

Mercury Study Guide

Mercury by Margot Livesey

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Plot Summary

NOTE: All citations in this Study Guide refer to the Harper Collins version of *Mercury*, published in 2016.

Viv wants to be a championship winning horsewoman. Viv destroys her own life, damages her family, and badly injures a close friend in an attempt to pursue this dream. When Donald, Viv's husband, scrutinizes of the events that lead to these tragedies, Donald realizes he is perhaps as much at fault for Viv's actions as she is.

After the death of his father, Donald is distracted by his grief and distant from his family. He is angry with Viv for spending more and more time away from the family taking care of a new horse, named Mercury, at the stables where she works. When she finances an alarm system for the barn with her own credit card, Donald is angry with Viv, especially since it is after this purchase that Viv stops pushing the idea that their son attend private school. Even though Donald does not want Marcus in private school, he believes Viv's change of mind is a sign that she cares more for the horse than she does for her family. In an attempt to get revenge on Viv, Donald chooses not to tell her that he has been at the stables late one evening and found that Charlie, one of the stable girls, has been breaking into the barn to ride Mercury.

Viv's side of the story comes next. She admits that as long as she could remember, she has wanted to be a championship equestrian. In college she over-trained a horse resulting in an injury that not only knocked them out of the three-day competition she was on track to win, but also resulted in the horse's death. After that experience, Viv tries to gratify her ambitious nature in the business world. When she meets Mercury, she thinks that her life's purpose is to win championships with him.

As Viv trains on Mercury, she becomes more and more paranoid that someone is trying to hurt him. Viv believes the burglars who break into the barn were doing so because they are interested in Mercury. The break-ins continue despite increased security and Viv buys a gun. One night, she returns to the stables believing she has forgotten to set the alarm. She encounters three people in Mercury's stall. In her desire to protect the horse, she aims the gun intending to shout out and scare the people away. Instead her finger tighten on the trigger and she shoots one of the people. The victim is Jack, Donald's best friend. Donald has brought Jack, who was dating Hilary, the woman who owned Mercury, to visit the horse after hours. Donald is the only one who saw Viv standing in the shadows of the barn holding the gun.

Donald is the narrator again in the third part of the novel as he tries to piece together the circumstances that lead to the tragedy. He struggles to decide if he should turn Viv in to the police as the shooter or if he should leave the identity of the shooter a mystery. Meanwhile, Jack, who is also blind, suffers debilitating stress and fear following the incident. Donald believes telling Jack the truth will help Jack to heal. Instead, Jack is angrier with Donald for keeping the identity of the shooter a secret even while Donald pretends to be Jack's friend.



Part 1: Donald, Chapters 1-2

Summary

In Chapter 1, narrator Donald Stevenson described himself as being primarily Scottish because he lived in Scotland for the first ten years of his life. He owned his own full-service optometrist office, and was content with the average day

Donald's family came to America when Donald was ten because his mother got a two-year job in Boston. Donald was forced to leave his friend, Robert. At the end of the two years, Donald's parents told him they would not be returning to Scotland. When Donald finally returned to Edinburgh when he was 18, Robert's family had moved. No one in the old neighborhood knew where they had gone.

Donald continued his story by describing his relationship with Viv, his wife of nine years. The couple has two children. After their first child, Marcus, was born, Donald was qualified as an ophthalmologist. Four years later, Donald gave up surgery and the family moved to be closer to Donald's parents. After the move, Viv was able to ride horses more. Her best friend, Claudia, ran a stable near Viv and Donald's new home. Claudia suggested that she and Viv work together there.

When Viv got the offer to work with Claudia at Windy Hill, Viv told Donald to tell her if he did not want to take the job offer. He already knew about Viv's love of horses from a discussion about Nutmeg, the horse she rode when she was a girl, during their second date. Donald was happy at that time to support the family and let his wife pursue her dream. He was, however, preoccupied with his father who was suffering with Parkinson's.

Donald writes of his fear that when Viv first told him about Mercury that he was not fully listening to what she was saying to him. He was thinking about an encounter with a patient. In the background of Viv's talk about Mercury, Donald's father's African grey parrot named Nabokov was complaining about being hungry, another distraction. As he looks back on what happened, Donald blames his poor listening skills as well as his father's death and Mercury's entrance into Viv's life for the division that happened between him and Viv. At the time, Donald did not realize how grief from his father's death had made him oblivious to what was happening around him. The conversation was interrupted when Viv and Donald heard sirens. Fire trucks had been called to the neighborhood because the house down the street was on fire.

Donald concluded this opening chapter by describing how hard his father's Parkinson's disease had hit him. Edward had gotten very sick, very quickly. Because of Edward's sickness, he told his wife, Peggy, he wanted to file for a no fault divorce. He did not want to be a burden to her. On the way home, Donald had thought at that time that he and Viv would have done the same thing for each other.



In Chapter 2, Donald's first patient of the day was a young girl who attended a Catholic school, based on her uniform. Although the girl's mother, Hilary, said her daughter, Diane, had trouble seeing the blackboard, Diane insisted she was not having trouble seeing. Donald persuaded the girl to give glasses a try. He indicated he would later learn it was his first meeting with the woman who would change his wife's life.

Later that week, Donald was at the stables when he first saw Mercury. The horse was so beautiful that Donald was absorbed in watching him until he noticed the woman riding the horse waving at him. It was Hilary, Diane's mother. Searching for Viv, Donald finally found her in a stall with Charlie, a girl who worked at the stables. Charlie was grooming Samson. When Donald mentioned Mercury, both women remarked upon how wonderful the horse was.

Analysis

Donald, who is also a main character in this novel, is the narrator of the first part of the novel. He appears to be looking back at the circumstances of his life to determine how he and his family arrived at some point at which they never believed they would arrive. References are made to how predictable he thought his life was: "we knew what we were doing next week, next month, next year" (23).

The novel is an outward representation of Donald's personality. He is the type of person who wants to figure things out and determine how they work, or how they do not work. The story results from Donald's attempt to figure out what minute details led to a tragedy that affects his entire family.

There is no mention of what is in store for Donald and his family. There is an indication that whatever will happen will focus on Mercury, a new horse being boarded at the stable where Viv works. Donald meets Mercury's owner, Hilary, when Hilary brings her daughter to Donald's office for an eye exam.

There are some hints about the things that will lead up to the tragedy for Donald and his family. Donald blames himself for not noticing how obsessed his wife becomes with Mercury because he is only half listening when she first tells him about the horse. He believes if he had not been distracted he might have better picked up on the signs that his wife was getting overly interested in another woman's horse.

Donald additionally blames his preoccupation with his father, who was suffering with Parkinson's disease, and later his grief from his father's death, for the decreased attention that he paid to his wife. The Parkinson's disease does figure into the tragedy because Donald and Viv decided to move out of Boston, closer to Windy Hills, so Donald could be closer to his father. It was this move that allowed Viv to work at the stables and spend more time riding, thus giving her the opportunity to meet Mercury.

The level of devotion between a husband and wife is illustrated when Donald's father, Edward, tells his mother, Peggy, that he wants a no fault divorce so that she can go on with her life instead of being weighed down by him. It appears the two do not get



divorced but Donald seems to consider this the ultimate in devotion. As he left his parents' house at that time thinking about his father's intentions, he had believed that he and Viv would have done the same thing for each other if one of them had gotten sick. At the point from which Donald writes his book, after tragedy has struck his family, Donald is no longer as sure about the devotion between himself and his wife.

An important symbol in this section of the novel is Viv's crooked left pinkie. This finger is a symbol of Viv's devotion to riding horses. The broken finger is the result of an accident with Nutmeg, a horse Viv had ridden when she was a young girl.

Donald draws an analogy between what happens in his family and vision. Blindness and nearsightedness are particularly important in his analogy. As he works with Diane, his young patient, Donald tells her "you are shortsighted, and no amount of willpower will change that. If you don't wear glasses, you'll miss most of what's going on around you. You may have an accident, or cause one" (19). Donald should take the advice that he offers Diane. Instead of having literal nearsightedness, Donald suffers from a sort of mental shortsightedness where he has allowed himself to become distracted by grief and pain so that he cannot clearly see what is happening around him either.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss Donald's apparent intent in writing this novel. How does his process of writing reflect his personality?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the incident of the burning house that is included in this section of the novel. Why do you think this house fire is significant?

Discussion Question 3

How is Donald wrong in assuming that his life will go on in the same pattern? How is he "shortsighted" when he indicates he had truly believed there would be no changes or disturbances in his life?

Vocabulary

ascended, valiant, hypothesis, inoculated, aerogram, egalitarian, orrery, feigning, palindrome, irrefutable, delegated, idiopathic, elephantine, mendacity, sclera, ardent, barometer, cauterizing, stalwart, prevailed, perilously



Part 1: Donald, Chapters 3-6

Summary

In Chapter 3, when Donald first met Viv, he fell in love with her. They slept together on their second date. Eight months later Viv was pregnant. At that time, they agreed on important facets of parenting, including sending their children to public school. When Viv approached Donald about Marcus, their son, going to a private school her change of mind surprised him. When Viv brought up the idea of a visit to the private school, she reminded Donald how she thought Marcus's public school was troubled. She began trying to get Donald to agree to private school. Viv lashed out at Donald, telling him that she wanted the best for Marcus. Even though Donald also wanted what was best for Marcus, he thought private school fees were too expensive, especially since he was the one who supported the family financially so that Viv could ride Mercury.

Donald brings his friend Jack into the story by saying that if he did not tell Jack's story, there would be no story. Donald remembered having to tell Jack that he was going blind. Looking at Jack's bright blue eyes, it was hard for Donald to believe how little his friend could see. Even while his father was sick, Donald made visits to Jack. The two talked about the book Jack was writing about blindness.

It was after one of his visits to Jack after his father's death that Donald noticed his mother eating dinner in a restaurant with another man. Donald said nothing to Viv about seeing his mother with the man. He also said nothing to his mother the next time she visited the family. Viv mentioned to Donald the changes that she saw in his mother. Viv suspected Peggy was looking for another man but Donald still said nothing to his wife about having seen Peggy with a man. Looking back, Donald realized it was the secrets that he and Viv began keeping from each other that began separating them.

In Chapter 4, Steve, Donald's tennis partner, with whom Donald finally discussed his mother's new boyfriend. Steve indicated he was happy for Peggy. When Donald got home that evening, Viv had not arrived yet. Claudia called Donald intending to make plans for Viv's birthday. Claudia indicated that Viv was at the stables when she had left. Worried that Viv had an accident, other than falling in love with Mercury, Donald and the children loaded into the car to drive to the stables. They met Viv on the way home.

In Chapter 5, Donald felt like he was turning into his own version of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde when he followed Viv back home the night he and the children had loaded up to drive to the stables because he was afraid something had happened to her. It was not until after the children were in bed that Viv told Donald what happened at the stables that day. Viv and Claudia were both worried about Mercury because he'd had no exercise that day. Viv had taken him riding and lost track of time. She told Donald she had been "bewitched" by the horse (39).



Donald thought about the account of the evening both women had given him and realized that only Viv had voiced any concern about Mercury. He believed it was Viv who had “adjusted the truth,” a small lie he did not think much about at the time (39). The next day when Donald talked to Claudia about Viv’s birthday party, Claudia suggested that Hilary and Diane be invited. Even though Donald did not think it was a good idea, he did not stand his ground.

In Chapter 6, Donald discusses how his and Viv’s love life changed with Viv being too tired for their usual pattern of intimacy. Donald found himself unusually interested in Bonnie Dawson, a patient from his office. She came because she was having trouble with a shadow across her vision.

Donald next described how he remembered his wife’s birthday party in two different ways. What struck him at the time was that his wife had her waist-length hair cut short. Also during the party, Hilary asked Donald about Jack Brennan. Because Jack told Donald he did not want to be referred to as Donald’s blind friend, Donald did not mention to Hilary that Jack was blind. Later when Donald saw the two of them talking, he indicates no one could have known what would come of their conversation.

It was only much later after Viv’s birthday that Donald learned that when Viv had blown out her candles, she had wished for success with Mercury. Because her wish did not include good fortune for her family, it made Donald furious.

Analysis

Two factors that seem to exacerbate the friction between Donald and Viv include Viv’s pressure to send Marcus to a private school and Viv’s preoccupation with Mercury. Donald believed he and Viv had agreed before their children were even born that they would send them to public school. To him, Viv’s ability to even consider private school shows that she is changing, turning from her core beliefs. Donald is additionally frustrated when Viv stays late at the stables one evening riding Mercury. He and the children hurry to the stables to check on her because they are afraid she is hurt. They meet her on the way home.

Donald discusses the experiences leading up to the tragedy in his family both in terms of how he interpreted them at the time and how he has come to interpret them in hindsight. Jack apparently plays a major role in what has happened. The reader can tell that Jack weighs heavily into the story because Donald tells his reader that he does not want to have to include Jack in his story but that he has no choice but to do so. Donald also gives the reader the idea that Jack and Hilary meeting at Viv’s birthday party was one of the steps that led to whatever it is that happened. Donald notes first he had wished that he had stood by his feeling that it was not appropriate to invite Hilary to Viv’s birthday party. He next notes the conversation between Hilary and Jack played a role in what happened in October.



Through the course of the section the author continues to make references to how much Viv loves horses, particularly Mercury. When she talks to Donald about the private school, Livesey makes a point to include in the description of Viv that she “clasped her hands, pleating her crooked finger in with the others” (27). Even though the couple is talking about schools, the reader’s attention is drawn to this sign of Viv’s devotion to her horses. Later, when Donald shares his concern with Claudia that Viv has had an accident at the stables, Claudia indicates the only thing that might have happened to Viv at the stables was that she fell in love with Mercury.

In this section, Livesey alludes to the novel “The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.” Donald compares himself to this character who had both an evil and a good side. It is after Donald and the children hurried to check on Viv when they thought she might be hurt that Donald felt his evil side emerging. He uses the analogy of driving, as he was driving back home after having found Viv safe, to describe how he was “turning away from the street of honesty, and heading down the avenue of duplicity” (37).

The dark glasses that Jack wears are an important symbol introduced in this section of chapters. Donald compares these glasses to a “kind of staging” (45) like the way that Hilary prepares houses in a way that brings out the best features. Jack wears these glasses to hide his blindness.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Donald get so angry when he learns that Viv wished for success with Mercury when she blew out the candles of her birthday cake?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss why it is only later that Donald is disturbed by Viv’s lie that both she and Claudia were worried about Mercury when in reality she was the only one worried.

Discussion Question 3

Why does Jack not want to be known as Donald’s blind friend? How might Hilary have missed the fact that Jack could not see?

Vocabulary

notable, fervently, compensate, rendered, guile, mediocre, crucial, commune, segregated, utopian, parse, vicissitudes, placating, conspirators, bewitched, subterfuge, expedition, baleen, dismayed, vehemently, resplendent, adamant



Part 1: Donald, Chapters 7-9

Summary

In Chapter 7, Viv and Donald discuss the family of a patient who seemed to blame Donald because their father died the day before he was scheduled to have cataract surgery. Viv indicated the family probably thought Donald “loaded the gun” that led to the heart attack by stressing the man when he told him he had cataracts (46). She shared with him during the same conversation that someone had broken into a farm stand near Windy Hill. Viv was worried the same people might break into the stables.

The family did tour Greenfield. Marcus was not impressed. Trina interrupted the conversation about the private school to tell Donald that Nabokov was pulling his feathers out. She said she had not said anything before because he and Viv had seemed busier than usual.

That night Donald looked at the family’s finances. He found the proof he needed that they could not afford the tuition to send Marcus to private school. Donald called his mother and arranged a lunch date. He intended to talk to her about Greenfield, but instead she told him that she was seeing another man. She tells Donald his name is Larry. Donald allows him to come to Thanksgiving dinner.

