

My Name Is Lucy Barton Study Guide

My Name Is Lucy Barton by Elizabeth Strout

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Plot Summary

My Name Is Lucy Barton, by Elizabeth Strout, is written as a fictional memoir of a famous author. The story is told in a series of flashbacks, beginning with Lucy's time in the hospital when she was younger. The time is the early 1980s.

Lucy recalls that her earliest memories of her parents are accompanied by a feeling of loneliness. She remembers that when her parents would go to work, and she was still too young to go to school, they would take her with them, and lock her in the cab of the truck until they were done for the day. She says that those times alone devastated her, and instilled in her the idea that she was a burden.

While in the hospital, many years later, when she, herself, was a wife and a mother, her own mother visited her, which was monumental, because her mother and father lived in impoverished conditions in a rural part of Illinois. Her mother hated hospitals, but had come nonetheless, which spoke volumes to Lucy.

Her mother, at first, just made small talk. They discussed one of the women that Lucy's mother did alterations for, a Ms. Kathie. Ms. Kathie, though she was very well off, had left her husband for another man, only to find out that the other man was gay. When she thought to come back to her husband, he wouldn't have her, and both of them remained alone and sad the rest of their lives.

Lucy recalls her third grade teacher, Mr. Hanley, who had such a monumental impact on her life, though she doubts that he ever realized it. Out on the playground some of the girls had teased her about being poor. Mr. Hanley gave a stern lecture about prejudice once everyone was back inside. Later, he pointed out that prejudice happens in many ways and in many forms. It is this lesson that Lucy internalized and carried with her, as well as the fact that someone cared enough about her to stand up for her.

Lucy discusses the fact that her entire childhood was one of extreme poverty, sadness, and isolation. Because her home life was so dismal, she loved being at school. It was her refuge and she often opted to stay later than the others so that she could enjoy the warmth of the building, the food that was offered, and have access to the books. Whenever Lucy thinks about love, even in the present, she thinks of warmth, and to her loneliness is attributed the feeling of cold.

Back in the hospital, and another memory, the doctors came to take Lucy for a CAT scan. She was afraid that when she came back her mother would have left. However, her mother surprised her and stayed, sleeping by her side all night. When they both woke up in the morning, her mother's hand print was on her leg from where she held on to her all through the night. It was then, Lucy writes, that she knew that her mother cared. In her entire life, her mother has never, and never did, tell her directly that she loved her.



Lucy writes that when she met William, the father of her two daughters, that she'd believed he was the man that would remove the feelings of loneliness from her. And for a time this was true. However, as the years waned, and he shifted his attention to the children, she began feeling lonely again. They eventually divorced after the children were grown and were in college. William was never able to relate to Lucy's family or to understand how they all related to one another. He'd never experienced such poverty and couldn't identify with them. Lucy's second husband came from similar circumstances and as a result became the true love of her life.

Lucy talks about after leaving the hospital that she had gone to a bookstore where she'd run into a woman who had talked to her about writing and sharing her own truth, no matter what people thought. She later learned that this woman was Sarah Payne, a well known author who was speaking in the area. Lucy had read many of her books and found that she had even more respect for her after having met her in the store. Lucy decided that she wanted to be like Sarah and it started her on her path to becoming a published author.

Lucy talks about her friend Jeremy, an artist, who told her that in order to be a writer she would have to learn how to be ruthless. For many years, Lucy didn't understand what he meant by that. Later, after Jeremy died, she came to the understanding that Jeremy equated ruthless behavior with being able to be brave enough to put something of your true nature down on the page, which is what Lucy began to do.

At the end of the novel, Lucy tells about going to see her mother on her deathbed, of speaking with her father, and making peace with her childhood memories, even the painful ones. They were a part of her, and her parents had done the best they could with what they had to work with.



Chapter 1-3

Summary

Chapter 1

The book opens with Lucy thinking back to when she spent 9 weeks in a New York hospital, during the 1980's. She was admitted because of her appendix, but after the surgery she became sicker. They were never able to figure out why. Lucy starts to go into more detail about her life at the time. She was married, with two children. Her children were scared whenever they visited, but they tried to be brave. Her husband rarely showed up. He hated hospitals, but it was also because he was busy taking care of the house, and working to pay for their medical expenses. About three weeks in, Lucy's mother came to visit, which surprised her. Lucy never spoke about her father, or much about her siblings.

Chapter 2

Lucy reflects on her childhood, mentioning her older sister, Vicky. Lucy and her family grew up very poor. On top of that, they lived in an isolated part of town, so Lucy and Vicky were constantly lonely. Despite that, they were also very distrustful and not that close. Because of their isolation, it was difficult for Lucy and Vicky to learn what she now realizes were basic things. Lucy has mixed feelings about her childhood. Sometimes she looks back on it and thinks that it wasn't so bad, while other times she's struck by how dark things were.

Chapter 3

Still remembering the past, Lucy thinks back to her time with her mother at the hospital. Not wanting to discuss deeper or more emotional matters, Lucy's mother had fallen back on the conversational standby of most small towns: gossip. Lucy's mother had told her about what happened to Kathie Nicely. Kathie was wealthy, but frequently came by the house to speak with Lucy's mother and to get her outfits tailored. Kathie was always unhappy, even though she lived a lavish lifestyle. She just always craved more. One day, Kathie told Lucy that she had fallen in love with someone else. She ran off with him, but he dumped her shortly into their relationship. Kathie was miserable, but her husband refused to take her back. The family barely spoke to her. Lucy felt bad for Kathie, back then, thinking that both her and her husband must have regretted what happened.

Analysis

Chapter 1



The book establishes one of the main settings of the book, the hospital. It also sets up the fact that Lucy is going to spend 9 weeks of her life isolated with an unknown sickness, as well as Lucy being a mother of two children. The issues with Lucy's husband are hinted at, which becomes a relevant plot point later in the book. The end of the chapter sets the tone for Lucy's relationship with the family, which is explored in much greater detail throughout the rest of the story. It is clear that despite having a family and children, she is a very lonely person. This theme of Loneliness is one of the major themes of the novel, and suggests that a feeling of loneliness motivates people to do things, and sets them on a course of thinking, that can ultimately lead to devastation and more unhappiness, or conversely, can end up being the driving factor that ushers in better change.

