLuca instead, there are more hard feelings, but Tara is so little in control that the reader, at least, cannot hold her accountable. Fortunately, Keesha and Anna are forgiving and when Tara invites them back into her life, they are glad to discover her again.

## Masking or compensating for symptoms

At a number of points throughout *Kissing Doorknobs*, characters make light of Tara's behavior, or let her continue her crazy habits because they don't know any better, and they want to like her. Her behavior becomes a source of humor and even friendship. When Tara infuriates her mother by praying, she learns to pray silently, so that she can continue her compulsive behavior, but in a more acceptable form. Tara does try to hide her compulsive behavior, some, but she is much less successful at hiding her behavior than she is at compensating for it, and turning her condition into a source of humor and entertainment for her classmates. Her deadpan answers when Wendy wants to know why she didn't hit the volleyball give her a certain authority against Wendy's athleticism, and save her from complete humiliation.

With Donna DeLuca, Tara is a sidekick and a source of amusement. They are clearly an odd couple, but Tara's oddities are not alarming to Donna, they are merely entertaining, and while Donna is a little bit mean to Tara (repeating Tara's mother's treatment of her, but in much gentler form) their friendship does not obligate Tara to behavior a certain way. She is accepted in spite of and even because of her quirks, and this allows her condition to continue to develop.

## Obsessive compulsive disorder in the family

Susan Leopardi tells Tara and her parents that doctors don't know of many conditions that stress family resources the way obsessive compulsive disorder does. The person



with obsessive compulsive disorder ends up as the center of a web of resentments and frustrations, and because of the condition, everyone else's experiences are distorted. Susan Leopardi says that the longer this goes on, the more destructive it can be.

One of the sweetest moments in *Kissing Doorknobs* comes when Tara's mother Susan Leopardi talks about the problems obsessive compulsive disorder causes. She cries and apologizes for all the things she did to try to get Tara to stop her compulsive behavior. She and her husband, Tara's father, have completely lost their patience and are the end of their ropes almost from the beginning of the novel. They have almost completely given up hope that a doctor is going to diagnose and treat Tara's condition. It is only when a stranger and outsider comes to visit that the condition is named and revealed as a medical condition and not just a personality issue.

## **Taking control of the tyrants**

The triumph of *Kissing Doorknobs* resides in the fact that Tara gains control over the 'tyrants' who dictate her behavior. This power swells in her when Mr. Jacobson tells her that he knows someone who has what she has and until that moment, she is struggling alone through a world she has no control over. As soon as she meets Sam, and finds out that there are millions of people with OCD and then meets Susan Leopardi, and begins to get treatment, the book becomes a success story. This changes all the terms the book has presented and all of the tension Tara causes inside her family dissolves as her parents discover that she was not merely being wayward or critical, but she was actually suffering a medical condition. Not only does Tara take control of her own demons, but she learns the language of taking control so well that when Sam has a relapse following the death of his parakeet, Tara comes to his house, and gives him the encouragements he gave her, in addition to some encouragements of her own. She recognizes in the end that obsessive compulsive disorder is going to be a perpetual struggle, but she is at least optimistic about her ability to make the small gestures that give her some control against the enslaving compulsions.



# Style

## Point of View

Kissing Doorknobs is told by Tara Sullivan, a young girl who has obsessive compulsive disorder. She describes her condition as a series of nonsensical imperatives that she feels compelled to complete, whether it is repeating Step on a crack, break your mother's back, counting sidewalk cracks, praying, or performing rituals. She is slightly humorous and slightly pathetic as she describes her family's reaction to these rituals, and she is even sympathetic with her parents' exasperation since she is exasperated herself. Nonetheless, she thinks of herself as innocent in terms of these habits and wishes she could get them to stop. The story comes from her beleaguered position. She is a slightly self-deprecatory narrator, but her self-deprecatory tone comes from her ignorance of her own condition.

## Setting

This book is set in an ordinary house in a town with a school. The physical setting is not the most important part of this book. The book is really set in between the 'normal' world where everyone lives, and the personal world Tara lives in, where things have meaning according to their own special rituals. Tara spends most of the book trying to get to the 'normal' world, and really only sees it in glimpses. Since it is told from Tara's point of view, the reader spends a lot of time inside of her routines and compulsive habits.

## Language and Meaning

Kissing Doorknobs is told in straightforward, standard English. The language is what you would expect from a precocious but not academic girl between ten and fifteen. She is somewhat wiser than her years and she has words for her own feelings in a way that might be uncommon, but she is also painfully ignorant about her own psychological condition, and the possibilities for controlling her behavior. This makes for some heartbreaking and also for some very amusing writing, as the reader knows things the character does not - that she is suffering from obsessive compulsive disorder - at the same time that the narrator herself gets to address the reader, sometimes, and acknowledge how out of control she was.