When Donald does finally bring up the issue of private school, his mother said that she and her husband had gone through a similar argument. It had turned out, however, they were really arguing about something entirely different. She suggested that might be the case for Viv and Donald.

That night as Viv and Donald discussed Larry, Donald wondered if Viv knew that he felt Viv had abandoned her for a horse.

In Chapter 8, Donald describes how well he believes he once knew Viv. She was impetuous, driven, a Democrat and an animal lover. Once she had even stayed with a dying mouse. Donald felt his wife had abandoned a large part of herself when she asked Donald to go to the stables to help with Nimble, a horse being sent to the vet to be euthanized. Donald was horrified when Nimble refused to enter to trailer, as if he sensed that he was being taken to die.

Donald thought it was even worse when he went home to Viv who told him that Nimble did not know what was happening. Viv did not sympathize with the horse or with Donald for wanting the horse to be spared. At this point Donald realized he had also missed that Viv had thought her life was over until Mercury had arrived at the stables.

In Chapter 9, Larry endeared himself to Donald’s family during the Thanksgiving dinner. Donald felt it was significant that his mother chose to carry on the tradition of the toast to absent friends that his father had always done. Also significant on that day was the phone call in the middle of the night telling Viv that there had been a break in at the



barn. Viv went to check the barn with the police. The only thing they had found out of place was a man's glove on the floor in front of Mercury's stall. Viv made Donald promise not to tell Hilary about the break in because she was afraid she would move Mercury.

Donald learned later that Viv had paid the bill for new security lighting and an alarm system at the barn. At that time all that Donald knew was that their household was not running smoothly because Viv was leaving early to ride Mercury and often leaving the stables early. She had also told Donald he was right about Greenfield. He believed at the time that Viv had changed her mind because she decided Marcus needed to stay with his friends.

Analysis

Viv's devotion to Mercury seems to reach a new level in this section of the novel. When she learns that the stable was broken into, she seems to think that Mercury was the target of the burglar. Her fears are multiplied because a man's glove is found in front of Mercury's stall. This glove is a significant symbol because it demonstrates Viv's belief that Mercury is being targeted by thieves.

Viv's reaction to the break in at the stable is telling of her true devotion. Viv first asks Donald to promise her that he will not tell anyone about the break in. Viv does not even tell Claudia about the break-in. She fears that if Hilary learns about what happened she will move Mercury and Viv will no longer have access to ride him. Viv agrees to pay for the security measures that she thinks the security measures needed at the stables. While this relieves the stress between Viv and Donald caused by the argument over whether to send Marcus to private school or not, the stress is not relieved for the right reason. Donald believes Viv has finally come to her senses about Marcus' desire to stay with his friends. In reality, Viv knows they can no longer afford the school because she has spent so much money on security at the stables.

This security system is an important symbol in the novel because it shows Viv's devotion to Mercury over even her children.

Donald additionally argues to his reader that Viv has changed by pointing out her attitude about Nimble, a horse being put to sleep because his kidneys were failing. Donald believed his wife, who had once stayed with a mouse while it was dying and begged Donald to do something to help it, would never have agreed with killing Nimble. He thinks that she has abandoned another of her principle beliefs when he is called to help with Nimble's death.

Notice the way that Donald uses hyperbole as he tells his story to make his point about his family's situation. Take this quote, for instance: "my patients were dying (only one); my mother was changing (she had found happiness); my wife was obsessed with private school and a horse (she was an enthusiast); we were close to bankruptcy (not really)" (59). Even while Donald points out the instances in which his life is going badly,



he also includes a description of how exaggerated each of his statements are. This gives the reader the idea that while Donald thinks his life is really in bad shape, he is also rational enough to know things are not really as bad as he would like to make them out to be.

The author does foreshadow in this section that a gun will be involved in some part of what happens to Donald and his family. This hint comes when the author writes: "If there was a gun, I argued — at the time it was only a metaphor — then it was loaded by genes and habits" (47). The mention of the gun comes in a discussion between Viv and Donald that it might have been the stress from a patient's cataract surgery that caused him to have a heart attack. The indication that the gun was only a metaphor at the time indicates there is to come a time when the gun will not be a metaphor.

In addition to the direct lies and deception that Donald and Viv share between them, there is also a lack of communication that makes the lies and deception that much worse. At the end of Chapter 7, Donald indicates that expects his wife to know that he is feeling abandoned by her because she is spending all of her spare time with Mercury. Since the beginning of Viv's relationship with Mercury, however, Donald has not said anything to Viv about feeling abandoned. She has told him that he has distanced himself from her, but he does not do the same by being honest about his feelings.

Discussion Question 1

Why is it significant that Viv decided not to send Marcus to private school?

Discussion Question 2

Compare and contrast Donald and Viv's reaction to Nimble's euthanasia.

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the significance of Peggy's act of seeing another man on Donald. How does it contribute to Donald's feeling that he has been abandoned?

Vocabulary

articulate, voluble, monosyllabic, stealthy, abundant, banished, vexation, staunchly, scenarios, impetuous, advent, euthanized, obligingly, accomplice, bemoaned, conspired, irked



Part 1: Donald, Chapters 10-11

Summary

In Chapter 10, when Diane visited Donald's office for a change in her prescription, Donald learned from her that Hilary and Jack had become friends. She asked Donald what was wrong with Jack's eyes. After the office closed that day, Donald paid Jack a visit. Jack sensed Donald's frustration that Jack and Hilary were seeing one another. Jack seemed surprised that Hilary had continued to date him even though she did not learn he was blind until after they slept together.

In Chapter 11, Donald describes the Christmas traditions that his family generally followed. Donald was disappointed when he learned both his mother and sister had made other plans for Christmas. To make matters worse, Viv asked Donald if they could invite Hilary and Diane for Christmas Eve. It was during the Christmas Eve dinner that Jack had suggested perhaps Nabokov had been pulling out his feathers because he was lonely. He had not had much attention since Edward, Donald's father, had died.

As the guests were describing how their families had celebrated Christmas in the past, Hilary told them about her brother Michael. He had been Mercury's first owner. He was obsessed with horses. Michael died when he fell while jumping Mercury. Hilary said the death was ruled an accident but thought that it was strange because her brother did not have accidents around horses. Jack asked Hilary what Mercury was worth and Hilary guessed five to ten thousand dollars. Regardless, Hilary said she would never sell the horse because he had belonged to Michael.

When Donald and his family returned from their annual ice skating outing there was a message on the answering machine. Claudia was angry because she had learned about the first break in at the stables. There had been another break in. It was at this point that Viv told Donald she had bought the security equipment for the stables. Donald realized Viv had not changed her mind about the private school because she thought it was best for Marcus but because she had spent the money in an attempt to protect Mercury. Viv made as if she planned to go to the stables but Donald forced her to stay at home with her family. At that time Donald did not realize he was also at fault for not understanding Viv's love of Mercury. He hoped when she came upstairs that she would apologize to him. She did not apologize but they did have sex.

Analysis

As Donald continues to describe what was happening between himself and Viv, he compares his inability to see what was happening as myopia, or nearsightedness. He feels he had gotten so focused on what was happening in each individual moment that he lost sight of the larger picture.



One of Viv's lies is exposed in this section of the novel when Claudia is called to Windy Hill by police because there has been a break in. It is from the police that she learns her business had already been broken into once. Donald hears the irate message that Claudia leaves for Viv on their home answering machine. It is not until this time that Donald realizes that Viv did not even tell Claudia about the first break in because she was so afraid Hilary would move Mercury.

The security system is an important symbol referred to in this section because it is in Chapter 11 that Viv confesses to Donald that she paid for the system with her own credit card. It was at this point that Donald realized the reason Viv had stopped pushing for Marcus to go to private school was because she had spent so much money on the security system.

Another significant symbol in this section is what Viv describes as Donald's astronaut suit. She complains several times that he seemed to wear a protective suit that kept his family and friends away from him. While this might have been the case, Donald realized that despite the way Viv felt the suit distanced him from her, he did not feel secure in it. He points out his protective covering had not way of providing him with the necessities of life, like food, water and oxygen.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss Donald's apparent problem that people close to him are developing new relationships.

Discussion Question 2

How might Jack's lack of sight affect his interactions?

Discussion Question 3

The security system becomes a point of contention between Viv and Donald because Viv buys it with her personal credit card. Why, specifically, is Donald angry about the purchase?

Vocabulary

reciprocate, blatant, admonished, celibate, abridged, appalling, solstice, epigraph, endeavored, vindicated, superlatives, cutlery, lax



Part 1: Donald, Chapters 12-14

Summary

In Chapter 12, it was several days after Claudia left her message before Donald was able to go to the stables. Viv had been sick. Claudia was clearly angry with Donald. There had been another break in, the burglars had come in through the hayloft. Donald suggested at the time that Claudia tell Hilary what had happened and ask Hilary to move Mercury. Claudia replied moving Mercury would do no good because she believed Viv would just follow Mercury to the next stable. Claudia went on to explain how Viv had always been ambitious and that she had ruined one horse, her favorite then, because she had overworked him.

Claudia also told Donald that she knew when Viv decided not to have an abortion when she first discovered she was pregnant by Donald that Viv really loved Donald. Because one of his favorite memories was when Viv told Donald she was pregnant, he asked Claudia what she meant. Claudia told Donald that Viv had decided to have an abortion but before she was supposed to go to Planned Parenthood she had a dream about her and the baby having a picnic by a river. This dream had convinced her to keep the baby. Claudia told Donald that Viv did love him and the children but that Mercury had ignited an old desire in her. Viv had never outgrown her dream to find a horse that could jump anything. Donald decided he could perhaps make Viv happy by offering to buy Viv her own horse.

In Chapter 13 after the first of the year, Donald began taking Nabokov to the office with him. Bonnie Dawson finally came for a second appointment three days later. Donald determined she needed surgery to repair a torn retina. Bonnie was upset by the uncertainties of surgery. Her husband came to pick Bonnie up since her eyes were dilated. He asked Donald for the truth about Bonnie's situation and promised to treat her like a princess. Donald was envious of their relationship. Later on, even though he told himself he was not attracted to Bonnie, he put her contact information in his phone. He even called her home phone but no one answered.

About the same time, Viv began attending riding master classes in New Hampshire. Things had calmed at the stable. Hilary had asked Claudia about the new security system but Claudia had lied about the break in in order to keep her promise to Viv.

In Chapter 14, Donald writes that he blamed the snow for what happened next. Viv seemed more distant than ever. Donald's friend Steve as well as his mother asked what was wrong. He suggested they ask Viv. His mother pushed for more information. Peggy tried to explain to him that Viv had come last in the family for years. Peggy thought Mercury was a good opportunity for Viv. She encouraged Donald to help Marcus and Trina to understand their mother's dreams and help them not to feel neglected. She challenged him to imagine how he might feel if it had been Viv's father who had been sick instead of his.



It was when Donald was helping his mother rearrange furniture in a room where Donald and his father often visited that he remembered their discussion of the Simurg. Edward imagined on his bad days that this huge mythical bird, large enough to carry off an elephant, would carry him away.

Later, Donald called Bonnie the day before her surgery to make sure that she was prepared. He tried to determine if his behavior was inappropriate or not. He thought it was not inappropriate because he always called his patients before surgery. At the same time, he knew the conversation had crossed a line.

Analysis

A new spin is put on Viv's intentions when Donald's mother challenges him to look at things from Viv's perspective. Instead of being upset with Viv for spending so much time with Mercury. She challenges Donald to consider how his view of Viv's behavior might be different if she was a man instead of a woman. She also challenges him to consider how he might feel if Viv had spent the amount of time he had in taking care of an ailing parent.

A second break in is reported at the stable. Donald brings up an important point about the break-ins. Even though the stable had been broken into twice, nothing had been taken either time. Donald poses the question: "But why break in and not take anything?" (80).

Even though Claudia does not tell Hilary about the break-ins, as she promised Viv, Hilary notices and asks about the new security equipment. Claudia lies instead of telling Hilary the truth. In the midst of the conversation with Claudia, Donald suggests to her that she tell Hilary about the break-ins and suggest that she take Mercury to another stable. Knowing that Donald is concerned about Viv and her obsession with the horse, and not Mercury's safety, Claudia tells him that she will just make Viv angry and cause her to lose her as an employee. She believes Viv will just follow Mercury to whichever stable Hilary chooses to board him.

An important image introduced in this section is the Simurg. It is a symbol of Donald's desire to be taken out of his situation. He learns about the bird from his father, Edward, who sometimes wished the bird would come and take him away, particularly on his worst days.

Notice the way that Jack's intelligence is shown by the way he plays with words as he talks to Donald. Donald accuses himself of being "an unsympathetic oaf" to Jack's coming blindness. "Actually you seemed like a Hippocratic oaf" (87). Jack replies. His response plays on the similar pronunciations of the words "oaf" and "oath."



Discussion Question 1

Discuss the conundrum presented in Chapter 13, “Which is worse: breaking a promise or telling a lie” (87).

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the dream that Viv had that convinced her to go ahead and keep the baby even though she had already decided to have an abortion. Why did she not tell Donald about the dream?

Discussion Question 3

Consider what Peggy tells Donald. How would Viv’s actions and her obsession with Mercury be different if she were a man?

Vocabulary

negotiation, intonation, circumlocutions, despised, homely, ballistic, feckless, stoicism, vague, docile, benevolent, quotidian, exophthalmic



Part 1: Donald, Chapters 15-19

Summary

In Chapter 15, although Donald often wondered what would have happened if he had asked Viv about her dream about the baby, he instead told her that he was thinking she should buy a horse of her own. She said there was no need to do so because she had Mercury. Viv tried to explain to Donald that she and Hilary had an understanding about Mercury. She believed that if Hilary were to sell Mercury, she would sell him to Viv. Donald questioned the strength of that understanding. Donald tells his reader that he learned later it was the day after that conversation that Viv drove to New Hampshire and bought the gun.

In Chapter 16, Donald had to return to the stable one night because Marcus left a book in the office. At the stables, nothing happened when Donald punched the code into the alarm pad. Inside he heard a rustling, which he believed was a mouse. It was only when he returned to his car that he realized the lights were on in the arena. When he went to inspect, Donald discovered Charlie riding Mercury.

Charlie begged Donald not to tell Viv what he had seen. At that time, Donald believed not telling Viv what had happened would cost him nothing. Looking back on the incident, Donald thinks he was perhaps not telling Viv because he wanted to punish her. At the time, he warned Charlie not to ever ride Mercury after hours again. When Charlie returned the keys to Donald that she has used to get into the stables the next day, Donald thought that his act of lying to his wife was a small lie that would cover a bigger one.

In Chapter 17, Donald describes how he and his family went to Gloucester to commemorate the one-year anniversary of his father's death. In Chapter 18, since the tragedy, Donald writes that he learned that some of Viv's busyness included practice at a shooting range. At the range, people considered the gun as another type of tool, not a deadly weapon.

In a discussion about Hilary, Jack told Donald that Hilary had called him telling him that she had the flu. Since that time, several days in the past, she had not returned his calls. Even Trina noticed how sad Jack was. Donald knew the sadness resulted not only from being blind, but also being alone. At home, Donald suggested to Viv that she go and check on Hilary.

Jack also asked about Bonnie, prompting Donald to call and check on her. He offered to take her home from an eye appointment personally if she could get a taxi to take her there. He knew there was harm in what he was doing, but did it anyway. When he dropped Bonnie off at her house after the appointment, she kissed his check.



Viv went to check on Hilary and discovered she had been really sick. Viv helped with household chores. When Donald finally told Jack that Hilary was sick, he learned that Jack had already checked on her himself. He said he had woken up in the middle of the night with a voice telling him that he should ask Hilary to marry him. Donald indicates that by the time Diane got home from school that day Hilary and Jack “were standing on the same ground” (114).