Chapter 2

Lucy brings up her poverty as well as her isolation for the first time. For the majority of the book, Lucy discusses the impact that both of these elements had on her life, which all revolve around the theme of Loneliness. Lucy mentions her sister for the first time as well. Vicky isn't a major character, but she is mentioned a few times, and helps to show some of the different themes later on. In this chapter, Lucy also discusses how she didn't understand popular culture because of her upbringing. This is again something that is frequently brought up and plays into several themes. The chapter ends with Lucy admitting that, despite the poverty and isolation, things weren't that bad. This touches on one of the themes, Appreciating Life.

Chapter 3

In the hospital, Lucy's mother tells her many stories about other people and their failed marriages, or their lives falling apart because of their wealth. These stories are meant to illustrate another theme of the book, that Pride can Lead to Misery. The reader also learns that this is her way of addressing how their poverty wasn't necessarily bad. Lucy's mother ends up apologizing for not being a better mother, but in these stories she's trying to stress how, despite their problems, she stayed with the family and didn't try and run off. She also argues that if they were wealthier, things might not have been good for them, since money leads to problems. This type of 'lack' mentality is something that the reader will see Lucy struggles with her entire life.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss Lucy's relationship with her parents and siblings.

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the theme of Pride, as it is introduced already in the book.



Discussion Question 3

How is Lucy's mother's perspective on poverty and money damaging to her daughter?

Vocabulary

abject, abscond, bereft, duplicity, eclectic, convivial, cupidity, dearth, hapless, impinge, maverick, noxious



Chapter 4-6

Summary

Chapter 4

Still in a flashback, Lucy thinks back to when she was in third grade. Her family was living in a small, very cold garage. She'd stayed late at school, doing homework or reading, just because of how warm it was. She had read a book about a poor girl, Tilly. She related to Tilly and decided she was going to become a writer, because she wanted to tell stories and keep people from being lonely, like Tilly had done for her. Because of how studious she was, Lucy got a scholarship that covered all her expenses. She was the only one of her family to attend college.

She dated a professor in college, the one person who commented on her poverty. Lucy hated this, and soon realized they could never be a couple. She later met her future husband, William. William understood Lucy, and accepted her and her past. She took William to meet her family, but her father was visibly uncomfortable. Lucy later learned that it was because William was German. During the war, her father had accidentally killed two German boys. It haunted him for the rest of his life, and he thought William was his punishment, since now he was losing his girl to a German.

Chapter 5

Lucy asked her mother for more details about Kathie. Apparently, the man she ran off with was gay, so he left Kathie. Lucy asked if the two ever slept together, but her mother had no idea. She then asked if Kathie's husband ever slept with anyone else, and her mother wasn't sure. Lucy was enjoying herself, since she felt like for once she was having a genuine adult conversation with her mother.

Chapter 6

Lucy thinks about her artist friend, Jeremy. Jeremy had lived in the same apartment as Lucy. When Jeremy discovered that she was a writer, he told her that she had to be ruthless, which had upset her. Lucy felt like Jeremy understood that even though she had a family, she was still lonely.

Analysis

Chapter 4

Lucy continues exploring the poverty from her past. She talks about how she took comfort in reading books and studying. She mentions warmth for the first time as well. Changes in temperature are used, symbolically, many times during the book to express Lucy's feelings. To her, being cold is the worst thing imaginable because she associates



cold with loneliness, and warmth with comfort. The theme of Loneliness is touched on, again, in this chapter. Lucy's stories were a source of comfort for her, because it made her feel like she wasn't alone. That's why she wanted to write, to share this comfort with other people that were in positions similar to her situation.

Lucy brings up her dating life. She briefly mentions the professor, but he continued to be a large part of her life. The professor is used several more times throughout the book to help show the theme revolving around the Destructive Nature of Judgement. This theme is partially shown through William's interaction with the rest of Lucy's family. Her father judges not only William, but also himself. He thinks he deserves to lose Lucy, and he also incorrectly assumes that William wants to take her away. He also looks down on William for offering to buy dinner for the family. William wasn't trying to flaunt his wealth, but Lucy's family decided to judge him based on that simple gesture.

Chapter 5

The end of this chapter goes to show that Lucy and her mother were still close, and that Lucy is enjoying time with her mother. The theme of Loneliness shows up again in this scene. This scene with her mother is important, since for the last few chapters the reader was just hearing about how Lucy's family didn't want anything to do with her husband, and how Lucy grew up feeling poor and alone. It shows that Lucy doesn't blame her family for what happened then, or ever, foreshadowing another theme in the book, that Love is Imperfect by its very nature. Lucy goes into this theme much later in the book.

The story with Kathie continues to establish the previous theme of Pride and how having too much of it just leads to misery. Kathie's husband was too proud to accept her back in his life, but he ended up just as miserable as she was. Neither could overcome their hurt or their pride to really do what they truly wanted to do, which was to reconcile.

Chapter 6

Jeremy is mentioned for the first time, although he's a very minor character. Through him, Lucy is able to explore more of her loneliness, and also how she's drawn towards people that can relate to her. As revealed much later in the book, Lucy ultimately left her husband because the two were unable to relate to one another, largely because he didn't understand Lucy's desire to overcome her childhood feelings of isolation and poverty.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the theme of Pride as it is offered in these chapters.

Discussion Question 2

Why would Jeremy say what he did to Lucy?



Discussion Question 3

Why does Lucy say that Love is often imperfect in its very nature?

Vocabulary

obfuscate, noxious, forbearance, flagrant, panacea, rife, apathetic, callous, debacle, candor, dour



Chapters 7-12

Summary

Chapter 7

Lucy, still thinking about the past, thinks back to a time several years after the hospital. She had met a beautiful woman in a bookstore, who later identified herself as Sarah Payne. She felt something familiar in Sarah, and recognized that she, too, was lonely. Sarah said she was a writer, but hadn't gone into much more detail. When she got home, Lucy realized she owned the woman's books. Other authors, in their reviews of Sarah, criticized her for having too much compassion, but Lucy appreciated that because it showed truth in her writing. She also discovered that, just like her, Sarah had grown up in poverty.

Chapter 8

Back in the hospital, in the past, Lucy and her mother discussed Lucy's aunt, Harriet. Harriet was very similar to Lucy. She was always worried about other people. Lucy's mother thought it was strange how both of them shared so many fears. Harriet lost her husband early on and she never recovered. Her son went on to have a successful life, but her daughter lost her husband and struggled to raise a family. Lucy's mother never felt safe, and Lucy didn't understand why. Lucy tried to talk about her life. She wanted her mother to know what she was doing, but her mother seemed uninterested, so Lucy had just stopped talking about it.