## Structure

The novel proceeds in largely linear fashion, although it starts in fifth grade, then goes back to earlier times in Tara's childhood, before it picks up again, and proceeds in a straight line to the end of the book, when Tara is fourteen. At the end, the novel does jump ahead by six months, to give the reader some distance from Tara's obsessive behavior and give her a chance to be herself, the girl she knew herself as before the



tyrants took over her head. In this sense, the book is also a coming-of-age narrative. It follows Tara back to herself, but it also follows her into new territory, as she gains power over herself and her fears.

## Quotes

"Letting kindness get that near to pain is like giving fire some oxygen. Each time it happened, I cried harder and harder and harder as my eczema secretly spread to my torso and made an appearance behind my knees" (p. 20).

"What's the point? If I hit it back to them, They'll just hit it back to us. So why not just keep it, as long as they insist on hitting it over here?" (p. 36).

"I pay attention to lots of stuff...more than most of the kids! I Have to pay attention to all different stuff...at the same time! I think I have attention overload!" (p. 39).

"To compensate for my new and frustrating sinful thoughts, I studied my catechism with a God-fearing piousness and memorized details about the fabulously self-mutilating saints. I scratches my eczema and waited for my calling to the convent from God." (p. 57).

"She dismounted her victim like a warrior heroine, and bent down to look him in the face. 'If you look at my sister again, I'll get our baby sister to kill you" (p. 70).

"If I was a slave to my thoughts, Greta was a master of the universe. If I was a victim of my quirks, she was a victor over bullies and evils" (p. 71).

"My friends tried to ignore my quirks. It didn't seem hard on them though. They were already trained to ignore their parents' alcohol abuse, constant bickering, serial marriages, and nonsensical advice" (p. 77).

"We decided to go to the carnival together. We should have known better. It was like asking for trouble" (p. 98)

"Twinkie, you keep me outta jail, and I'll keep you outta the loony bin" (p. 110).

"Please don't make me have to pray! I don't want my mother to drag me off this stage and kill me here in front of everyone" (p. 121).

"With Donna by my side, my family tucked safely inside the house and new forest=green Document Martens on my feet, I felt almost happy—which made me reflexively nervous" (p. 123).

"I don't remember what I was thinking when I did it. It was involuntary and yet voluntary. It was natural and yet unnatural. It was the birth of a ritual that would be repeated man, many times" (p. 134).

Even with the slapping and the hollering, the pleading and the tears, I considered myself lucky. After all, my counting and praying had subsided almost completely. And I only had to do this doorknob thing at home" (p. 137).



"You thought you could make me remember that this stuff isn't pleasant by slapping me! Do I look like I'm suffering from an excess of pleasure, Mom? Do I look like a poster child for joy?" (p. 151).

"Obsessive compulsive disorders have a lot of varieties. There are people with contamination fears like me. Worriers. Doubters. Counters like Tara. Those with needs for symmetry." (p. 156).

"Oh my God! You know what I have! You do have what I have! None of this was good news to her. But to me it was the best thing that happened to me since eating apricot dumplings in Michigan when I was four years old" (p. 156)

"Imagine how you'd act if you were trapped in an endless loop of repetitive obsessive thoughts accompanied by an anxiety so powerful you'd do anything—perform any compulsive act—just to make it go away" (p. 165).

"when I finally faced my fears and doubts, unbelievably, they became boring and then they went away" (p. 190).



## Topics for Discussion

What are the different techniques that Hesser uses for conveying the reality of Tara's condition? What examples does she use, what voices does she speak in, what incidents does she describe, to make it real in the reader's experience? Using examples from the text, describe how Hesser gets the reader to understand the reality of life with OCD.

What is the key moment in *Kissing Doorknobs*? Which other moments might be the key moment, but are not? Using examples from the text, make an argument for what you think is the key moment of *Kissing Doorknobs*.

What is the key factor that allow Tara to make the recovery she makes in the end? Is it luck? Is it Sam's help? Is it Susan Leopardi's? Is it an inner quality she had all along? Using examples from the text, account for Tara's progress at the end of the novel.

*Kissing Doorknobs* narrates a serious change in Tara Sullivan's life, between the beginning and the end of the novel. How does Hesser prepare the reader for this change? Are there hints that predict it? Are there other hints, that predict other possible endings? How does Hesser create tension and anticipation throughout the novel by getting the reader to expect one kind of ending or another?

If you could know more about one character, which character would it be, and what would you like to know? Explain your decision, and explain why the other characters, and the things you might learn about them, are less important to you than the character you chose.

How do Tara's friends both help her and hinder her? What do they do to make her condition better, and what do they do that makes it worse? Using examples from the text, describe the advantages and disadvantages of Tara's friendships in *Kissing Doorknobs*.