In Chapter 19, Peggy offered to keep Marcus and Trina overnight because she was concerned about Viv and Donald. Peggy intended her son and daughter-in-law to spend the evening together but Viv wound up at the stables with Samson who had colic. Donald had made reservations at a fancy restaurant but when Viv called and said she could not make it she suggested Donald invite Jack. It was this chain of events that led to Jack, Hilary and Donald eating dinner together.

During the evening, Hilary explained that while she was sick she had dreamed about Mercury. She had seen herself and Michael walking along railroad tracks, searching for the horse. She had the feeling the horse was in trouble. She expressed the desire to go see the horse right then because Michael had always told her that people could hear the thoughts of animals at night. Donald offered to take them because he still had the key Charlie had given him as well as the alarm code.

At the stable, Donald parked behind the trailers. He believed that if he had parked in front of the barn, the tragedy might have been averted. At Mercury’s stall, Hilary had to move two lead ropes, a red one and a white one, to open the door. The three of them went inside the stall. Just as Jack was raising his hand, telling Mercury he had asked for Hilary’s hand in marriage, a shot rang out. Jack fell as Mercury reared. Hilary and Donald pulled him away from the frightened horse.

Outside the stall, Donald dropped to his knees to examine Jack’s wound. As he stood to find something to help them get Jack to the car, he noticed Viv standing in the darkness at the end of the line of stalls. He realized she was holding a gun. She lowered it and stepped backwards. Hilary did not see her. Donald drove furiously to the hospital. He felt that his life as well as Jack’s, Hilary’s and those of his wife and children hung in the balance.

Analysis

Donald ends Part 1 of the novel with a description of the shooting, the tragedy that has so divided him and his wife. The reader now understands the various references that Donald made to Jack as well as references to the relationship between Jack and Hilary. Donald said that without Jack there was no story. This is the case because it was Jack who was shot by Viv. Later, Donald indicates if he had stood firm on insisting that Hilary and Diane not attend Viv’s birthday party, the tragedy might have been averted. This is because if Hilary had not been at the party, she and Jack would never have met.



There are other references, even in this section, of things Donald believed he was doing to help Jack, but wound up leading to the circumstances that hurt his friend. For instance, when Jack was devastated because Hilary had not returned his calls, Donald sent Viv to check on her. While Viv was there, just a short while before Jack had arrived, she had helped Hilary clean up the house and had washed Hilary's sheets and nightgown. Had Hilary's house been in the shape it was when Viv had arrived, Hilary perhaps would not have answered the door or let Jack into her house. As it was, however, Jack proposed to Hilary that night. For this reason, when Donald later invited Jack to dinner, he brought Hilary along. Hilary began talking about the horse, which was why they wound up in the stables, telling Mercury they were getting married.

It is perhaps also Donald's lie to Viv about his discovery of Charlie riding Mercury after hours that also led to the tragedy. Viv was already paranoid someone was trying to hurt Mercury. Had she known that it was only Charlie who was going into the barn after hours to ride Mercury it would have helped to ease Viv's mind. She would have been angry with Charlie but would have realized Mercury was in no real danger.

One of the reasons that Donald gives for not telling Viv about finding Charlie riding Mercury is that he believed he was punishing her for giving Mercury so much attention. Donald seems to be very intent on punishing Viv and getting back at her for trying to pursue her dreams. All the while he is angry with Viv because he thought she was giving Mercury preferential treatment over her family, Donald was harboring thoughts of having an affair. Although he knew what he was doing was not right and probably would never have acted on his desires, he still harbored thoughts about Bonnie, and even carried through with some of his thoughts, that he might not have done if he were not so angry with his wife.

Guns are presented both as taboo and tools in this section of chapters. Viv had been raised to regard a gun as an instrument of evil. When she begins practicing at the shooting range, she meets a group of people who regarded a gun as a tool. It is described that Viv found herself in "the company of people who regarded a gun as no different from a screwdriver" (106). In this atmosphere that she realizes that the aversion to guns, with which she had grown up, was not prevalent in all areas of the country.

There are two important symbols included in this section of chapters. The first is the key that Donald has to the stables. Because he never told Viv he took the key from Charlie or that he found Charlie riding Mercury, this key is a symbol of Donald's deceit. Another important symbol included in the description of Hilary, Jack and Donald's visit to Mercury's stall is the two, different color lead ropes that Viv has wound through the bars so they have to be removed before his stall door can be opened. The reader recognizes these ropes as a sign of her paranoia. She put the ropes there so she would know if someone was visiting Mercury during the off hours.



Discussion Question 1

Do you think of a gun as a dangerous weapon or a tool? How does Viv's experience with her gun show that it is more than just a tool?

Discussion Question 2

Should Donald have told Viv that Charlie was the burglar? Do you think this might have changed the way the story played out? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

As Donald is driving to the hospital it is indicated that he drives as if the lives of his wife and children, as well as Jack's, were at stake. Is this a use of dramatic hyperbole or do you think Donald really feels his family member's lives are really in danger?

Vocabulary

oblivious, deft, fervently, eloquent, insuperable, brigade, debilitating, rampant, compromise, estrangement, subtleties, transpired, embody



Part 2: Viv, Chapter 1

Summary

In Chapter 1, Viv uses this part of the novel to plead her case. She starts with a list she made when trying to persuade her mother to let her take riding lessons when she was eleven. Her pinkie was broken when Nutmeg, the horse she rode, was spooked by a cat when she was leading him in from the pasture. Viv did not tell her mother because she was afraid her mother would not let her ride any more. Soon she was entering competitions and winning rosettes.

When Viv began college, her parents got a divorce. Despite the divorce, the hardest part of college for Viv was leaving Nutmeg behind. In college, Viv did not have the time or money to ride. She tried to trade her passion for horses for a passion for business but did not have the sixth sense for it that she felt did with horses. During a trip to a museum Viv saw the painting *The Polish Rider*. Looking at it, she realized she was out of sync with her life. Then, after a blood drive during which she had given blood for the first time she fainted and fell on the train tracks at the subway station. Two men pulled her from the tracks and saved her life. She never told anyone what happened, but considered that day her second birthday. Viv believed she had been saved so she could do something special.

After three years in New York, Viv's boss transferred her to the company's Boston branch. In Boston, Viv lived with Claudia. She worked during the week and spent her Saturdays at Windy Hill, then owned by Claudia's great aunt Helen. Viv was impressed by Claudia's riding skills. Her own had gotten clumsy and stiff. Claudia told Viv in order to win big competitions, people had to be fanatics, riding all the time.

It was on the first anniversary of Viv's second birthday that she saw Donald on the train. He was reading the *New Yorker*. On their third date, Donald had told her that his father had Parkinson's. They also discussed Robert, the friend Donald had suddenly cut communications with in Edinburgh. Donald had said he had stopped writing because he did not want to lie and tell his friend he would see him soon. Viv thought it was better to lie than to hurt someone.

When they took HIV tests, Viv thought the test was a marker between two possible futures. She could only imagine the worst. When she called for the results of her test, she misdialled and got a morgue. After she calmed down enough to call the correct number Viv learned her test was negative. She and Donald stopped using condoms and she got pregnant. Viv was not sure if she wanted her life to be overtaken by a baby even though she knew the baby would make Donald happy. The night before she was to go to Planned Parenthood, Viv had the dream where she and the baby had played near the river beside which she had ridden Nutmeg. It was not until Viv got pregnant the second time that she agreed to get married.



Viv realized she had come last in Donald's argument for them to move to be closer to his parents. They had once told one another they would never move out of the city. Viv wanted to stay in the city and had presented her arguments against moving out of Boston but Donald told her he believed he was close to having a nervous breakdown.

After the move, Viv soon began worrying that her work with interfering with her family. She could not move up in the company because it would mean more hours away from them. She felt the other mothers on the block, who did not work, were critical of her job. It was at that point she began working at Windy Hill, a job that made her more flexible. Viv still wondered if she will fulfilling the true purpose of her second life.

When Donald's father died, Viv felt that Donald was angry with her. She tried to let him grieve in his own way. She felt as if he walked around in a suit that separated him from his family. Viv had talked to Donald about the possibility of sending Marcus to private school after Marcus had broken his leg at school. Another mother indicated Marcus had been bullying the smaller children when the accident took place.

Viv did not even try to tell Donald about Tiffany, a new student at the stables. She was desperate to improve as a rider but her family did not have much money. Viv recognized the girl had potential. She worked out a deal where Tiffany could have twelve lessons for the price of ten but her mother never paid. Viv saw herself in Tiffany and grieved because she felt she had let the girl down.

Viv had been at the stables when Mercury was delivered. She was fascinated by him from the start. One day when Claudia was not there, she brought Helen to meet him. Helen agreed with Viv's assessment of the horse. When Mercury scraped the ground with his right hoof, Viv believed he had chosen her.

Analysis

The point of view changes from Part 1 to Part 2. While Part 1 was told from the first person point of view of Donald, Part 2 is told from the first person point of view of Viv. She tells her reader it is her chance to plead her case. The person to whom Viv directs her story is Donald to whom she refers as "you" several times during this first chapter. The reader knows the "you" is Donald because she says this in her story of how the two met on the train: "Let him notice me, I thought. And you did" (132). The "him" whom Viv hopes will notice her on the train is Donald, who she later directly references as "you."

Viv's discussion of her life up until the point she met Mercury focuses on her desire to find something at which she can be the best. It is while riding horses that she feels most comfortable. She describes her relationship with the horse as being one in which she has a sixth sense of how to get what she wants from the horse. Even though she does well in business, Viv has to work to be a success.

Viv indicates that she believes she has been granted a second birthday. On this day it was possible she could have died but was saved by strangers. Viv believes she was saved for something special. Ironically, it was on the one year anniversary of her second



birthday that she met Donald. Even with this sign, Viv is not completely sure that her special future lies in being a wife and mother. When she visits a friend from college who has had a baby Viv wonders if all of that girl's studying and work in college was just to have her life taken over by a baby.

An important facet of Viv's personality is her belief she has failed in all of her endeavors. She believes she failed when she got her first opportunity to show horses. She believes she was a failure in the Big Sister program in college. She quit her position at the firm in Boston because she believed she was failing her family. When she worked only as a manager at Windy Hill she felt again as if she was wasting her life.

Feminism is introduced in Viv's section of the novel as she often evokes the life of Margaret Fuller, an early feminist. Claudia challenges Viv to be a captain, like Fuller had suggested women should strive to be. Viv doubts that real women can follow this example. She believes they are forced to work too hard as wives and mothers. There is a point at which Donald asks Viv about moving to the suburbs, something they had both promised each other they would not do. Viv indicates that she knows she is last in Donald's mind when he decides they need to move.

One of the differences that the reader may notice between Viv's descriptions of what has happened between herself and Donald is their description of Viv's decision that Marcus needed to go to private school. Viv indicates she began talking to Donald about sending Marcus to a private school when he broke his leg at school. She had heard a description of the incident that led her to believe that Marcus was becoming a bully. She had thought a private school would help straighten him out. In his description, Donald did not remember Viv having told him about Marcus and bullying. He thought the idea to send Marcus to private school came out of the nowhere.

The discussion of whether it is better to lie or hurt someone leads to another discovery about Viv. She believes that it is better to lie than to hurt another person. This is the advice she gives to Donald when he tells her about how he had decided to stop writing to Robert rather than to lie to him with a fake promise they would see each other soon.

The text introduces two important symbols in this section. The first of these is Viv's broken finger. She describes how it was broken when she was leading Nutmeg in from a paddock and he was scared by a cat. Viv did not tell her mother about her finger because she was afraid her mother would make her stop riding. For this reason, the finger healed crooked. Another symbol mentioned in this chapter of the novel is the painting *The Polish Rider*. The painting reminds Viv how much she loves horses.

Discussion Question 1

Compare and contrast Viv and Donald's sides of the story thus far.



Discussion Question 2

Why is Viv so disturbed by the failures she believes she has had in her life? Why is she so determined that she is intended for great things?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss Viv's connection with Tiffany. What do the two have in common? How does Viv think that she failed the girl?

Vocabulary

vertigo, departure, fanatic, ominous, phlebotomist, banished, succumbed, serendipity, eulogy, precedent



Part 2: Viv, Chapters 2-3

Summary

In Chapter 2, Viv remembers how she proposed to Hilary that she could exercise Mercury as part of their boarding arrangement since Hilary did not feel comfortable riding him. Hilary made it clear she could not pay Viv to ride Mercury but Viv said that having a horse to ride was payment enough. Hilary had not known that Donald was Viv's husband. She complimented him on what a good job he had done with Diane. Viv explained how he had been distracted and distant at home since his father had died. Hilary indicated she was still grieving the death of her brother.

When Viv told Claudia about her arrangement with Hilary, Claudia was sarcastic. She told Viv they did not need horses like Mercury at their stables. Even though Viv argued Mercury could attract higher rate horses to their stables, Claudia commented she was happy with Windy Hill the way it was. When Viv told Claudia that Mercury would make her happier, Claudia relented. She said she wanted Viv to be happy.

On the other hand, Viv knew Claudia was not happy. Viv was aware that Claudia considered herself a failure. Additionally, Claudia was dating Rick, a married man who had three children. Rick, whom Claudia had met because he took photos at horse shows, had told Claudia he would divorce his wife but the divorce had not happened yet.

One day when Rick was at the barn photographing Mercury, he mentioned to Viv he had told Claudia she needed to get a gun for protection while at the stables. Viv could not help but ask Rick if he was really going to leave his wife. He said he planned to but did not know what was stopping him. In his world, everyone thought of Rick being a good husband to Nan. He knew how hated he would be if he were to leave her. Viv warned Rick that if something did not change soon, she would declare war on him. He promised to break up with Claudia if he discovered he was unable to tell his wife.

In Chapter 3, Viv remembers telling Donald that Rick owned a gun. He reminded her about Melanie's father when he said that one could never tell about people who owned guns. In that instance, Trina had come home from Melanie's house with a picture of a girl holding a gun. Donald had called Melanie's father and criticized him for letting the children see his gun. He also called all of the parents in Trina's class to warn them. Viv noticed when she mentioned to Donald that Rick had a gun, Donald did not seem disturbed.

Viv also admits in her narrative that it was when both Claudia and Donald showed her that they disapproved of Mercury that Viv began to hide things from them. Hilary became a friend to Viv when it came to things involving Mercury. Hilary was the first one to whom Viv showed the pictures Rick had taken of Mercury. To Viv those photos were like porn.



Hilary called Claudia to complain about vet bills and farrier fees. Claudia passed the information along to Viv. They argued about the horse with Claudia telling Viv that she acted like Mercury was the only horse in the stables. She also accused Viv of treating Mercury as if he were her own. When Claudia complained that Viv was different, Viv countered by saying that she was actually more like herself than she had ever been. She realized why she had been saved from the train tracks. Claudia relented but reminded Viv what happened with Nutmeg.

Viv saw Hilary's act of going to Claudia about the expenses as a betrayal. She called Hilary to apologize and also hint to Hilary that she did not need to involve Claudia in financial issues. Hilary took the hint. She also asked about Jack and said they had been hanging out together. Because Viv did not think the relationship would last, she did not mention it to Donald.

Analysis

As Viv continues her side of the story, she explains to Donald that she began lying to him, and to Claudia, because she knew they both did not approve of Mercury or Viv's aspirations for him. She also covered her tracks by arranging for Hilary to come to her with concerns about Mercury's expenses. If Claudia did not know how much money Viv was spending on the horse, she could not complain or correct Viv. In some other instances where Viv did not tell Donald things she had learned, she withheld information just because she did not think he needed to know. One of the instances about which she withheld information was in the case of Jack and Hilary's friendship. She did not share her knowledge of this friendship with Donald because she did not think the relationship would last.