Chapter 9

Lucy continues reflecting on her life and thinks back to when she was a child, too young for school. Her parents would lock her in their truck while they worked and her older siblings attended school. Lucy hated it, because it made her feel so alone and scared. She'd come up with a fantasy of being rescued and taken somewhere safe and warm until her father returned to pick her up.

Chapter 10

Lucy very briefly thinks back to her doctor. She loved him because of how important he made her feel whenever he checked up on her. He would show up every so often just to make sure that she was doing okay, a simple kindness that Lucy still remembers in the present.

Chapter 11

Lucy thinks about her other friend from that time, Molla. Molla wasn't interested in Lucy's life, but she did talk about hers. She had a very strict mother, and she still felt



grief because of that. Lucy liked being around Molla because of her style, and because she felt safe around Molla because Molla didn't pry into her life.

Chapter 12

Lucy recalls a time when still in the hospital, her mother admitted she thought she did a bad job raising them because they were so poor. Vicky had always been mad because they were teased as children; something that Lucy's mother had no idea about when Lucy told her. Lucy recalls that she tried to assure her mother that she wasn't a bad mother, and she missed her so much at school. Lucy's mother admitted that Lucy was different, and she was able to get things done in a way that the other children never could.

Analysis

Chapter 7

Lucy continues exploring her feelings of isolation, while also introducing the character of Sarah Payne. Sarah Payne is another minor character, but she is mentioned several more times throughout the book, and helps to show some of the later themes. Elements of her character are set up early on, such as her compassion. This also carries on a discussion from the previous chapter, with Jeremy declaring that writers have to be ruthless. Lucy disagrees with this notion at first, but it will be explored more in the later chapters.

Chapter 8

Lucy's compassion is explored in more detail, carrying on the earlier references about writers having to be ruthless. The conversation shifts and addresses Lucy's fears, which is explored in even more detail in the following chapter. This chapter also introduces Lucy's mother's paranoia. Lucy had commented on it before with her mother's sleeping habits.

Lucy was curious as to why her mother never felt safe, and she even asked her brother about it later in the book. This shows one of the major differences between Lucy and her mother. Both of them had to overcome difficulties in their lives. Lucy was able to move on and start a successful career. She's still haunted by the loneliness, but she doesn't let it control her life. Lucy's mother seems unable to move on and serves, in many ways, as a cautionary tale to her children. She's still very much the same person that she was when Lucy was a child.

Chapter 9

Lucy mentions temperatures again as a way of explaining her mood. She associates being cold with those moments of being locked in a truck. Lucy was terrified when this happened because she was alone. She wanted to be rescued and brought somewhere warm, because she associated warmth with company and love. It is clear that while she



knows her parents care for her, it seems that early on she internalized that she was a burden to her parents and unloved.

Although the reader doesn't realize it at the time, this chapter is later used as an example of how feelings of love are often imperfect, which reflects and demonstrates the theme of that title. Lucy's parents didn't set out to traumatize her. They only left her alone because they both had to work to try and provide what they could. Even with both of them working, it wasn't enough, so it would have been impossible for a parent to try and take time off to be there for her, or to pay someone to watch her.

Chapter 10

Lucy's relationship is brought up with the doctor. He ends up being a very important part of her life. The doctor makes her feel safe and cared about, something that Lucy needs in her life. This kindness has a profound effect on Lucy, which is why she keeps bringing him up. It is from this tiniest of gestures on the doctor's part that Lucy is able to extricate herself from the same lack mentality that seems to plague her parents and many of her siblings. She has regrets, but unlike her brothers and sister, she isn't bitter or angry about it, just sad that it had to have happened the way that it did. She is able to have empathy, sympathy, and compassion for her parents because she is able to see the situation from their viewpoint and knows that they did the best that they could.

Chapter 11

Molla is a very minor character in the story, but she does contribute to one of the themes, which is Appreciating Life. Molla seems to be stuck in the past, obsessing on the pain that she went through as a child, and thus is not able to move forward to appreciate all that she currently has. This is in stark comparison to Lucy. While Lucy certainly hasn't forgotten all of the problems she went through as a child, she doesn't let it consume her life.

Chapter 12

This chapter continues on the theme of Appreciating Life. Like with Molla, Vicky is shown to be unable to move on from what happened in her past. Lucy and Vicky both have families, but all Vicky talks about is how she's miserable. Lucy has her problems, but she loves her family, and she even loves William despite their difficulties. While she has her rough patches, she also has moments where she is genuinely happy, and she keeps trying to make her life better.

This chapter also continues the theme of Imperfect Love. Lucy isn't resentful towards her mother like Vicky is. She understands that her mother was trying to be a good person and take care of the family. She did everything that she could, and the fact that she worries it wasn't enough goes to show how much she cared. Lucy wasn't loved in the way that she needed, but she understands that her mother was at least making an effort, which is what matters most to her.



Discussion Question 1

Compare Vicky to Lucy.

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the theme of Appreciating Life.

Discussion Question 3

What does the author mean by love is imperfect?

Vocabulary

divisive, duplicity, onerous, penchant, sanctimonious, vilify, utilitarian, morass, tirade, wily, alacrity



Chapter 13-17

Summary

Chapter 13

Lucy thinks back to when she was a young girl at school. She was in class with her teacher, Mr. Haley. Mr. Haley saw another girl making fun of Lucy. He chastised the class, saying he wouldn't tolerate anyone thinking that they were better than someone else. Everyone respected Mr. Haley enough, and after that they treated Lucy better. Mr. Haley also taught Lucy about what happened to the Native Americans. Lucy was horrified at the way they were treated, but when she tried to talk to her mother about it, she was uninterested.

Chapter 14

Back at the hospital, Lucy's mother had mentioned that her brother loved to read Little House on the Prairie books. Lucy had read them, but wasn't as attached. She remembers that Laura Ingall's parents were always kind and loving towards their children. Lucy's daughter, Chrissie, loved the books too. She liked them more than the book about Tilly that Lucy had given her for her birthday.

Chapter 15

One evening, while at the hospital, Lucy was taken out of her room and had to get a CAT scan. Her mother was exhausted, and Lucy was afraid that she would leave while she was gone. Lucy felt cold the whole time. When she returned, her mother was still there. Lucy asked how her mother even found her since they'd moved her room, but she brushed the question aside, simply saying that she knew how.

Chapter 16

Still in the past and thinking about her time in the hospital, she recalls that she didn't read any of the books she had while her mother was around. She did read one of the magazines a nurse brought. This allowed Lucy and her mother to discuss some of the dark things that her mother had seen on the news. Lucy felt lonely, and when her mother was napping, she called her family, wanting to tell her daughters how much she missed them, and that she was getting better so she could come home soon.

Chapter 17

While cooped up in the hospital, Lucy thought back to a statue in a nature museum. She always ignored it when she was with her children, but one day she finally looked at it. It was of a father, who was starving in prison. His children were at his legs, begging for him to eat them. Lucy understood the statue, and found herself returning to visit it many times.



Analysis

Chapter 13

Mr. Haley is one of the characters that best represents the theme of Judgement. He stands up for Lucy, something that nobody else had done before. He didn't want any students making fun of her because of her poverty. He later extends this lesson to Lucy when she writes about a character looking cheap in her paper. Lucy's compassion is shown once more when she learns about what happened to the Native Americans. This is something that had a profound effect on Lucy as a child, because she couldn't stand the idea of a whole race being abused in such a fashion. She hated that people in her class, and back during that time, didn't seem to care. This shows another difference between Lucy and her mother, who immediately dismisses it when Lucy tries to bring it up.

Chapter 14

Lucy doesn't understand why her brother and daughter are so attached to Little House on the Prairie books. She tried to get her daughter interested in Tilly's story, since that motivated Lucy as a child. As previously mentioned in the story, books are a way for people to get what they want. Both Lucy's brother and her daughter like Little House on the Prairie because they feel like their parents aren't taking care of them and they live vicariously through the characters. Books are quite symbolic in this novel and represent an escape from many things: poverty, loneliness, and depression.

Chapter 15

Lucy uses the cold to express her discomfort and her loneliness again. While in the hospital, Lucy is afraid that her mother is going to leave her, and she'll be alone in the hospital again. But, Lucy's mother is there waiting for her when she gets done with the CAT scan, surprising Lucy. Lucy's mother knew how important it was that she was there. She was clearly uncomfortable in the hospital, but she stayed because she knew that Lucy needed her. This is another sign that Lucy's mother did love her, even if it wasn't always in the way that Lucy needed. This demonstrates the theme of Imperfect Love.

Chapter 16

Lucy wasn't reading her books because she didn't want her mother to judge her. She was afraid she would appear too educated and privileged, and she didn't want her mother to think that Lucy was acting better than her. At the same time, Lucy didn't want to read the gossip magazine, because she didn't want the doctor to think any less of her. Lucy's compassion and isolation are addressed again when she calls her daughters. Lucy wants to be a good mother, and she doesn't want her children to feel like she loves them imperfectly.

Chapter 17



The statue that Lucy finally stopped to view was very important to Lucy because it represented how she felt. Lucy believes that families need to protect one another. She also believes that parents are the ones that need to shield their children. She knows the father in the statue could use his children as food, but that would obviously hurt them. As a mother, Lucy doesn't want her children to ever hurt. She keeps reassuring them that she's going to get better, and she worries that nobody is taking care of them. Symbolically, the fact that the children would offer themselves as food for the father is metaphorical in nature, and suggests the nature and selflessness of a child for a parent. The entire statue is about a sense of hopelessness and self sacrifice and this resonates with Lucy on many levels.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the symbolism of books in these chapters.

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the symbolism of the statue of the Father in these chapters.

Discussion Question 3

Why is Lucy confused about her daughter and her brother's attachment to the Little House on the Prairie books?

Vocabulary

ambivalent, affluent, dirge, disparate, construe, contrite, pert, quandary, redoubtable, truculent



Chapter 18-23

Summary

Chapter 18

Back at the hospital, and still in the past, Lucy's mother asked her about the famous people in the magazine. She had no idea who any of them were. She ended up recognizing someone, the daughter of someone Lucy's father once knew. Lucy was surprised and offended that it was the first time her mother had mentioned her father. They both admired the woman, because she had an expression that showed she had seen things in the world.

Chapter 19

Lucy thinks back to a time after she was out of the hospital. Her husband had been getting close to the woman that was watching their children. This upset Lucy, and she felt humiliated. Lucy ended up running into the professor she was in a relationship with. Because she was distressed, she was dressed in a very thrown together way. She felt like the Professor was judging her appearance, which once again upset her.

Chapter 20

Sometime after meeting Sarah Payne, Lucy found out Payne was speaking at a library. Lucy went to hear her speak. Sarah discussed how she sometimes received hate mail from people that couldn't tell her views apart from her characters. She went on to say that she thought fiction writers could report on the human condition, and show readers who they were and how they acted. Lucy was motivated by this and went home to start writing the very book that the reader now holds in their hand.

Chapter 21

In the hospital, in the past, Lucy recalls trying not to cry. She never felt comfortable crying around her mother. Her mother touched her leg, and Lucy begged her not to let go. The next morning, Lucy had a mark from her mother's hand. The doctor was touched by this gesture, which was another sign that he was a kind man. He promised that he would get Lucy home soon so she could be with her family.

Chapter 22

After getting out of the hospital, Lucy's husband bought her tickets to a workshop taught by Sarah Payne. Sarah seemed exhausted every day that she taught. Part of the workshop was a private meeting with Sarah. Sarah was very impressed with the book Lucy was writing. She told Lucy that people would judge her for writing about poverty and abuse, but Lucy didn't have to defend herself to them. She also said it was a story about imperfect love, but that everyone loved imperfectly.



Chapter 23

In the past, Lucy's mother started talking about another girl, Marilyn, that had lived near them. She had gotten married in college, but her husband had served overseas and came back a different man. Lucy grew uncomfortable, thinking to herself that she was afraid her mother would bring up something from her past she couldn't bear to talk about. Lucy quickly changed the subject. She remarked that, in the present, when she spoke to doctors about her past, they said it was possible her mother didn't remember it the same way Lucy did. Back in the hospital, Lucy's mother assured Lucy that she was strong, and she would always be able to get through whatever happened in her life.