Lives continue to be held in the balance as characters lie to one another. Of particular focus in this section is the relationship between Claudia and Rick. Rick is a married man who has promised Claudia he will leave his wife for her. As of this point, Rick has not yet told his wife about his secret. While he lies to Claudia about his devotion to her, he also lies to his wife when he fails to tell her about his life with Claudia. Whatever Rick decides to do, he will hurt one of the women. With her friend's happiness in mind, Viv pushes Rick to make a move.

The times in these chapters when Claudia does reproach Viv about her behavior around Mercury, Viv is able to placate Claudia by telling her that Mercury makes her happy. She goes so far during one conversation to tell Claudia that she believes it was for Mercury that she was saved from the train tracks in New York.

Success and failure comes into play when Claudia tells Viv that she believes that she is a failure. Claudia compares herself to Viv whom Claudia believes was a success in the business world while Claudia has spent her life working with animals. Although Claudia is happy with her job, she does not have the money to eat expensive meals and take fancy trips like Viv has been able to do in the past.



Viv's idea of failure is more finely tuned than Claudia's. She does not see her friend's life as a failure. She reserves that label for herself. Viv is frustrated by the circumstances that life has sent her way. Her college years did not leave her time to ride and neither did her years working in the corporate world. Even working in the stables, Viv is unhappy because she is no longer able to exercise her drive through her business deals. She seems to believe that Mercury is her last best chance to finally prove herself.

Rick appears to be the character who plants in Viv's mind the idea that she needs to get a gun. When Viv talks to Donald later about the fact that Rick owns a gun, she seems to do so with the hope that he will rail against the idea of anyone owning a gun and will, in this way, discourage her from getting one. Instead, Donald does not pay much attention to her comment about the gun. She seems to take his lack of interest in the subject as a lack of interest in her. She compares his reaction to her statement about the gun to a picture Trina had brought home from a friend's house of a gun. Donald had called the father of that child and criticized him for letting the children see the gun. He had also warned other parents there was a gun in that house. Donald's reaction to one of Viv's acquaintances having a gun is so understated she wonders if she is really important to him.

Discussion Question 1

How does Viv manipulate the circumstances to get what she wants from Hilary?

Discussion Question 2

Do you think Donald responded appropriately to Viv's news that Rick had a gun?

Discussion Question 3

During a discussion with Hilary, Hilary tells Viv that she does not think that grief has a timetable. What do you think she is trying to say to Viv about Donald and his grief?

Vocabulary

cavalcade, incandescent, affinities, perceptive, ultimatum, digression, expedition



Part 2: Viv, Chapters 4-6

Summary

In Chapter 4, Viv tries to explain to Donald how she felt when she returned home after Windy Hill was first broken into at Thanksgiving. She felt like she was two people, both of whom wanted different things, as she sat in the car outside their house. She had to remind herself that she was a mother and wife. She had sworn Donald to secrecy about the break in because she was afraid he might mention it to Jack, who would tell Hilary. Viv had told Claudia the police had been there, but only said they had been investigating other break-ins in the neighborhood and recommended an update of the stable's security system.

Viv describes how Claudia announced to her one day that she was pregnant. Regardless of how Rick reacted, Claudia told Viv she wanted to keep the baby. Viv thought the baby was wonderful news, especially since it would distract Claudia from how much Viv was working with Mercury.

In Chapter 5, Viv began to learn Mercury's history from Hilary. Michael, Hilary's brother and Mercury's owner, had known Mercury from the time he was a foal and had always thought he would ride Mercury to victory. It was only in the last year of his life that he began to believe Mercury was somehow in danger. Hilary told Viv he thought someone had been riding Mercury in secret.

Viv additionally recalls Christmas Day, the day of Claudia's phone call and the second break in. She believed in their argument that Donald had "blamed me for the things you'd promised never to blame me for" (163). She had wanted to go see Mercury but Donald had stopped her. Viv knew she had finally gotten through to Donald, but at that point, wanted him to go back to being oblivious so she could go visit the horse.

The next morning Viv woke sick. In her feverish thoughts, she wondered if perhaps Michael's enemy had followed the horse to Windy Hill. She wondered how she could protect him. When she was finally well, Viv went to visit Helen and Claudia. Claudia was furious with Viv for lying about the break-in. After Viv agreed to care for all the horses, not just Mercury, Claudia told her the details of the second break-in. Driving to the stables, Viv wondered how Claudia could be so blind to Mercury and his potential. Although no one suspected the second break-in had anything to do with Mercury, Viv noticed that his saddle had been put on a different peg.

Viv writes that she had believed things had come together perfectly for her when she saw Tiffany, her old student, in the grocery store. She offered Tiffany a ride home and Tiffany admitted to Viv that her father was in trouble again. He had been involved in a fight in a bar and had been arrested because he was in possession of a gun. Tiffany thought perhaps her father had gotten the gun in New Hampshire.



In Chapter 6, Helen asked about Mercury when Viv picked her up for a physiotherapy session. When Viv voiced her concerns about Mercury's training, Helen suggested she consult Garth, a man giving master classes in New Hampshire. Helen also commented that Claudia was jealous of Mercury. Viv finally understood Claudia was jealous not only because of the time Mercury took away from the other horses but also of the time he took Viv away from Claudia.

Viv met with Hilary to talk more about Michael. She said Michael had been high when he had fallen off Mercury during a jump. Regardless, Hilary said it was strange that Michael had a premonition of what was going to happen to him. He had talked to her only days before about a scene from Anna Karenina where the hero's horse is killed in a jumping accident. In the same conversation, Viv surprised Hilary by telling her that she had entered Mercury in a couple of shows. Hilary was not able to respond because Diane interrupted them when she came home.

Analysis

As Viv learns more and more about Mercury and his first owner, she gets more and more paranoid that someone is trying to hurt the horse. Since Hilary has told Viv that Michael did drugs, it is understandable that his paranoia might have been connected to his drug use. He believed someone was sneaking in secretly to ride Mercury. Remember this suspicion as it will be important later on in the novel. Viv seems paranoid about Mercury but there are also some signs that point to the fact that the burglar might be interested in Mercury. For instance, the black glove that was found in the stables after the first break in was discovered right in front of Mercury's stall. In this section of chapters Viv discovers that Mercury's saddle is on a different peg than the one on which she generally placed it.

When describing their changes in personality, both Donald and Viv refer to the book *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. In his section of the novel Donald described himself as being like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde in that he felt he developed a second personality when he thought Viv was neglecting her family for Mercury. When Viv returns from the stables the night of the first break in, she admits that she feels like a different person than the one who lived in her house with her children and husband. While Donald had thought something awful must have happened to keep Viv sitting in her car instead of coming inside, Viv was actually trying to remind herself that her real life was there with her children and husband.

The state of New Hampshire comes into play twice in this novel. First, Viv learns that Tiffany's father got the gun he had in the bar in New Hampshire. Later, Helen suggests to Viv that she should attend master classes in New Hampshire to help her out with Mercury's training. These two references seem to be leading the reader to the idea that she will be going to New Hampshire to get a gun.

Viv takes several measures to try to protect Mercury in this section of the novel. She has fire extinguishers installed in the barn in case of fire. She also tries not to draw



attention to Mercury by arriving at the barn early to ride and groom him. Additionally, Viv also tries to pay more attention to Claudia. She realized from her conversation with Helen that Claudia was jealous because Mercury was taking Viv's attention away from Claudia. Viv hoped by paying more attention to her friend that she could alleviate some of this jealousy.

Discussion Question 1

What does it mean for Viv that Claudia is jealous because of the time that Mercury takes away from their friendship?

Discussion Question 2

How do Michael and Viv's opinions of Mercury begin to parallel one another?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss Viv's belief that she is divided into two people after she returns from the stables after the first burglary.

Vocabulary

queried, intrepid, exasperated, oblivious, hypothesis, cauterizing, stealthily, invoke, spavined, ascendant, redouble, premonition



Part 2: Viv, Chapters 7-10

Summary

In Chapter 7, when Tiffany called Viv to take her up on the offer to help out at Windy Hill, Viv knew it was a bad idea. On the drive to the stables, Viv asked Tiffany how her father had gotten a gun in New Hampshire. Later, after they finished riding, Tiffany asked Viv if she had seen National Velvet. Tiffany suggested that Mercury could win a competition like that.

Before she left for the night, Viv looped both a brown and a black lead rope around the bars of Mercury's stall and the door. She took a picture of the ropes so she would be sure they were in the same place the following morning. That night she remembered Rick's suggestion that she get a gun. In the morning when she returned to Mercury's stall, the ropes were still as Viv had placed them the night before.

In Chapter 8, Viv began using the computers at the library to complete Internet searches so Donald would not find out she was researching how to go about buying a gun in New Hampshire. The day that Viv had decided to buy the gun, it was snowing. She almost hoped Claudia would stop her but Claudia encouraged her to go. She thought Viv would only be attending a master class.

In a diner, Viv got acquainted with a man named Chance. She told her story just as she rehearsed, pretending as if she were asking about a gun purchase for a relative. As she had hoped he would, Chance takes her money and goes to the store to buy the gun for her. When he returned he gave her some tips on safe handling of a gun and told her he did not want to hear she had had an accident with it. When she returned to Massachusetts with the gun, Viv thought to herself that she was now a criminal.

In Chapter 9, even though Viv tried to convince herself nothing had changed when she went to the stables the next day, all it took was a look at the gun in the trunk of her car to make her realize things had changed. She escaped from reality while riding Mercury but Viv had to return to reality when it was time to start that day's work.

During her next trip to New Hampshire for the master class Viv also stopped at a shooting range to practice firing the gun. On her second visit to the shooting range Viv met another woman. That woman was very laid back about gun ownership. As she drove home, Viv remembered how all the people she knew thought that guns changed people. Viv decided instead of moving the gun from place to place, she would keep it stored in her trunk, separate from the ammunition.

In Chapter 10, Viv's children noticed she had changed. Viv interjects in her dialogue that the gun had not changed her, Mercury had changed her. She believed the gun had only changed how she felt power was balanced. In her record she reminds Donald of the night she went to the 7-Eleven for milk. She had been scared by two men who had



gotten out of a low rider car until she remembered she had the gun. She had told Donald about her experience and he warned her she had to be careful, especially since they had never found out who had broken into the stables. Because Viv thought he realized the stables were not safe, she considered showing him the gun but decided against it.

One night Viv was alone in the stables when she was surprised by a man's footsteps. It was only Rick, looking for Claudia but Viv started keeping the gun and ammunition in her jacket at that point. She figured having a gun was useless if it was in her trunk. As Viv was getting ready for bed that evening she had remembered the gun was still in her jacket. When she went to move it, Donald had held out his arms for her. Because it was his first invitation in a long time, she concentrated on him instead of the gun.

Analysis

Tiffany is a key figure in Viv's story for two reasons. First, because Tiffany's father was arrested for having a handgun, Viv is able to ask her how he got the gun in the first place. From what Tiffany tells her, Viv is able to put together a plan to get her own gun. Tiffany also encourages Viv's dream to make Mercury a championship horse without even realizing it. Tiffany alludes to the movie *National Velvet* when she tells Viv she believes Mercury could be a champion just like that horse.

This is the second time in the book the movie *National Velvet* has been mentioned. The movie about a young girl who rides a no name horse to victory is popular in the sector of horse crazy teen girls. Tiffany is still young enough to believe that stories like that can come true. That same movie is mentioned when Claudia is talking to Donald about Viv and her aspirations. She explains that as girls they used to dream about finding a horse that could jump anything, like the horse in that movie. Although Claudia had grown up and discarded the dream, Viv had continued to search for that special horse. Viv believed she had found it in Mercury.

After Viv purchases the gun, she struggles with her own conscious because of the attitude she was always taught to have toward guns. Of the people that Viv knew, those people did not keep guns in their homes and probably would not consider purchasing one. Viv seems to think it is taboo when she learns from Rick that he owns a gun. When Viv goes to the shooting range in New Hampshire to practice shooting, she is surprised by the relaxed attitude of one woman in particular. This woman claims that guns are not dangerous in and of themselves. She figures that if she keeps the gun and ammunition stored separately, she has nothing to worry about. Her words, in fact, "Nothing magical about a gun" (82).

In Viv's world, guns are believed to be a force that causes people to do things they would not usually do. In Viv's case, the gun makes her feel more secure even when she does not have it on her person. This is demonstrated by her encounter with the two men in the parking lot of the 7-Eleven. After she is spooked in the stables by Rick, she



realizes the gun will do her no good if it stays locked in the trunk of her car. It is at that point she begins carrying it with her.

In order to get around the strict gun laws in Massachusetts, Viv goes to New Hampshire to buy the gun. She plans carefully to get a man she meets in a diner to buy the gun for her. She cannot purchase it because she does not have a New Hampshire identification. Because this man, Chance, bought the gun and ammunition for her, the gun is registered to him. He takes a very big chance that she does not plan to do anything illegal with it when he agrees to have the gun registered in his name. In the case that the gun were used in a crime, Chance would be the one who would get in trouble for it. Apparently since Viv has put forth such a bad fake persona, Chance trusts her not to be a trouble maker. Proof that he has seen through her lies comes when he tells her that she can put her wedding ring back on while he is off getting the gun. He also lets her know that he is aware she intended for him to buy the gun for her all along, especially since there is a gun shop located so close to the diner.

A pair of significant symbols are mentioned in this section of the novel. The first symbol is the two lead ropes that Viv loops through the bars of Mercury's stall and door. These ropes serve as a way for Viv to know that Mercury is safe. If the ropes have been moved or rearranged, she will know someone went into his stall. If they are still looped where she left them, she will know he had not been bothered during the night. The gun is also a significant symbol that is introduced in this section. It is a symbol of Viv's willingness to take things into her own hands, and even resort to violence in order to protect Mercury.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you think that Chance agrees to buy the gun for Viv?

Discussion Question 2

In what way does Tiffany help to further Viv's story? How might things have been different if Viv had not crossed paths with Tiffany again?

Discussion Question 3

In what ways does Claudia unknowingly encourage Viv to purchase the gun?

Vocabulary

doting, recede, ransacked, nocturnal, alibi, absconded, incongruous, lateral, rampage, diaphragm



Part 2: Viv, Chapters 11-14

Summary

In Chapter 11, as Viv was riding Mercury the next morning Claudia came running in to tell her that Rick was going to move in with her. Claudia was certain this was true because Rick had spent the night in a Holiday Inn after having told Nan what was happening. Claudia was overjoyed because she suddenly had the family and home she had always wanted. When Viv walked by Mercury's stall, she thought that if things could change for Claudia, they could change for her as well. She believed she could be the champion she had always wanted to be. When she had told Donald, he seemed angry because he did not know that Claudia wanted children. He suggested that Viv had been like that, too. Viv thought it was a great aspect of their relationship that Donald had made her want children.

In Chapter 12, Viv tells what happened with Nutmeg. She planned to train him during one summer break from college and enter him in a three-day competition before school restarted. In the event, Viv and Nutmeg were in first place after the dressage competition the first night. The second night they finished the cross-country with no penalties. When she unloaded Nutmeg that night one of his forelegs was hot. His owner, Elsa, suspected the pastern was fractured. Viv protested because Nutmeg had no trouble jumping and did not appear lame. Elsa suggested the injury might have been developing over a period of time, especially since Viv had been training him so hard.

After Viv arrived at the show the next day, it was clear that Nutmeg was hurt. Viv watched the jumping and knew that she and Nutmeg would have won easily. Back at the stables that night Viv only left a note for Elsa telling her that she quit. The next summer Viv got an email from Elsa telling her that they'd had to put Nutmeg to sleep because the fracture in his leg had gotten worse. Her indication that Viv was not to blame made Viv feel that Elsa did blame her.

In Chapter 13, in order to avoid her mistake with Nutmeg, Viv took Mercury to New Hampshire to get advice from Garth. After the first lesson, Garth said if she did not schedule another lesson with him he would hunt her down. He praised Mercury and said the horse lived up to Viv's description. The only safe person whom Viv could think to tell about Garth's words of praise for Mercury was Charlie, one of the stable girls who was also enthralled with the horse. Viv thought perhaps she would even take Charlie on as her groom.