Analysis

Chapter 18

Lucy recalls that when she was in the hospital, in all of the time that her mother spent with her she rarely, if ever, saw her father. She was upset that Lucy's mother hadn't even mentioned him, and that he hadn't tried to come and visit either. Lucy is someone that needs people in her life, and she wants her parents to be around to protect her. It is evident that much of Lucy's feelings of self worth stem from the perception and attention and companionship of those important to her. Her father not showing up, or even being mentioned, hurt her. Lucy and her mother do share a moment, when they admire the strength of the actress in the magazine. This can be seen as another, subtle example of having to live life to the fullest. The actress didn't let her difficult past get in the way. She carries it with her, but she went on to have a very successful career despite the pain. The theme of Appreciating Life is demonstrated in this discussion about the celebrity because it is clear that this woman was able to rise above her problems.

Chapter 19

The theme of Judgement is brought up again when Lucy ran into the professor from her past. Normally, she doesn't care about the way that she dresses. Running into the professor made her feel self-conscious, in no small part because of the trouble that she was having with William. This trouble foreshadows her eventual breakup with William later in the story.

Chapter 20

Lucy looked up to Sarah, as shown by the fact that it was Sarah's words that made her start writing her book. Lucy wanted to be able to talk about the human condition. She wanted the world to know what she went through with her family, all the good and all the bad. Lucy believed that Sarah wanted the same too. That's why Sarah was bothered when people focused too much on whether the views presented in the book belong to her or not. Sarah wanted people to think about what was happening and how it related to their lives, not how it related to Sarah's personal views.

Chapter 21



Lucy's mother once again showed how much she cared about Lucy, and she did understand what Lucy needed. She wanted to be a good mother, so she stayed with Lucy all throughout the evening and didn't let go, giving Lucy that feeling of comfort that she needed. The doctor recognized this gesture as well, which in Lucy's eyes was just another reason why he was a good person. He also recognized that Lucy had that same kindness towards her family, which is why he specifically reassured her that she would be able to get back to her family instead of just saying that she would get better.

The handprint that her mother left behind is not only a physical reminder for Lucy that her mother did love her, but it is also symbolic of the imprint that her mother has left on her soul, her emotions, and in the way Lucy views life. The author would seem to be suggesting that parents have a profound affect on their children's later happiness in life.

Chapter 22

Many different themes are shown in this chapter. The first is that there is no such thing as a perfect love (Imperfect Nature of Love). This is addressed directly by Sarah, but it is also shown through William. Lucy and William were having relationship troubles, but he was still making an effort to do kind things for Lucy. He knew how much she looked up to Sarah, so he got tickets for her workshop. Sarah talked about how people would judge Lucy, even though they had no right to do so. She didn't want Lucy to feel like she needed to defend herself, which was exactly what Sarah herself had done previously when she discussed the hate mail that she received.

Chapter 23

Lucy never outright states what she was worried her mother might bring up. Lucy mentions a few other times in the story that the book wasn't about her and William, so it's possible that is what she was referring to. Lucy's new doctor commented that not everyone remembers the past the same. This ties into the theme of Imperfect Love again. Lucy's mother likely didn't remember incidents in the same way that Lucy did. In her mind, she was a good mother for working when Lucy was a child. In Lucy's mind, her mother was wrong to leave her alone when she needed company. These words of wisdom gave Lucy the chance to look at things in a different light. Ultimately, it helped to set her apart from her older sister, who is just vindictive towards her family and doesn't try to understand what they were doing, or why things turned out as they did when they were all younger.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the theme of Imperfect Love.

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the symbolism of Lucy's mother's handprint.



Discussion Question 3

What advice did the doctor give her that stuck with Lucy?

Vocabulary

travesty, inoculate, gratuitous, hapless, ephemeral, beguile, proscribe, ubiquitous, umbrage



Chapters 24-30

Summary

Chapter 24

Thinking of the past, Lucy remembered a time in her childhood where her brother was caught wearing women's clothing. Her father had humiliated him to the point where he broke down crying. Vicky was traumatized, so Lucy ran outside and hid for most of the evening with her. Many years later, when she was at a Gay Pride parade with William, this memory had been triggered seeing some of the men cross dressing. William assured her that everything was okay and that he loved her. Lucy knew that he was trying to comfort her, but it was hard to be comforted by those words, because she had heard them before and they had been meaningless.

Chapter 25

Still in the past and still at the hospital, Lucy's mother had surprised her by talking about Elvis. Lucy had remarked that trashy people listened to Elvis, which angered Lucy's mother. She said they weren't trashy, and she talked about how their ancestors were some of the first to go to some of his concerts. Lucy apologized, feeling awful for what she'd said.

Chapter 26

Lucy recalls that she made a friend after the hospital stay, her closest female friend. One day, she had accidentally called her mother trashy. Like at the hospital, she felt terrible. It reminded her of a paper she wrote in high school. She had described someone's dress as cheap. Her teacher pointed it out and told her it was an inappropriate word to describe someone. Thinking about that time, she is grateful that she had a good friend to share her problems with.

Chapter 27

Still in the hospital, Lucy's mother told her another story, about someone from their town named Mississippi Mary. Mary ended up marrying a rich business owner. She went on to have several daughters and they were very happy. She eventually discovered that her husband had been cheating on her for years and she had a heart attack. Lucy's mother remarked that it was strange how, just like Elvis, all of her wealth didn't buy her happiness.

Chapter 28

Lucy thinks back to a time she went to see a plastic surgeon, normally only seen by wealthy people. She hadn't wanted to look like her mother. While she was there, she



saw a young boy holding the door for a much older woman in a back brace, and she was touched by the kindness.

Chapter 29

Lucy thinks back to her childhood. Her father had taken her out to the city once, to see a Native American festival. She now realizes that he did it just for her. At the hospital, she asked her mother if she loved her. They were both amused with the question, but Lucy's mother couldn't actually say it. In the present, Lucy goes on to write that she knew her mother loved her, and she hoped that readers understood that too, even if her mother could never say it out loud.

Chapter 30

The 5th day that Lucy's mother visited, Lucy's doctor told her that she had to get an X-Ray to see if she would need surgery. Lucy's mother decided to leave, even though Lucy pleaded with her not to. Her doctor knew how sad Lucy was, but he didn't once bring it up. Lucy remembered how she was worried about her mom trying to find a cab once she left the hospital.

Analysis

Chapter 24

What happened to Lucy's brother is another example of why people shouldn't judge one another. Lucy's father was needlessly cruel towards her brother. Her father didn't try and understand what his son was possibly going through and instead just jumped to his own conclusions. Seeing what happened, hurt Lucy, who strongly believed that parents were supposed to take care of her children and love them no matter what. William tried to comfort her and told her that he loved her, but Lucy just pointed out that she had heard those words before. To Lucy, actions matter far more than words, which was something that William didn't understand.

Chapter 25

During the book, Lucy keeps talking about how bad it is to judge people. But she also mentions that it is something that people can't help themselves from doing. That's why the theme revolves around the Destructive Nature of Judgement. Lucy isn't trying to say not to judge people at all, because she knows that it isn't possible. It's how people handle the judgment that matters the most. Lucy expresses guilt over what she says, and she knows that she was in the wrong.

The brief story about Elvis is also another example of Lucy's mother trying to give a lesson, in this case being that pride and money can be dangerous. Again, this could just be her way of justifying what Lucy and her family went through when they were younger. Had they been more successful, there was no telling what would have happened to them. The theme of Pride is expressed in this short scene.



Chapter 26

This chapter continues on the lesson that Lucy was talking about in the last chapter. Lucy tries to be mindful of judging anyone. She had gone through so much judgment when she was younger. She knew that it was wrong to do, and her teacher had helped her understand that. Despite herself, she still finds herself sometimes passing judgment, because it's, unfortunately, human nature. However, she also realizes that if left unchecked and unmonitored that it can eventually ruin lives.

Chapter 27

Mary's story is just another example of how people need to appreciate what they have in their life. Mary's husband ignored the fact that he had a loving wife as well as several children. He kept having an affair, and ultimately ended up destroying the life of his wife. Lucy's mother goes on to add the part about wealth. This is another attempt at her to justify the difficult situation that Lucy was in when she was younger, to make it seem okay that they were impoverished.

Chapter 28

Lucy was surprised, but pleased to see that someone who was rich was willing to help out someone that was struggling. It contrasted with Lucy's own upbringing, where most people were mean to her because she was different, but this was a reminder to Lucy that just because someone was wealthy, didn't mean they were always unkind. This short chapter also showed another example of Lucy trying to escape her past, since she was there just because she didn't want to look like her mother.

Chapter 29

This whole chapter is another example of how people don't love perfectly. Lucy's father and mother made many mistakes when they were raising Lucy. They were never outright malicious towards her. Anything they did that hurt her was inadvertent on their parts. Both of her parents clearly cared about her. Even though her father wasn't there in the present, Lucy knows that he loved her. That's why she was thinking about how he went out of his way to take her to a Native American festival. He had no interest in it, but it was clear that Lucy did.

Lucy's mother was unable to say that she loves her, which Lucy wanted to hear. Lucy wasn't upset that her mother was unable to say it, because her mother showed that she cared just by making the trip out to see Lucy. However, in a later chapter, when her husband told her that he loved her, she rejected it, though she clearly had longed to be outwardly and enthusiastically loved and cherished her entire life. This makes her a very real, and very frustrating, character. She wants something, but when she gets it, she is unable to accept it.

Chapter 30



Lucy's compassion shines through again at the end of the chapter. She was upset that her mother left, but she still took the time to worry about how her mother was going to get home. Lucy's mother leaving is another example of how people love imperfectly. Lucy's mother was aware that Lucy needed her, but she was unable to handle being away from home and in the hospital any longer. She also couldn't handle the possibility of losing her daughter. This scene is repeated later in the book, with the roles reversed.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss how Lucy viewed her parents' parenting skills.

Discussion Question 2

Why did Lucy become upset at the Gay Pride rally?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the theme of Imperfect Love.

Vocabulary

vestige, abscond, consign, defunct, enervate, accede, blandishment, foil, intransigent, knell



Chapters 31-35

Summary

Chapter 31

When she was in the hospital, Lucy recalls that she passed by the room of a man with a yellow sign on the door, marking him as being infected with AIDS. The door was open enough for Lucy to stare into his eyes. Looking at him made Lucy confront all of her fears, about her illness and her mother leaving. She comments that the man actually helped her by staring back into her eyes.

Chapter 32

Lucy discusses the kindness of her doctor once again. She had returned to the hospital to speak with him after she had been discharged. She talked to him about problems she was having with her family, and each time he tried to offer her advice. When she was in the hospital, he visited her every single day, except for Father's Day, something that Lucy is still grateful for in the present.

Chapter 33

Lucy was worried after her mother left the hospital. She couldn't call because her phone only allowed for local calls. She had William call her mother later that evening. William said that she got home fine. Lucy asked if she had anything else to say, but William regretfully said that she did not.

Chapter 34

After her mother left, Molla came to visit Lucy in the hospital. Even though she was telling Lucy the same story she always did, Lucy was grateful to have her around. Molla said she was keeping an eye on the children, and she had told them that their mother was getting better.

Chapter 35

One of the weekends in the hospital, William came to visit Lucy. It wasn't the only time that he had visited, but it was the one that stood out the most. He was too tired to talk, so they just lay together watching television. In the present, Lucy remarks that her mother was right about her and William. They got divorced many years later, but both went on to remarry. Lucy went on to talk about a recurring nightmare she used to have, where she and her children were going to be killed by Nazis. In her dream, all she wanted to do was protect her children.



Analysis

Chapter 31

Lucy doesn't mention it, but she was once again expressing her fear of being alone when she stares at the dying patient. The theme of Loneliness shows up in that death is a solitary act. She remarks that the man was kept in isolation because of his condition, as if he was being hidden from the rest of the hospital. As constantly established, Lucy is afraid of being alone. By being able to walk around freely in the hospital while that man was isolated, Lucy was reminded that she was not alone, which would explain why she said the man ended up helping her.

Chapter 32

This short chapter is another example of what Lucy considers important. She looked up to the doctor because he was a stranger that offered kindness to her. He visited her because he recognized that she needed people around her. Not only that, but he was there for her in the future as well.

Chapter 33

William was upset that Lucy's mother had nothing more to say. He doesn't understand the way that Lucy's family works. This again relates back to the theme of Love being Imperfect. Lucy's mother didn't know what to say, but the fact that she showed up at all said quite a bit to Lucy.

Chapter 34

After having her mother leave, Lucy was feeling lonely. She appreciated that Molla was there, even if Molla was saying the same stories that she always did. This shows why the two of them were friends. Molla understood Lucy, which was very important to Lucy. Molla assured Lucy that she was looking after her family because she recognized how distressed Lucy was about them.