That night during dinner with Hilary, Viv began talking about Garth and his reaction to Mercury without even thinking about it. Viv even talked about the shows she planned to enter. When Hilary told Viv she did not want Mercury being driven to lessons and horse shows, Viv noticed she was not smiling. Hilary told Viv she was considering leasing Mercury to help with expenses. Her suggestion that Viv ride another horse for competitions shocked Viv so much she could not respond. After Hilary left, Viv realized



that both Donald and Claudia had been right in warning her that Hilary could take Mercury away from her.

Viv tried to calm herself and tell herself she would pay to lease Mercury. She also tried to talk to Donald when she got home. She had voiced her fear that Hilary would not let her compete on Mercury. When Donald told Viv that was Hilary's choice, she felt as if she were alone.

In Chapter 14, Viv was shocked to arrive at Mercury's stall one morning and discover that the lead ropes had been moved from the door. She checked him completely and found nothing amiss. As she exercised Mercury that morning, she was determined nothing was going to come between her and her determination to become a champion.

Analysis

The news of Claudia's pregnancy is a sore spot between Viv and Donald because Donald has not yet discussed with Viv his feelings after learning she had almost aborted Marcus. In fact, Donald has not even told Viv that Claudia told him how close Viv came to aborting their first baby. This is an example of the way Viv and Donald see the same situation in their life in different ways. Viv believes the dream and her choice to keep Marcus was special because she had never wanted children before that time. She was not sure if she wanted to be tied down by children. Viv was made certain that she loved Donald because he did make her want to keep the baby. Donald, on the other hand, is offended that Viv could ever have even thought about having an abortion. He sees this instance only as more proof that Viv doubted their relationship, not a sign of her ability to overcome that doubt.

Viv's ambitious nature has already led to one tragedy in her life. As a college student she worked a horse so hard that it injured itself and eventually had to be put to sleep. While ambition is generally thought of as a positive personality trait, Viv takes her ambition to an extreme. By pushing her mount so hard, Viv not only ruined her own chances for success, she also ruined a good horse.

Viv's habit of taking liberties with Hilary's horse is discovered by Hilary in this section. Because Viv so desperately wants someone to talk to about Mercury she tells Hilary about Garth's reaction to the horse even though she had not mentioned to Hilary she was taking the horse to New Hampshire. Hilary is clearly not happy with Viv's decision to take Mercury to another state without talking to her first. She also does not seem to approve of Viv's plans to show Mercury. Viv reports feeling abandoned when she talks to Donald about her encounter with Hilary and Donald reminds her that Mercury is Hilary's horse. Despite Donald's constant reminders that Hilary had control of Mercury, Viv still appears surprised and hurt when Hilary does not agree with Viv's plans to make the horse a champion.

There are two things to notice in this section. First, Viv was startled when she arrived at work one morning to find the lead ropes she had placed around Mercury's stall door



were moved. Even though the moved ropes were proof to Viv that someone had been in Mercury's stall, there was really nothing she could do with the proof besides make sure Mercury had not been injured. Remember also Viv's mention that Charlie also shared her love of Mercury. The fact that Viv considers asking Charlie to be her groom will be significant later on in the story.

Discussion Question 1

Why is it significant that Donald is unhappy about the news of Claudia's pregnancy?

Discussion Question 2

Are you surprised when Hilary is upset with Viv for taking Mercury to New Hampshire? Is Viv taking freedoms with Hilary's horse that she should not be taking?

Discussion Question 3

How has Viv's ambition gotten her into trouble in the past? Is she going down the same road again?

Vocabulary

sonogram, stamina, erratic, loitering, confidante, preposterous, contemplate, prerogative



Part 3: Donald, Chapters 1-4

Summary

In Chapter 1, Donald indicates to his reader that even with his side of the story, in which he now realizes he misunderstood quite a bit of Viv's actions and intentions, and Viv's side of the story, there is still information that led up to the accident of which he is unaware.

At the hospital the day of the shooting, the doctor asked who had shot Jack and why. Donald was still trying to compose an answer when Hilary spoke up and told the doctor the story as she understood it. Donald called his home phone and left a message telling Viv he was at the hospital, the doctors were calling to police. He wondered if Viv had already confessed to the shooting.

Donald tried to comfort Hilary by telling her Jack was strong but Hilary worried about Jack's spirit. The part of blindness he hated most was not knowing who was in the room with him. Hilary asked Donald what he thought had happened. He knew if he told the truth his family would be changed forever. Instead he intentionally lied and suggested someone was trying to rob the stables. Donald believes at this point, when he told his second premeditated lie was perhaps his second birthday.

In Chapter 2, Donald learned later that while he and Viv were sitting waiting for news about Jack, Viv had gone to calm Mercury. After getting him soothed she wondered if she should go to the police. She drove for a distance and then stopped and threw the gun and ammunition into the woods.

In Chapter 3, the police arrived at the hospital to question both Donald and Hilary. Afterward, Hilary asked Donald if he knew a girl named Charlie who worked at the stables. Charlie had come by her office the day before, but Hilary had not been there to talk to her. Donald and Hilary's conversation was interrupted by a nurse who came to tell them Jack was in recovery. The nurse promised to call if anything changed with Jack. Donald drove Hilary back to her car. Once he was alone, he did not want to go home and face Viv. He went instead to his office where he spent the rest of the night.

In Chapter 4, in the morning Donald called the hospital and learned that Jack was still asleep. Outside the office, Donald noticed Viv had left a note on his windshield asking him to come home. At home, Viv told Donald she had not gone to the police yet. She had wanted to see Marcus and Trina first. Donald asked what she had done with the gun.

He remembered Viv telling him her side of the events of that evening. After Samson's colic had improved she had gone home but returned to the stables because she was not sure if she had set the alarm. Back at the barn she heard voices and she knew they were coming from Mercury's stall. She put the magazine of ammunition in her gun and



took off the safety when she saw there were three people in the horse's stall. In her fear she did not notice her finger on the trigger until she heard the noise. Even though Donald tried to convince her otherwise, Viv believed what she had done made sense. She had believed someone was trying to hurt Mercury.

At the hospital, Jack was still unconscious but the nurse said he had been conscious at one point in the recovery room. As Donald sits by Jack's bedside he thinks of the philosophical question Jack had once posed to his family where a person is told he can stop a train crash by pushing a fat man off a railway bridge. Donald realized in his real life, just like in this conundrum, he did not know who he should save and who he should sacrifice.

At home, Donald learned that both Claudia and his mother had been told lies about the shooting at the stables. He was angry how the lie was spreading. He asked Viv again why she had decided to get a gun. When she again explained she felt she had to protect Mercury, Donald thought of mercury as the deadly substance that could cause death and blindness.

Analysis

The author connects the story to sight as Donald explains how he was still unable to understand what had happened between himself and Viv even after he had heard her side of the story. He compares his situation to "the three blind men, each encountering different parts of an elephant, each believing he grasped the whole" (211). Donald realizes his side of the story, or even Viv's does not make that story complete. In believing that he alone had understood completely what was happening, Donald had deceived himself. "I had believed myself the possessor of the 20/20 vision my progressives promised" (211). In reality, Donald had grasped only a small bit of what was happening.

The danger of guns is underscored as the reader learns that Viv did not intend to shoot the gun. In her fear, her finger tightened on the trigger and released a bullet before she realized what was happening. Viv tells Donald she had intended to call out to the people in Mercury's stall first but had been afraid when she realized there were three of them. Her mistakes included not only having a loaded gun, but also taking the safety off and having her finger on the trigger. Most firearm instructors will teach students to leave the safety on a keep their fingers away from the trigger unless they intend to shoot. A mistake with a gun can be deadly. It is for this reason that owning one should be taken so seriously.

Even though Viv has badly injured one of Donald's friends, she seems more concerned first about Mercury and then about herself than Jack. She does not offer to help Jack after she sees she has shot a friend. She does not go straight to the hospital. Instead, she checks to make sure Mercury is not injured. She goes home where one of her first questions to Donald is whether or not she will be allowed out of jail on bail if she turns herself in.



Now Donald is faced with the decision of whether or not he should turn his wife into the police as the person who shot Jack. He knows that by turning her in, he will destroy his family. By not turning her in, the lies about what happened that night in the stables will continue to spread. Because Viv has already told this lie to both Claudia and Peggy, it does not seem likely that she plans to do what is best and turn herself in. She leaves instead this terrible decision to her husband.

In this section the author uses the literary technique of personification when describing how Donald wanted to tell the police what had really happened at the stables. In this sentence, the words are given the abilities of bird: "The words I had kept in a cage the night before banged around. I longed to call the police, let them fly" (225). Also used quite often in this section of the novel are a variety of simile, comparisons using the words like or as. For instance, Jack's skin in the emergency room is describes as being "white as Mercury's mane" (212). In another instance, Jack knows that if he tells the police that Viv was the one who shot Jack, his life would be "changed almost out of recognition, like the flimsy Coke can I had unthinkingly, crumpled in my fist" (215).

Discussion Question 1

Should Donald tell the police that it was Viv who shot Jack? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Do you think this story would have had a different ending if Donald had encouraged Viv to pursue her dreams with Mercury like his mother suggested?

Discussion Question 3

What is Viv's rationalization for the shooting? What were her major concerns after she had accidentally fired the gun?

Vocabulary

vehement, muddled, stoic, microcosm, premeditated, dire, fanaticism, revulsion, genial, excruciating, alcove, jostling, panoply, slewed, atrocious, vaporous, absolution, invoking, exuberantly



Part 3: Donald, Chapters 5-8

Summary

In Chapter 5, in the days after the shooting, Donald and Viv had no choice but to go back to their daily routine. When he called the hospital Donald learned that Jack was still unconscious. Donald wished he could talk to his father, who had believed in doing the right thing and being able to look at one's self in the mirror, about what was happening in his life.

In Chapter 6, during a visit to Jack in the hospital, Donald asked his friend to come back to the world because he was needed there. Later that night he told Viv his fears about Jack and his condition. He wanted her to understand the severity of what she had done.

That night Donald also admitted to Viv that it was Charlie who had been breaking into the stables to ride Mercury. Viv cried in grief when she understood Mercury had never been in any real danger. Donald, however, realized that if he had told Viv the truth, Jack would not have been shot. He considered himself an accomplice to Jack's injury.

In Chapter 7, Donald tells his reader that Charlie had come by his office four days before Jack had been shot. Charlie asked for Donald to help her because she never got to see Mercury any more. She wanted advice from Donald on how she could persuade Viv to let her ride him in shows. Donald reminded Charlie that Mercury was Hilary's horse. She left quickly, thanking him profusely. In retrospect, Donald realized he had not understand what it meant that Charlie had gone a few days later to visit Hilary in her office. Donald had just about made up his mind that in order for Jack to regain consciousness, he needed to tell the police about Viv. It was at this point that Hilary called saying Jack was awake. When he visited in the hospital room, Donald felt it was his chance to tell Jack and Hilary what had really happened, but he let it slip past.

In Chapter 8, Viv demanded to know if Donald was going to turn her in to the police or not. Viv also told Donald she planned to fire Charlie. She planned to tell Claudia that Donald had seen Charlie riding at the stables after hours. Viv asked if Donald was okay with being the one who took the blame as far as the truth about the break-ins went.

Later at the hospital, Jack talked to Donald about his fears. They had increased since the shooting. He wondered who hated him enough to shoot him. Because he was so shell shocked, he thought he should break up with Hilary. When Donald told Jack the shooting was just an accident that could have happened to anyone, Jack said he knew that, but was having trouble believing it. Viv tried to convince Donald they did not need to go to the police. Donald was mired down by his indecision. He was relieved when Bonnie made an appointment to get her daughter's eyes checked. He believed somehow Bonnie could tell him what he should do. When he saw her, however, Donald realized she was just another patient. Meanwhile, Hilary called Donald to confide how



badly Jack was behaving. Donald hoped that in the aftermath of his injury, Jack did not lose Hilary as well.

Analysis

When Donald first chooses not to tell the truth about Viv's part in Jack's shooting, he begins down a path from which he finds he cannot easily return. The more he does not tell the truth, the harder it gets to do so. Although the question is not asked in this section, the reader should remember Viv's statement to Donald about his choice not to respond to Robert's letters that it was better to lie than to hurt someone. In this case, Donald will hurt someone whether he lies or whether he tells the truth. While Donald's situation is like Rick's in the fact that Rick stood to hurt either his wife or Claudia with his affair, it is dissimilar in that Donald should not be the one responsible for telling the truth. Viv should take responsibility and own up to what her paranoia has caused her to do.

Since Viv has put Donald in the position that he is responsible for telling the police who shot Jack, Donald tries to weigh his choices. He sees the day that he intentionally lies about the shooting, telling Hilary it was probably the person who had been breaking into the barn, as a sort of second birthday. Unlike Viv's birthday, which Viv believes has granted her a new lease to be the best she can be, Donald believes he has turned into his worst self.

Even though Jack admits to Donald how fearful the shooting has made him, Donald is still not able to tell his friend the truth. Donald tries to tell Jack that the shooting was not personal, Jack was not the intended victim and no one hated him, but does not share with Jack specifically what happened. Hearing the true story might help Jack feel less traumatized by his experience.

Viv is grieved when Donald finally tells her that it was Charlie all along who was the one breaking into the stables. Donald realizes that his lie, intended to help him get even with Viv for distancing herself, is probably a good deal of what contributed to Jack being shot. Viv might never have gotten a gun or felt Mercury was in danger if she had known from the beginning that it was Charlie who was breaking into the stables.

Meanwhile, Charlie becomes a character to be reckoned with. Her actions at Donald's office in taking Nabokov out of his cage are presumptive and irresponsible. It appears she has a history of taking liberties with other people's animals. Donald does not put together what Charlie has in mind when she visits him and learns from him that Mercury belongs to Hilary, and then visits Hilary a few days later. Notice that during their meeting, Donald feels uncomfortable with Charlie, as if she is attempting to manipulate him.

Even though Viv does not want Donald to tell what she did to Jack, Viv has no problem using information that Donald gave to her about Charlie to fire the girl. She has no qualms against bringing Donald into her decision to fire Charlie. In reality, Charlie has done nothing that Viv did not do, she just does not have the power that Viv has at the



stables to make her actions acceptable. Viv fires Charlie because she can and because she wants Mercury all to herself.

Discussion Question 1

Do you think it would have aided Jack's recovery to know what really happened the night he was shot? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Compare and contrast Viv and Charlie. How are the two alike? In what ways are they different?

Discussion Question 3

What significance does Donald give to his second birthday? How is it different from Viv's second birthday?

Vocabulary

nocturnal, incredulity, overt, dubious, refrain, sundered, accomplice, orrery, veering, snibbing, askance, conciliatory, enticingly, irascible, incoherent, embarked, dour, gaudy, inchoate, vacillating, irrevocably, reciprocated



Part 3: Donald, Chapters 9-13

Summary

In Chapter 9, Donald wonders if some force overcame Viv and made her buy a gun and use it, but decides she had made a conscious choice. She was responsible for her actions. The next time Donald went to Windy Hill to pick up Marcus and Trina he saw Claudia even though he tried to avoid her. She said she felt guilty about what had happened and was having security cameras as well as a gate installed at the entrance to the stables.

Viv told Donald how angry Charlie was when Viv fired her. She lashed out at Viv about Mercury. Viv recounted how even though Charlie knew nothing about Mercury, she thought she was going to ride him in shows. Donald told Viv he thought Charlie was obsessed with the horse. He realized that Viv had no idea how alike she and Charlie were in the obsession with Mercury. In the midst of her concern about Mercury, Donald reminded Viv how badly Jack was recovering from his bullet wound. He insisted Jack's injuries should change something in Viv's consciousness. Deep inside he knew it meant he had to go to the police and tell them what he knew. Viv only replied that Charlie would never see Mercury again if she could help it.

In Chapter 10, when Donald got a call from the police asking him to come in, he was relieved. On the way to the police station he stopped to see Jack, believing it would make him more determined to tell the truth about what had happened. Donald felt he was in the right frame of mind to tell on Viv when he had another memory of a student who had mentioned visiting the prison to see her mother. The student confessed to Donald she wished her mother could come home. Largely because of this memory, Donald did not tell Detective O'Donnell about seeing Viv in the stables the night Jack was shot. Later when Donald told Viv he was worried someone might find the gun she had thrown out, Viv promised to go and look for it. She begged Donald for them to put the incident behind them without him going to the police. Even though she mentioned their children's needs, Donald told his wife he could not promise her anything.

In Chapter 11, Donald looked up his old friend Robert. He found an address and wrote Robert a letter telling him that he had a situation about which he needed advice. In Chapter 12, Donald's mother asked to meet him for lunch. She told him that Larry's wife Jean was dying of pneumonia. She had a DNR and was asking her wishes be respected but Peggy felt as if their ability to do nothing was the same as killing her. In Chapter 13, just when Donald was about to give up on his letter having made it to Robert, he got a phone call from his old friend. Robert agreed to meet Donald in Washington. Later, his mother called him to Jean's nursing home. As he watched the way that Larry treated his wife, Donald realized he liked him.



Analysis

As Donald considers that some force might have taken over his wife and made her buy the gun, the reader can see that he is still trying to give her the benefit of the doubt. When he considers his idea rationally, he realizes that Viv intentionally bought a gun and that she should be held responsible for her actions.

Although he knows he should tell the authorities the truth about the shooting, Donald is pulled back and forth between what is right for Jack and what is right for his family. Jack is still suffering stress and flashbacks from the shooting. He still has another surgery to repair his shoulder and months of physical rehabilitation to be able to use that arm again. Despite what his friend is suffering, Donald is also faced with the pain he might cause his children if their mother were to be sentenced to serve time in jail. It is the idea that his children might have to grow up without their mother that keeps Donald from again telling the truth when he has the chance.

Viv, meanwhile, tries to encourage Donald not to tell what he knows. She uses the children as a reason he should keep the truth to himself but in reality, her intentions are selfish ones. Her selfishness comes out when Donald tries to show that she understands the severity of Jack's injuries, injuries that she caused because of her obsession with Mercury. Instead of grasping how she has let her love for the horse take on a dark tone and is causing hurt to others, Viv only swears that Charlie will never see Mercury again. This statement turns out to be highly ironic as the reader learns Mercury's fate in the closing chapters.

Discussion Question 1

How do his children figure into Donald's decision not to tell the police about what Viv did?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss Viv's continued obsession with Mercury. Do you think she is at all aware how much she has changed Jack's life? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

What does it mean that Donald reaches out to Robert at this point for advice? Why do you think he calls upon Robert at this point when he was content to let him be part of his past for so long?



Vocabulary

staid, superfluous, aberration, meticulously, nocturnal, nadir, defibrillator, abetted, stalwart, cryptic, composed, stertorous



Part 3: Donald, Chapters 14-15

Summary

In Chapter 14 while waiting for the time to come for his meeting with Robert, Donald visited the Rotunda in Washington where he looked at the document, the Bill of Rights, that give people the right to bear arms. After this he made his way to the Peacock Room where he was supposed to meet Robert. Once they were reunited, Robert explained the history of the room in which they were meeting. When he was finished, Robert asked Donald to tell him about the situation for which he needed advice. Robert was openly disturbed when Donald told him about Viv's secret decision to buy a gun. Robert told Donald he was very anti-gun because he had been mugged by a man with a gun when he had been in Washington only a year.

Once Robert had the whole story, Robert told Donald that Viv should have gone to the police if it was truly an accident. He told Donald that since Viv had not gone to the police, Donald needed to do so. Before they parted, Robert asked Donald if he thought Jack would be able to forgive him for hurting him with his lies.

In Chapter 15 as Donald thought about what his friend had told him, he thought that he had regained the reality of his belief on the importance of people versus ideals. At home, he told Viv what he planned to do. He apologized and Viv told him she was surprised he had waited as long as he had. Viv went to the study and Donald later read the list she had written. The first item on the list of things she believed she needed to do was to get a saddle pad for Mercury. Donald was so angry he wanted to break things. That night, Viv came to Donald when he was almost asleep. They made love.

Analysis

Seeing his old friend seems to put things into perspective for Donald. This could be because Robert, having grown up in Edinburgh, shares the same Scottish sense of propriety as Donald. He leaves Washington believing that the thing to do is to turn Viv in to the police for her crime. Although Viv seems disappointed that her husband is turning her in, it appears Viv still has not gotten her priorities straight. She makes a list of things she needs to do which Donald finds later. He is angered that the first thing she had listed was getting a new saddle pad for Mercury. The saddle pad ranked above talking to her children about what was going to happen.

Robert is a person who has very strong ideas about gun ownership. He is at first surprised that Donald is married to a woman who "solves problems by buying a gun" (281). It is apparent that Robert think this is an uncivilized way of solving one's problems. He is anti-guns because he was mugged at gunpoint. Even though his mugger did not injure him, Robert still had to have counseling to help him deal with the fear that he had after the attack.



Notice that one of the things that Donald does while in Washington is to pay a visit to the place where the Bill of Rights is displayed. He seems particularly interested in trying to decipher the line that allows United States citizens to own guns. It is almost as if he needs to see for himself if it is really part of the Bill of Rights.

Discussion Question 1

What do you think Donald means when he thinks to himself that his reality of what is most important, people or ideals, has been returned to him?

Discussion Question 2

Since the time of the shooting, Viv has tried to convince Donald not to tell that she was the one who was at fault for Jack's injury. What do you think she means when she tells Donald she is surprised he waited as long as he did when he announces he is going to the police?

Discussion Question 3

Because of a bad experience involving a gun, Robert loathes guns. How does this experience affect the advice he gives Donald?

Vocabulary

obelisk, defiant, fortnight, impartial, squalid, pivot, monopolizing, hypothetical, penitent, juxtaposes, sublime, trivial



Part 3: Donald, Chapters 16-19

Summary

In Chapter 16, Donald went to Detective O'Donnell and told her that it was Viv who had accidentally shot Jack. He asked the detective to wait until the following day to tell Jack what had happened, giving Donald a chance to tell Jack in person. Donald got a text from Viv asking him to meet her at the stables to talk. When he arrived, she was in the area riding Mercury. He knew this was what she thought of as her most persuasive argument. He saw the harmony between her and the horse as she rode. When Donald realized Viv had been willing to risk their lives to ride a horse, he got up to leave. Viv called him back. She said she had gone to the police. The district attorney would decide on charges sometime in the spring. She would probably serve six months to a year in jail. In Donald's dreams that night, the Simurg finally came. It lifted Donald up over Edinburgh where he dreamed he had been walking. The bird set Donald down at the train station. His father was waiting for him. He remembered his father had smiled at him, but Donald had woken just before he started speaking.

In Chapter 17, Donald visited Jack. Even though he knew he had not forgiven Viv, he was about to ask Jack to do so. When Donald told Jack it was Viv who shot him, Jack was so angry he overturned the coffee table. He swore and asked Donald why he was just being told if it was an accident. After Jack calmed down from his initial shock, he asked Donald to explain to him why Viv had a gun. He told the story and admitted as time when by it was easier to lie. Jack expressed his shock that Donald had not said anything even after Donald saw how Jack had fallen into despair about the shooting.

Jack changed the subject and told Donald that Hilary had decided to sell Mercury. Jack said it was a man by the last name of Adams who bought Mercury and Donald understood the horse belonged to Charlie. In reference to Viv, Jack told Donald that in his mind what Donald had done was worse than what Viv had done. He argued Viv had believed she was protecting something, Donald had lied to Jack even while he pretended to care for him. Donald realized at that point he had not saved anyone by his actions. Even Jack asked Donald how the world was a better place now that Jack knew the truth. As Robert walked out of Jack's apartment, he was suddenly very unsure if he had done the right thing by telling the truth.

In Chapter 18, Viv told the children what had happened. She had talked to a lawyer and knew she would have to serve some time in jail because there was a mandatory sentence for bringing an illegally bought gun into Massachusetts. Donald noted he never again wanted to see the suffering he saw on Viv's face when he told her that Charlie was buying Mercury. In Chapter 19, Robert indicates that since Jack's shooting at Windy Hill he no longer thinks of himself as a person of integrity. He does not completely understand why he lied about what Viv had done or why he eventually decided to tell the truth. When Viv went to court she was sentenced to serve a year in



jail. She and Donald decided their focus would be to make sure the children were relatively unscathed from the experience.

In a conversation with his mother, Peggy complimented Donald on coming home when she and his father had needed him. Donald was glad to learn he had done one good thing. She asked him if Viv and Donald would go on being married after she got out of prison. Donald admitted he did not know. It was a few nights after his visit with his mother that Donald began writing his account of what happened. In April, Donald was surprised to discover a police car parked in his driveway. The policeman told Donald they had located Viv's gun. He showed Donald a zippered bag with the gun inside. Donald asked to hold it, a request the officer allowed. He then asked to pull the trigger, a request the officer considered for a longer amount of time before allowing. Donald was surprised how easy it was to pull the trigger.

Analysis

When Donald tells Jack that he had been lying about not knowing the identity of the person who shot Jack, it is apparent that Donald and Jack's friendship is over. Jack tells Donald that what he did was worse even than what Viv did. Jack suggests to Donald that it would have been best for him to continue to lie.

Donald questions his decision to tell Jack, and the police, the truth. By telling the truth, he has not eased his conscious, he still believes himself to be a person of no integrity. He has also hurt his children and his best friend. Even though Viv is sentenced to time in jail it is perhaps what happens to Mercury that is her worst punishment. Remember in an earlier section that Viv had sworn that Charlie would never see Mercury again if she could help it? It turns out that Viv is the one who will probably never see Mercury again. Charlie has arranged with Hilary to buy Mercury. Perhaps if Viv had not taken things into her own hands and gone to such drastic measures to protect a horse that was not even hers, she could have had the chance to own Mercury. Instead, her blind ambition has again destroyed her dreams.

Notice the way that Donald describes Viv and Mercury when he watches Viv ride the horse in the arena at Windy Hill. In their sections of the novel both Viv and Donald have made reference to feeling like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. These characters represent the warring good and evil that exist in all people. When Donald sees how Viv and Mercury complement each other he describes them as "the two halves not fighting, like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, but in harmony" (294). Donald also sees Viv's act of riding Mercury as "Viv's ultimate version of the beast with two backs" (294). Since this same description had been used to describe Viv and Donald in a lovemaking scene, it gives an erotic spin on Viv's relationship with Mercury.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the meaning of Donald's dream with the Simurg. In earlier sections it had seemed a good thing to get carried away by the Simurg.



Discussion Question 2

Why do you think it is so important for Donald to have worked his way through assigning blame in Jack's injury?

Discussion Question 3

Why is Jack able to consider forgiving Viv more quickly than Donald? Why does his think Donald's actions are worse than Viv's?

Vocabulary

reproaches, incapacitated, incongruously, lucid, feckless, maelstrom, deigned, saturnine, corroborated



Characters

Viv Stevenson

Viv is the wife of Donald and mother of Trina and Marcus. She is described as being a highly motivated individual with a desire to be great. She is one of the main characters in the novel as well as the narrator for Part 2 of the book. Viv had tried to win a championship on a horse in college but had overtrained the horse, resulting in an injury for which the horse eventually had to be put to sleep. When she had entered the business world, Viv tried to forget her aspirations to be a great horseback rider and concentrate on being the best business woman instead.

While still living in New York, Viv fainted after having given blood and fell onto the train tracks in the subway station. She was saved by two men who pulled her back onto the platform. Viv noted this day as her second birthday and believed she had been saved to do some great work. When Mercury arrived in the stables where Viv worked, she decided it was her destiny to win a championship on him. Viv was insecure, however, because Claudia, her friend and boss, and Donald, her husband, were not supportive of her aspirations.

After a couple of break-ins at the stable, Viv became paranoid, believing someone was targeting Mercury. She devised an arrangement of different colored lead ropes to let her know if someone had been in Mercury's stall. Viv also bought herself a gun which she believed she could use to help protect Mercury from the person she believed was stalking him.

It is because of her passion for the horse that Viv shot Jack when she saw him, Hilary and Donald in Mercury's stall after hours. Because Jack was standing in front of the horse with his hand raised, Viv thought he was trying to hurt him. She did not recognize the people as her friends but instead shot on impulse.

Viv does not turn herself in to the police for shooting Jack. She instead leaves that decision up to Donald, who was the only one who saw her in the stables that night. She tries to convince Donald that he should not tell on her because of how much it will hurt their children.

Donald does eventually turn Viv in for her crime. She is sentenced only to a short amount of jail time because she violated the state's gun laws. Perhaps a bigger punishment for Viv was that Hilary sold Mercury to Charlie, the girl who had served as a stable hand and had been as obsessed with Mercury as Viv was. Because Viv had lashed out at Charlie when she learned the girl was riding Mercury in secret and then had fired her from Windy Hill, there is no chance that Charlie will let Viv near Mercury.



Donald Stevenson

Donald Stevenson is one of the main characters of the novel and serves as the narrator for Parts 1 and 3 of the book. He is the husband of Viv and the father of Marcus and Trina. He owns his own optometry office.

Donald tells his story in Part 1 in an attempt to determine the factors that led up to his wife, Viv, buying a gun and then accidentally shooting Jack, a family friend, at the stables where Viv worked. In Part 3, Donald attempts to determine how much he was at fault in what happened to Jack. He also struggles to decide if he should turn Viv in to the police for the shooting.

Because his father had just died about the time that Viv met Mercury, the new horse at the stables, Donald acknowledges he did not pay as much attention to her talk about the new horse as he probably should have. Donald was jealous of the horse and angry at Viv for appearing to choose a horse over her own family. He did not understand her aspirations to be a champion horse rider.

As Donald examines the circumstances that led to Viv shooting Jack, Donald realizes he was an accomplice to the shooting because he did nothing to stop it. Most incriminating is that Donald learned that it was Charlie who was the burglar at the stables but did not tell anyone. It was because Viv became more and more paranoid that someone was trying to hurt Mercury and that he was the target in the burglaries that she bought the gun in an attempt to protect him.

By not identifying Viv as the shooter immediately, Donald also destroys his friendship with Jack. Jack is angry and resentful when Donald finally tells him it was Viv who fired the shot that injured Jack. Jack, already blind, had become fearful and angry since the shooting in addition to having a bad shoulder. Jack told Donald he had added "cruel and unusual punishment" (302) to his injury by pretending to be Jack's friend while hiding from Jack what really happened that night.

It is at the advice of his oldest friend that Donald does finally turn Viv in to the police. In the final scene of the novel, Donald asks to hold the gun that his wife had purchased. He notes when he asked if he could pull the trigger of the gun that it took surprisingly little effort. The ending indicates that Donald has realized how easy it might be to veer away from one's ideals and initiate a tragedy like Viv did.

Claudia

Claudia is Viv's friend from childhood. The two rode horses together. As an adult, Claudia manages a riding and boarding stable once owned by her aunt. Claudia invites Viv to help her manage the stables.

To Viv's disappointment, Claudia never warms to Mercury, Hilary's horse. She believes he is too fancy for their stable. Claudia rails on Viv because she pays so much attention



to Mercury that she neglects the other horses. She does not understand Viv's aspirations to ride Mercury to a championship. This is especially so because Mercury does not belong to Viv but instead another woman. Claudia is additionally jealous of Mercury because he takes time away from her friendship with Viv.