Chapter 35

Lucy finally reveals that, in the present, she and William are no longer a couple. Lucy doesn't look down on William. She understands that, while they might have loved one another, they simply weren't a good match. William wasn't able to love Lucy in the way that she needed. He was working hard to take care of the family, but he wasn't able to give that same care to Lucy, not in the way that she needed. The end of the chapter is another example of how much Lucy cares about her children. In her dream, she wasn't afraid of the fact that she was going to die. Instead, she was afraid that her children were going to suffer because she wasn't there to protect them. This is also symbolic of her being terrified for the demise of her dreams, her inner children, and her desire to be a writer.



Discussion Question 1

Lucy states that William was a nice guy, just not the guy for her. What sort of love or relationship does she need based on this?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the theme of Imperfect Love.

Discussion Question 3

Discuss how meeting the AIDS patient helped Lucy while she was in the hospital?

Vocabulary

irreverence, laconic, caucus, fortuitous, inane, maelstrom, linchpin, neophyte, obdurate, paradigm



Chapters 36-40

Summary

Chapter 36

When Lucy was finally discharged from the hospital, she had lost a lot of weight. She sent a letter to her mother, saying that she loved her and thanked her for visiting. Her mother wrote back that the visit meant a lot to her, too. Lucy discovered that her friend, Jeremy, had passed away while she was in the hospital. Lucy was sad, but her family was there to comfort her. That summer, Lucy was still emaciated from the hospital stay. She hated the way that people looked at her whenever she went out in the city.

Chapter 37

Lucy used to spend Thanksgiving at a church when she was a child; since it was the only place they could get a proper meal. As an adult, she volunteered with William at shelters for many years. William eventually stopped doing it, since he felt like they weren't making a difference and he became depressed. Lucy was okay with that. What always got to her were people that were cold. She always gave money to help keep families warm. She wonders what her Mom would think, and decides that she would have just told her to stop bragging.

Chapter 38

Lucy kept visiting her doctor for years. Every visit, she tried to dress up to impress him. One day, she was scheduling a visit, but the nurse informed her that he retired. Lucy was sad and meant to write him to tell him how much of an impact he made on her, but she had too much going on in her life to focus on it, and never got around to writing the letter.

Chapter 39

Lucy remembered another lesson that she learned from Sarah Payne's writing class. Sarah taught her that she should write with a heart as open as God's. After Lucy published her book, Lucy visited a doctor and started to write down everything that had happened in her life.

Chapter 40

Lucy didn't see her mother again until 9 years after the visit in the hospital. She flew out to Chicago, where this time her mother was in the hospital. She saw her father then as well, whom, she barely recognized. She felt like he was grateful to see her. Lucy's mother asked her to leave, because she didn't want Lucy to see her die. Lucy was distraught, especially when her father said that there would be no service. The next



year, Lucy's father passed away as well, but not before telling Lucy that she was a good person and a good daughter.

Analysis

Chapter 36

The very end of the chapter touches upon the theme of Judgment once again. Lucy was reminded of the way that she felt in the past because everyone was looking at her. She looked like she was malnourished, just as she had when she was a child. Lucy hated that people were immediately writing her off just based on her appearance, making assumptions without knowing what had actually happened.

Lucy's letter to her mother is another sign that, despite their rocky history, she and her mother still love one another. Lucy's mother might not be able to say that she loves her, but just responding to the note is an acknowledgement of her feelings. Lucy recognizes this, which is why she holds onto the note.

Chapter 37

This is another chapter where Lucy discusses how afraid she is about loneliness, and demonstrates that theme. In her mind, it's the worst possible thing that can happen. She tries so hard to do everything that she can to keep anyone else from being lonely. That's why she was okay giving up volunteering during Thanksgiving, since she wasn't so personally affected. From her own experiences, she also knew that there were other people that could take care of them, but she knew that there weren't always people around to make sure that everyone was warm.

The last lines about Lucy's mother show that she didn't really understand Lucy either. Lucy's mother had a hard time dealing with success and wealth, because it was something that she never had. For so many years, in order to make herself okay with her circumstances, she developed her own internal philosophy that saw the wealthy and well off as somehow evil, unhappy, or inferior. In her mind, she saved her children from certain misery just by virtue of their simple lifestyle. As a result, she would be unable to see the good that Lucy was doing with her money, because she would see it as Lucy just flaunting her wealth.

Chapter 38

One of the more subtle themes in the book is that Style has Substance. This is shown with the way that Lucy dressed up for the doctor. She was letting her style speak for her. Normally, she didn't care about her appearance, which is telling in and of itself. She was going out of her way to look more presentable in front of the doctor because he was an important part of her life. Lucy never did this for the professor, even though he clearly cared about the way that she looked. The professor didn't have the same meaning to her that the doctor did, which she expressed by dressing the way she did.



Chapter 39

This very short chapter relates to some of the words that Sarah Payne had said earlier in the book. Sarah wanted Lucy, and writers in general, to be able to write whatever they wanted without fear of being judged. In order to get their message across, they need to be able to write as clearly as possible and not worry about what other people thought. This ties back into it being wrong for people to cast judgments on other people. It also addresses the theme of Appreciation of Life, since the judgment of other people shouldn't ruin other's lives.

Chapter 40

The bond between Lucy and her family are shown again. It had been 9 years since she saw her mother, and even longer for her father. Despite that, both sides of the family were still clearly happy to see one another. Lucy's mother continued to have a hard time expressing emotions around Lucy. She didn't want Lucy around when she was about to pass away, because she knew how emotional Lucy would get. The following year, Lucy's father made it much clearer that he loved Lucy with his words.

Discussion Question 1

Describe Lucy's relationship with her parents through the years.

Discussion Question 2

How has Sarah Payne shaped the way that Lucy has lived her life?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the theme of Appreciating Life.

Vocabulary

pernicious, congruity, constituent, accost, acumen, commensurate, disaffected, elicit, fetter, largesse



Chapters 41-45

Summary

Chapter 41

After losing her parents, the world seemed different to Lucy. Even though she hadn't been around her family for years, she knew that they were close. Her first book went on to be a success. Lucy felt comfortable promoting it in New York, but she felt lonely when she traveled. She answered every letter that she got, except from the college professor that she had dated in her youth.