Although she had not wanted children as a younger woman, Claudia is excited when she becomes pregnant by a married man. She is even happier when he agrees to leave his wife, move in with her and raise their daughter.

Jack Brennan

Jack Brennan is a college professor and friend of Donald. Donald has the unfortunate task of telling Jack, who is also his patient, that he is losing his sight. Despite his blindness, Jack tries to live his life as normally as possible. He even begins writing a book about blindness.

Jack and Hilary meet one another at Viv's birthday party. They begin dating. Hilary does not realize until after they have slept together for the first time that Jack is blind. Despite his blindness, Hilary accepts Jack's proposal of marriage.

Jack is accidentally shot by Viv when he, Hilary and Donald visit Mercury at the stables after the stables are closed. Jack, who had already admitted to Donald that the worst part of being blind was not knowing who was in the room with him, is badly shaken by the idea that someone could shoot him. Jack is even angrier when Donald admits to him that it was Viv who shot him and that Donald knew it was Viv all along.

Charlotte "Charlie" Adams

Charlie is a teen who works as a stable girl at Windy Hill. She has aspirations for Mercury just like Viv does.

It is because she wants to ride Mercury that Charlie and her boyfriend begin breaking into the stables at night. Donald discovers the girl riding when he goes to the stables one night to get a text book that Marcus forgot. He promises Charlie he will not tell Viv he caught her riding but tells her not to break into the stables again.

Charlie visits Donald at his office asking how she can convince Viv to let her ride Mercury. Donald reminds Charlie that Mercury is Hilary's horse, giving her the idea to go to Hilary and try to buy the horse. In the end, Hilary sells Mercury to Charlie.

Hilary Blake

Hilary Blake is Diane's mother. She inherits Mercury, a gray thoroughbred, when her brother is killed in a riding accident. Hilary boards Mercury at the stable that Viv and Claudia manage.



Because he is such a talented horse, Mercury sparks an obsession in both Viv and Charlie. Hilary originally makes an arrangement with Viv allowing Viv to ride Mercury as part of her boarding fee. Later, Hilary sells Mercury to Charlie.

Hilary meets Jack at Viv's birthday party and the two are engaged. It is because Hilary had wanted to go visit Mercury that she, Jack and Donald were in the stable after hours the night that Viv accidentally shot Jack.

Robert Walter Dougherty

Robert Walter Dougherty is Donald's friend from Edinburgh. The two were friends until Donald's family moved to America. Donald stopped writing to Robert when he learned his family was not going to return to Edinburgh. As an adult, Donald looks up Robert and visits with him to ask for advice about his situation with Viv. Robert advises Donald to tell the police it was Viv who shot Jack.

Marcus Stevenson

Marcus is the son of Viv and Donald. Viv had almost aborted Marcus but had a dream the night before her appointment with Planned Parenthood of herself and a baby playing in a river together. The dream made her reconsider her plan to have an abortion.

Mercury

Mercury is the horse that was owned by Hilary's brother, Michael. He is described as being almost seventeen hands tall and is five years old with a dapple-gray coat. When Viv sees Mercury she believes he is the champion horse for whom she had been waiting.

Peggy Stevenson

Peggy is Donald's mother. She is the one to whom Donald often goes for advice. Peggy challenges Donald to look at his situation from Viv's point of view instead of just focusing on what he sees. In addition to being upset by his father's death, Donald is also upset when he learns that his mother is seeing a man.

Nabokov

Nabokov is the African grey parrot who was once owned by Robert's father, Edward. Like Robert, Nabokov suffers from grief after Edward's death. In his grief, Nabokov pulls out his feathers. Robert begins taking Nabokov to work with him in order to give the bird more opportunities for socialization and relieve his grief.



Edward John Stevenson

Edward John Stevenson was Donald's father. He died of Parkinson's before the time of the novel. Edward figured into Donald and Viv's story because they moved to the suburbs, out of the city of Boston, in order to be closer to Edward so they could help with his illness.

Detective O'Donnell

Detective O'Donnell is the officer who questions Donald after the shooting. At first, Donald tells the officer he does not know who shot Jack. Later, Donald goes to the police department and admits that he knew Viv was the one who shot Jack. Donald makes his admission to O'Donnell.

Larry

Larry is the man whom Peggy begins seeing after Edward, her husband and Donald's father, died. Even though Donald does not want to like Larry and knows the man will never take his father's place, he has to admit that his mother had chosen a good man.

Tiffany

Tiffany is the horse crazy teenager who reminds Viv of herself at that age. Viv uses Tiffany to learn how Tiffany's father got the gun for which he had just been arrested. Tiffany is also one of the few people who encourages Viv's passion for Mercury.

Michael

Michael was Hilary's brother and Mercury's owner. He was killed before the time of the novel when he fell from Mercury during a jump. Hilary told Viv that Michael had been high at the time of the accident. Michael willed the horse to his sister.

Diane Blake

Diane Blake is Hilary's daughter. It is when Hilary takes Diane to Donald to have her eyes checked, that Donald meets Hilary for the first time.

Helen

Helen is Claudia's great-aunt. Helen was the original owner of Windy Hill. She passed ownership to Claudia. Helen agreed with Viv about Mercury's promise as a show horse.



Trina Stevenson

Trina is the daughter of Viv and Donald.

Bonnie Dawson

Bonnie Dawson is the patient on whom Donald develops a crush.

Symbols and Symbolism

Viv's Broken Finger

Viv's broken finger is a symbol of her devotion to riding horses. She hid her broken finger from her mother because she was afraid her mother would make her stop riding because of the injury. The finger is first mentioned in Part 1, Chapter 1. Viv describes how her finger was broken in Part 2, Chapter 1.

A Man's Glove

This man's glove found in front of Mercury's stall is a sign to Viv that the person breaking into the stables at Windy Hill was interested in Mercury. This glove is mentioned in Part 1, Chapter 9.

The Security System

This security system is a sign both of Viv's determination to protect Mercury and of Donald's belief that Viv had chosen Mercury over her family.

After the first break in at Windy Hill, Viv arranged for a security system to be installed at the barn. She paid for the system with her own credit card. When Donald learns that Viv paid for the security system about the same time that she told him that she had changed her mind about Marcus going to private school, Donald believed it meant that Viv cared more about Mercury than her own son.

The security system is first mentioned in Part 1, Chapter 9.

The Gun

The gun is a symbol of Viv's determination to protect Mercury. It is first mentioned in Part 1, Chapter 16.

The Simurg

The Simurg is a symbol of both Edward and Donald's desires to escape from their lives. Edward wanted to escape from his illness while Donald wanted to escape from the uncomfortable situation in which he had found himself. The Simurg is first mentioned in Part 1, Chapter 14.



Two Lead Ropes of Different Colors

These lead ropes of differing colors are also symbols of Viv's determination to keep Mercury safe. She arranged the ropes so that she would know if someone had gone into Mercury's stall during the night.

These ropes are first mentioned in Part 1, Chapter 19 when Hilary has to remove them in order to open Mercury's stall door. The reader learns why these ropes were there in Part 2, Chapter 7.

The Painting The Polish Rider

This painting is a sign to Viv that she is out of sync with her life. When she looks at the painting in a museum she does not focus on the man as much as she does the horse. Viv's encounter with the painting is recorded in Part 2, Chapter 1.

Photos of Mercury

These photos of Mercury are like porn to Viv. They represent her obsession with the horse.

Dark Glasses

These dark glasses symbolize Jack's blindness.

Key to the Stables

This key is a symbol of Donald's act of deceiving Viv by not telling her that it was Charlie who had been breaking into the stables all along.



Settings

Edinburgh

Edinburgh is the city in Scotland where Donald spent the first ten years of his life.

Windy Hill

Windy Hill is the name of the riding and boarding stable that Viv helps to manage. After Hilary's horse Mercury is boarded there Viv spends a good deal of her time there, away from her family. During a visit to Mercury at the stable, Viv accidentally shoots Jack believing that he is a burglar intending to hurt the horse.

Donald's Office

It is in Donald's optometry office that he first meets Hilary, Mercury's owner and her daughter, Diane. Donald also meets Bonnie, the woman upon whom he nurses a crush, at the office.

Meanwhile, it is when Donald begins taking his late father's parrot, Nabokov, to the office that the bird stops grieving his owner and pulling out his feathers.

Boston

Boston is the city where Donald and Viv met. They lived in this city until Donald decided they needed to move to the suburbs so they could be closer to his sick father.

New York

New York is the city where Viv worked after she graduated college until she was transferred to Boston. It was in New York that she fainted onto the train tracks after having given blood. She believed she was saved from the tracks for some special purpose.

The Peacock Room

When Donald travels to Washington to visit his old friend Robert, Robert arranges to meet him in the Peacock Room.



Themes and Motifs

Deception and Devastation

The focus of this story is the devastation that is caused in an entire community when a husband and wife choose to lie and be deceitful to one another. Not only are Viv and Donald affected by their lies, their family, friends and even acquaintances feel the brunt of their actions. Although it was Viv who bought the gun that ultimately wounded an innocent man, Donald comes to realize he had just as big a part to play in what happened.

Because Viv senses her husband does not approve of Mercury, a new promising horse at the stables where she works, Viv begins lying to her husband about the amount of time and money she spends on the horse. Donald, who was suffering from grief after his father's death, realizes perhaps he did not pay the attention to Viv that she deserved but at the same time believes that she is abandoning her family for a horse.

Viv's fear that her husband will be angry with her for trying to protect the horse initiates her first act of deceit: she purchases a security system for the barn on her credit card after a burglary was reported. Donald's act of deceit is no less hurtful. He visits the stable after hours one night and discovers Charlie, a stable hand, riding Mercury, the horse that Viv loved so much. Donald does not tell Viv it was Charlie who was the one who was breaking into the barn all along. He believes he is paying Viv back for her actions of choosing a horse over her family.

As time passes and there are more break-ins Viv becomes more and more determined she has to do something to protect Mercury. Because she still does not know it is just Charlie who is breaking into the barn to ride Mercury Viv purchases a gun. One night she visits the barn and discovers three people inside Mercury's stall. Before she is able to identify the people as Mercury's owner, her fiancée and Donald, Viv has pulled the trigger on her gun and shot Jack in the shoulder.

In the aftermath of the shooting, Donald and Viv's lives are in shambles. Donald was the only one who saw Viv in the barn and knew she was the one who shot Jack. Even though it was an accident, Viv does not go to the police, leaving that decision in her husband's hands. By the time Donald finally decides he needs to tell the truth, he has ruined his friendship with Jack.

Viv is the only character who does not seem to be properly affected by the shooting. Jack is badly injured and must undergo two surgeries as well as physical rehabilitation to regain the use of one of his arms. Hilary and Jack's relationship is close to being destroyed because Jack suffers paranoia and trauma long after the shooting. Hilary and Viv's friendship is ruined because Viv shot Hilary's fiancée. Viv loses her chance to own Mercury because of the shooting. Hilary chooses to sell Mercury to Charlie. Claudia, the owner of the stables, feels guilty because the shooting happened at her stables.



Additionally, the lives of Donald and Viv's children is changed forever with their mother becoming a criminal and spending time in jail.

The Analogy of Donald's Story with Sight

Because Donald is an optometrist, it makes sense that he would use sight as a way to help himself understand the tragedy that has taken place in his life. He uses analogies with sight in several instances to help his reader understand how he feels about a particular chain of events. Through most of the story, Donald considers himself to be myopic, or nearsighted, unable to see the whole picture of what is happening.

Donald uses an extended metaphor to explain how he is like a blind person as he tries to tell his story without knowing all the sides. "Like the three blind men, each encountering different parts of an elephant, each believing he grasped the whole, I had believed myself the possessor of the 20/20 vision my progressives promised" (211). Donald turns to a story in which three blind men are allowed to feel different parts of an elephant and asked what they believe they are feeling. None of the men answer that what they are encountering is an elephant. In the same way, Donald has experienced only a part of the things that led up to Jack's shooting. He does not realize how little he understood until he heard his wife's side of the story. Even then, he knows that he still probably does not know the whole story. Notice in this quote that Donald indicates he believed himself "the possessor of the 20/20 vision my progressives promised" (211). In this instance, even though Donald references the bifocal glasses he wears, he is not talking about physical vision but instead the ability to understand the events in his life.

At several points in the book, Donald describes himself as being myopic, or nearsighted, in his opinions and actions. In an appointment with Diane, who suffers with nearsightedness, Donald gives her some advice that he could put to use in his life. "You are shortsighted, and no amount of willpower will change that. If you don't wear glasses, you'll miss most of what's going on around you. You may have an accident, or cause one" (19). Although Donald may not need physical glasses, he needs to find some way to correct his outlook on life. His shortsightedness, particularly when it comes to not telling Viv about Charlie riding Mercury as a way to punish Viv, does contribute to an accident.

When Donald describes the actual shooting and how it affected his life he writes this: "as swiftly as if someone had severed my optic nerve, my life changed" (115). In this quote, Donald compares the way his life changes with Jack's shooting as being similar to the way his life might have changed if he had gone blind. Donald loses his footing and is no longer able to "see" the right way to go. As a result he flounders in his indecision and loses some of the good things in his life.

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Ambition

One of the things that Donald admits he loved about Viv when he first met her was her ambition. Donald, and the reader, soon learns that even though ambition is generally thought of as being a positive personality trait, ambition can be taken too far. In the course of her life, Viv manages to destroy several chances for greatness because her desire is perhaps too great. Although Viv does not realize she and Charlie are similar in their willingness to do whatever they need to in order to achieve their goals.

Viv’s ambitions first focused on horses. She believed she had a sixth sense of how to get her mount to do what she wanted it to. For her communicating with the horse was easy. As a young rider she won several rosettes but never the big championship she



desired. She decided to take one summer away from college and fulfill her ambition of riding a championship horse. Although she is warned by the owner of the horse she rides, Viv trains the horse, named Nutmeg, too hard. Although they are able to compete in the first two days of a three-day competition, Nutmeg's injury was obvious on the third day and Viv had to drop out of the competition. Not only did Viv destroy her own dream with her overzealousness, the horse had to be put to sleep because of its injury.

Viv tried to redeem herself in the business world but never had to knack for finances like she had for horses. Viv worked hard and was promoted but soon came to a point where she was no longer able to fulfill her ambitious nature because she had a family and was unable to work longer hours or transfer to another office, moves the next step up the ladder would have required. Frustrated with business, Viv returned to horses.

It was perhaps an experience in New York where Viv was saved from the train tracks that prompted her drive to try again to win an equestrian championship. She believed she had been saved for some special purpose. When she first met Mercury, a new horse at the stables where she worked, she believed that his talent would help her fulfill her destiny.

This time Viv is more careful training Mercury so that he does not become injured. In her care of Mercury, Viv becomes obsessed that someone is trying to hurt him. She lets her paranoia get the best of her and buys a gun in an attempt to protect him. When she discovers three people in Mercury's stall late one night Viv accidentally pulls the trigger on her gun. This act, which she believed would protect Mercury ends her dreams with him. Hilary, Mercury's owner, chooses to sell the horse to Charlie, another girl in the stables. Additionally, Viv has to serve jail time, a sentence that would have cut short her training with Mercury even if Hilary had not sold him.

Meanwhile, when Donald finally told Viv it was Charlie who was the burglar at Windy Hill, Viv was furious. Charlie had been breaking into the stables at night to ride Mercury because she never got a chance to during the day. Like Viv, Charlie saw the potential in Mercury. Also like Viv, Charlie had ruined her first horse, it had strained a tendon, because she rode it almost constantly. Viv, however, does not see any similarities between herself and Charlie.

The Impact of Grief

Grief is a powerful emotion as described in this novel. Donald puts a good deal of blame on his grief when he considers how poorly he listened to his wife in the months leading up to Jack's shooting. The book teaches also that animals, as well as people, can suffer with grief. While grief is most often associated with death, one can grieve a lost sense, like sight.

Donald believes it was his grief after his father's death that kept him from completely paying attention to his wife during the months in which she began focusing on Mercury. While Viv indicates she tried to let Donald grieve in his own way, she could not handle



his habit of closing her and the children out of his life. She felt he had abandoned her in the way he did not listen to her or react to her in the way that he once had. Donald's grief makes him not only neglect his family it also makes him angry and withdrawn when he realizes his mother is moving on with her life.

Even while Donald is struggling with his own grief, his father's pet, an African parrot, is grieving in its own way. When the family noticed the bird was losing feathers they at first thought perhaps he was molting until they remembered birds did not molt in the winter. A visit to the vet taught them that the bird was grieving the loss of his owner. His act of pulling out his feathers was a sign of that grief. Once the bird was put in a place where he got more socialization, he began to recover.

Jack, meanwhile, also grieves. Although he has had low vision for most of his life, he had only recently gone completely blind. He is no longer able to read, one of his favorite activities. He is not able to get around by himself as well as he once was. He struggles with the difficulties of living life as a blind person. While he challenges himself by writing a book about being blind, Donald recognizes his friend is suffering with loneliness and grief. His blindness has separated him from the society and the life that he once knew.

Guns in Society

A highly controversial topic this novel addresses is the role of guns in society. The opinions of gun ownership are presented in two different, drastically different lights. Donald struggles to understand why his wife would want to own a gun and why she would be able to use it as easily as she did. Also discussed are the challenges with buying a gun in some states as well as the penalties for breaking these gun laws.

The opinions of gun ownership are presented with no shades of grey in this novel. People are either against guns or they believe there is no problem with owning them. Before Viv got a gun, Donald believed they were among those who believed gun ownership was wrong. When Donald discovered the father of one of Trina's friends had showed the girls his gun, he went so far as to call all the parents in Trina's class to warn them there were guns in that student's house. Although Viv is dismayed when she learns Rick, a man she meets at the stables, owns a gun, she is also intrigued by his suggestion that she get a gun to protect herself. After she has purchased her gun and visits a shooting range for the first time, Viv is surprised by the way the people there regard their guns. They see them as tools, not instruments of evil.

After Jack is shot by Viv, Donald struggles to reconcile his opinion of Viv with her ownership of a gun. When his old friend Robert expresses shock that Donald is married to a woman who owns a gun, Donald admits that he is still surprised by that fact. Donald tries to excuse his wife's behavior by thinking that some force overtook her that caused her to buy the gun. In the end, he realizes he has to face the rational truth and accept that Viv knowingly purchased the firearm. Viv tells Donald she shot the gun accidentally. After she had removed the safety, her finger tightened on the trigger and caused the gun to fire without her even intending to have done so. Donald's act of pulling the trigger

on the gun in the end of the novel and realizing how easily it pulled may be his first step of realization that what his wife said to him about the shooting being an accident was true.

In an attempt to get her gun more quickly and with less hassle, Viv illegally goes out of state to buy the gun. She recognizes that she is a criminal once she crosses the state line back into New Hampshire. It is because of her violation of those gun laws that Viv has to spend time in jail for shooting Jack. It was not the act of shooting a man that required mandatory jail time but instead the illegal way she bought the gun. This mandatory jail time for the illegal gun underscores how seriously gun rights and use is taken in some parts of the country.



Styles

Point of View

This story is told from the first person point of view of two different main characters in the novel. Donald narrates Part 1 and Part 3 of the novel as he tries to determine what led to the changes in his wife that prompted her to purchase a gun. In Part 3, Donald describes the aftermath of Jack's death and his struggle with himself as he tried to decide if he should turn his wife in to the police. Part 2 of the novel is told from the first person point of view of Viv as she tries to defend her actions. Donald's sections of the novel are written to the reader in general while Viv's section is written for herself.

The first person point of view is appropriate in this novel as Donald and Viv are the only ones able to tell their side of the story of the events that led to Jack's shooting. Each character, however, is only able to tell what he knows and has experienced. It is after Donald hears Viv's side of the story that he admits there are things he did not take into consideration when he formulated his opinions of her actions. He has realized that he might never know the full story of what happened despite his attempt to pull together all the minute details that led up to the tragedy.

Language and Meaning

One significant aspect of the language in the novel is the way that Donald compares his lack of being able to understand what was happening with his wife to physical sight. This comparison is appropriate since Donald is an eye doctor. It makes sense he would describe what is going on around him in terms of eyesight.

Also included in the novel are several philosophical questions. These questions follow the idea in the novel that sometimes people are placed in hard situations where there is no good answer and no best course of action. One of these questions asks if a fat man were standing on a railroad bridge and a person knew he could stop a train crash by pushing the man onto the tracks if he should do so. Another asks if a person could save either their grandmother or a painting by Rembrandt from a fire, which one would they save. The question most central to this novel is presented in Part 2, Chapter 1. When Donald and Viv discuss the reasons that Donald did not return Robert's letters, Viv suggests to Donald that it is better to lie than to hurt someone.

Structure

This story is divided into three different parts. In the first part of the novel Donald tells his side of the story up to the point that Jack was accidentally shot by Viv. Donald does a good deal of leading up to and foreshadowing that some terrible tragedy has taken place but it is not until the end of this section that the story climaxes with Jack being shot and Donald being the only one to see that it was Viv who pulled the trigger.



At the point of the climax, the author inserts Part 2 of the novel where exposition from Viv's point of view is added. Donald's story of Jack is not picked up again until Part 3 of the novel. In Part 3 of the novel the action, at least the emotional action, of the novel increases with Donald trying to decide if he should turn Viv in for her crime. The story comes to a climax when Donald confronts Jack with the news that it was Viv who shot him and that Donald knew that all along. The action falls as Donald and Viv learn the sentence Viv will face for her crimes.



Quotes

We had both had previous relationships, but this was the only one Viv cared to describe. You could say I'd been duly warned."

-- Narrator (Part 1, Chapter 1)

Importance: It is because Viv told Donald only about her previous relationships with horses that he felt he should have known how serious her fascination with horses was. After the fiasco with Mercury, Donald believes he did not pay adequate attention to what she was trying to tell him.

I tried to make up for my lack of enthusiasm by being a good listener. But there is listening, and listening. When my patients talk during an exam, I respond appropriately even when 90 percent of my attention is focused on the cornea, the iris, the lens. And that, I fear, is how I listened when Viv first told me about a horse named Mercury."

-- Narrator (Part 1, Chapter 1)

Importance: Donald describes a habit of his, in which he manages to respond properly to what his patients are saying even if he is not fully paying attention to them. He fears he missed a major change in his life when he practiced this habit of not completely listening to his wife when she told him about Mercury.

I did not understand that grief has many guises. It can make a man oblivious to his wife's needs, or susceptible to a hazel-eyed woman, or a thief of keys and codes, or an outright liar."

-- Narrator (Part 1, Chapter 1)

Importance: Donald indicates that his grief, caused by the death of his father, caused him to do things of which he was not proud. It made him insensitive to his wife and her needs, and at the same time made him susceptible to another woman. He additionally blames his grief for the agreement he made with Charlie not to tell Viv it was Charlie who was breaking into the stable and riding Mercury. Donald believes his grief also made him blind to the lies his wife told him.

Her ability to enter wholeheartedly into a cause or an activity is one of the many things I admire about her. Or, I should say, used to admire."

-- Narrator (Part 1, Chapter 1)

Importance: Donald admits to his reader that one of the traits he once admired most about his wife was her ability to devote herself completely to a task. It is this same trait that becomes Viv's downfall when she devotes herself to Mercury despite the damage to her family and the paranoia she develops that ultimately causes her to shoot Jack.

Months later, when she told me she had wished for success with Mercury, I slammed the microwave door so hard the hinges broke."

-- Narrator (Part 1, Chapter 6)



Importance: Viv's admission to Donald that she did not wish for health and happiness for her family when she blew out her birthday candles but instead wished for luck with Mercury that he is angered. To Donald, it is another sign that Viv cares more about the horse than her family.

At some point the woman who watched over a dying mouse had disappeared. I had missed her departure."

-- Narrator (Part 1, Chapter 8)

Importance: Donald interprets Viv's reaction to Nimble's euthanasia as being completely uncharacteristic for her. For this reason he thinks Viv has abandoned her love for all animals, a key component to her personality. Viv sees it differently though. She believes putting the horse to sleep is actually kinder than letting it die from kidney failure, the disease from which the horse is suffering.

I have never believed I was exceptional, but Viv secretly, passionately, believed that she was destined for greatness. When her attempts to compete on Dow Jones failed, when she found herself thirty-seven years old with two beautiful children, a devoted (if grieving) husband, a pleasant home, dear friends, and a job she loved, she felt as if her life was over. Everything tasted of ashes until Mercury arrived."

-- Narrator (Part 1, Chapter 8)

Importance: Donald comes to realize that even though Viv had success in her personal and home life, she did not see any of those as ways in which she was fulfilling her belief she was destined for greatness. In fact, it appears she thought her chances for greatness had disappeared until she saw Mercury.

As I stood watching her, half a dozen forks in one hand, a dishtowel in the other, it came to me that her change of heart about Greenfield was due not to the importance of Marcus's friends but to the many expenses around Mercury. Even our son came second to her horse. For a moment anger robbed me of speech."

-- Narrator (Part 1, Chapter 11)

Importance: It is when Donald realizes that Viv changed her mind about the private school because she had spent the money instead on security at the stable that he is angered beyond words. He believes this is proof that Mercury is more important to Viv than even her own son.

Now I suspect that I also wanted to punish Viv, for her almost abortion, her obsession with Mercury, her betrayal of Claudia, her falling asleep, night after night, without turning to me.

-- Narrator (Part 1, Chapter 16)

Importance: Donald admits to his reader that he agreed not to tell Viv that he had discovered Charlie was the one breaking into the stable to ride Mercury in order to punish Viv.



Now I had a second birthday, and I wanted to do better by my second life.”
-- Narrator (Part 2, Chapter 1)

Importance: When Viv is saved from being killed when she faints onto the train tracks she believes she has been granted a second chance at life and an opportunity to achieve the greatness for which she always believed she was destined.

But did I want to be colonized by a small, helpless being? Was this my second life? After a long evening in a bar with Claudia, I called Planned Parenthood.”
-- Narrator (Part 2, Chapter 1)

Importance: When Viv first learns that she is pregnant, she decides that she does not want to carry the baby to term. She thinks she is meant for things more important than being a mother. After talking to Claudia, Viv makes an appointment at Planned Parenthood to have an abortion. Viv never tells Donald that she almost aborted the baby.

She was my younger self. I had failed her, and somehow that failure connected with all my other failures.”
-- Narrator (Part 2, Chapter 1)

Importance: Even though Tiffany is not allowed to take lessons any longer because her parents do not pay the fees, Viv blames herself for Tiffany losing the ability to ride. She feels it is another way in which she has failed. In this case, Viv believes she has failed a younger version of herself.

Now the news about Rick’s firearm barely reached you. Could I start the water for pasta? you asked.”
-- Narrator (Part 2, Chapter 3)

Importance: Even though Donald had gotten so angry when he learned that the father of one of Trina’s friends had let her handle a gun, he barely acknowledged when Viv told him that Rick had a gun. For this reason, Viv believed Donald no longer cared for her as he once had.

‘I’m not different,’ I said. ‘I’m myself again. Now I know why I didn’t die in the subway.’”
-- Viv (Part 2, Chapter 3)

Importance: Even though Viv’s children, husband and friends tell her that she has changed, Viv recognizes that she is more herself than she has ever been. She is the person who once desired to win championships.

No one had connected the second break-in to Mercury, but when I went to get his saddle, it was on a different peg.”
-- Narrator (Part 2, Chapter 5)

Importance: When the stable is broken into for a second time, Viv believes that the



crime is connected to Mercury because his saddle is on a different peg than the one on which Viv had placed it the night before.

Guns changed people; they made people do things they'd never normally do."
-- Narrator (Part 2, Chapter 9)

Importance: Even though Viv met a breed of people at the shooting range in New Hampshire who believed guns were just a part of life, another type of tool, she had been raised to believe that guns were evil and had the ability to change people.

Can you understand? I loved you, Marcus, and Trina, but I loved Mercury too. I was going to ride him to victory. After more than a decade I was going to fulfill the promise of my second life."
-- Viv (Part 2, Chapter 14)

Importance: Viv felt there was nothing wrong with the determination she felt to fulfill her desire to be a great equestrian. She believed she could love her family and also be great.

There is listening and listening; there is also seeing and seeing. I had missed, or misunderstood, almost everything. Which surely means that, despite everything Viv told me, I am still missing a good deal."
-- Narrator (Part 3, Chapter 1)

Importance: After Viv tells her side of the story, Donald realizes how much of the story he was missing when he took into consideration only his interpretation of the events.

And his spirit.' She told me then what I had not known before, namely how frightened Jack had been when he understood he was going blind, how, like my childhood neighbor, he hated never knowing who was in a room, or in the street."
-- Hilary (Part 3, Chapter 1)

Importance: When Donald worries that Jack will not heal completely from his gunshot wound, Hilary points out what is perhaps more important in his recovery. She tells Donald they need to be concerned about the health of Jack's spirit as well. As a blind person he had always had trouble with the idea that he did not know exactly who was in the room with him. The shooting had only worked to make that fear worse.

What sort of conversation does a man have on the occasion of his wife accidentally shooting his dear friend with a gun she has purchased secretly, and owns illegally?"
-- Narrator (Part 3, Chapter 4)

Importance: Donald presents this question as a way to indicate to his reader how highly unlikely he had believed it was that he would ever find himself in this sort of situation.



I heard the name differently now, not just a messenger god or a shining liquid or the smallest planet but a toxic substance that could cause blindness and death.”

-- Narrator (Part 3, Chapter 4)

Importance: After learning that Viv bought the gun with which she shot Jack to protect Mercury, Donald no longer thinks of Mercury by the good connotations of that name, all that comes to mind are the terrible things that the substance called Mercury can do.

Watching her, her face twisted, red, wet with tears, I in turn understood what she had still to grasp: if I had told the truth when I came home that night from Windy Hill, or indeed at any moment during the next few weeks, Jack would not now be lying in a hospital bed.”

-- Donald (Part 3, Chapter 6)

Importance: Donald realizes his own fault in what happened when he realizes that if he had told Viv that it was Charlie who was breaking into the stables to ride Mercury, perhaps none of the things that happened after that initial lie would have taken place.

Had some force entered Viv — the mysterious Fate she sometimes invoked — and made her buy a gun? No, I believed she was entirely responsible for her actions. She had chosen, and she could have chosen otherwise.”

-- Narrator (Part 3, Chapter 9)

Importance: Even though he would have liked to believed it was not possible, Donald has to realize that Viv had chosen, on her own power, to buy a gun.

As she continued to rant, as another car drove by, I understood two things: she had no inkling that she and Charlie were peas in a pod, and, despite everything, she still cherished her own ambitions for Mercury.”

-- Narrator (Part 3, Chapter 9)

Importance: Even after all that has happened, Donald realizes Viv still believes in her ambitions for Mercury. Although she was willing to do crazy things to protect the horse and get her chances to ride him, she does not believe that Charlie is willing to do the same things.

I can understand you lying to the police at the hospital, wanting to talk to Viv first. But that you kept on lying, even when you saw my despair, saw that I felt singled out by the universe, seems like cruel and unusual punishment.”

-- Jack (Part 3, Chapter 17)

Importance: Jack tries to explain to Donald how hurt he has been by Donald's choice not to tell him that Viv shot him accidentally. He considers Donald's intentional lie worse than Viv's accidental act of shooting him. Jack is so upset by what Donald has done that their friendship is destroyed.