Chapter 42

Lucy very briefly remembers her life when her children went to college. She felt like everything was ending. When she spoke about it, she said that was the reason her marriage ended.

Chapter 43

When Lucy got divorced, she didn't want any of the money that William offered. She felt like, because of her upbringing, she didn't need money. She just wanted to make sure that her daughters would have enough. When they had first met, she had wanted to cook for him, but because of her past she was never good at it, and eventually stopped trying.

Chapter 44

Lucy says that her present husband grew up in great poverty, too, and his house was always cold. Whenever she cooks for him, he's always happy with the food that she makes.

Chapter 45

Lucy remembered when her husband would take her to Yankee Stadium. She wasn't a baseball fan, but she loved going to the stadium. She appreciated being around all the people, and seeing the way the lights changed in the evening. Thinking about her husband usually hurt her, but she was always happy when she thought about their times watching the Yankees play.

Analysis

Chapter 41



Lucy outright states that she and her family were close, despite all of the physical distance between them. Lucy brings up the professor again, showing how she still hasn't been able to forgive him, even in the present. With the exception of the professor, Lucy showed her compassionate side by responding to all of the letters that she got. This goes back to Lucy's initial motivation of becoming a writer. She wanted to write to keep people from being lonely, so her responding to all the letters is just a natural extension of this desire. Lucy also mentions that she only feels comfortable promoting in New York, a place that truly feels like home to her. This has been subtly mentioned once or twice before, but becomes more evident in later chapters.

Chapter 42

This brief chapter mostly serves to establish the setting for the remaining of the book. While Lucy had explored the present before, as well as some time after her hospital visit, the majority of the book had been about her time in the hospital, or her time as a child. The rest of the book focuses on Lucy's interaction with William and her children. This also shows how strong her connection with her children was. Lucy only stayed with William because she wanted to be a good mother. She waited until they were old enough before finally ending things with William.

Chapter 43

Lucy's love for her daughters is shown once more when she declines William's money. The only thing that she's interested in is making sure that her daughters are being provided for. She also declines the money because she feels like she doesn't need it because of her past. This is another, more subtle example of Style having Substance. Lucy's general lifestyle is shaped from her past. By declining the money, and rarely using her own wealth, she's making a statement about who she is and where she comes from. The final comments about her cooking for William are followed up on in the next chapter.

Chapter 44

This very short chapter serves as a follow up to the previous chapter. Lucy is showing the reader how her new husband is able to understand her upbringing. Lucy wasn't comfortable cooking for William, because she knew that he was used to food in a way that she wasn't. Her new husband just appreciated having anything to eat, because he came from nothing, just like Lucy.

Chapter 45

Although she doesn't say it, the reader can infer from the other chapters that a big reason why Lucy enjoyed the ballgames was because of how many people were there. Several other times, Lucy has expressed a love for New York, because of the lights and all the people. It's a place that feels like home, and where she doesn't feel like she's alone, something she always yearned for when she was younger.



Discussion Question 1

How has Lucy's life changed for the better since leaving the hospital?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the theme of Style as Substance.

Discussion Question 3

What is it about the stadium that attracted Lucy?

Vocabulary

morass, intimation, instigate, exigent, exhort, antithesis, antiseptic, adverse, admonish, capitulate



Chapters 46-50

Summary

Chapter 46

Lucy once again reflects on what she heard about writers having to be ruthless. She feels like her version of being ruthless was leaving William, and not going to see her family. She knew if she had, she never would have written any other books. She thinks back to what her mother said, about how she just went and lived her life. She wonders if that was her mother's way of saying that she's always been ruthless, but just didn't realize it. What she also realizes is that her definition of ruthless was wrong. She thought that it meant being mean or indifferent to others, but in the end, it was a different type of ruthlessness.

Chapter 47

Lucy doesn't specify when, but at some point she started talking to her brother and sister again. They still speak once a week. Her brother never asks about her children, and she feels like their conversations are very superficial, since she doesn't ask about his personal life. Her sister is always upset. Lucy has been giving her money every few months. She thinks that her sister feels she's owed the money from her, and Lucy agrees. When Lucy brings up her sister's husband to her doctor, the doctor remarks that her husband must be angry if they're having so much trouble.

Chapter 48

Lucy very briefly remembered a roommate she had in college. Her roommate complained that her mother didn't care. One day, her roommate's mother sent her a package of cheese, even though neither of them ate it. She couldn't bring herself to get rid of it, because it was from her mother. Finally, she asked Lucy to get rid of it when she was away at class.

Chapter 49

Lucy talks about her fond memories of Bloomingdale's. When her children were younger, they would always go shopping there together. Lucy never went on her own, only with her daughters. She goes on to say that every apartment she gets, she makes sure to have a spare room in case her children visit, but they never do. She's hurt whenever they refer to William's new wife as their stepmom, but she never complains. She feels like, because she left William, she was also leaving them, reminding her of the story that her mother told of Kathie back at the hospital.

Chapter 50



This very short chapter consists of Lucy discussing the rage of her daughters, and how she is worried about what things they will never forget.

Analysis

Chapter 46

Despite talking about being ruthless, this chapter is another example of Lucy being compassionate. Lucy feels badly about what she did to William. She didn't do anything wrong by leaving William, and she did try to make the marriage work for as long as possible. Lucy feels like she was being selfish, but the only alternative was giving up her life. Even if she had, based on everything that was expressed earlier, Lucy likely would have just been miserable trying to stay with William and giving up her writing career. She realizes that the type of 'ruthless' a writer is called to be is one where extreme courage is committed every day on the page.

Chapter 47

This chapter illustrates the main differences between Lucy and Vicky. Vicky is unable to move past what happened to her in the past. She's bitter towards Lucy, and seemingly the rest of the world. Lucy has embraced her life, and is even trying to help out Vicky. Part of it is because she feels she owes Vicky, but part of it is also her natural compassion. In a similar fashion, Lucy's brother isn't living his life. He's not bitter like Vicky, but given everything Lucy knows, he isn't doing anything with his life either. He lives in the same home they grew up in, and has just taken over the job of their father.

Chapter 48

This chapter is just another example of how complicated family relationships can be. Lucy's roommate had a strained relationship with her family, very similar to Lucy. Despite that, when she receives something from her mother, she is unable to get rid of it, because it means something to her. This is yet another example of Imperfect Love. The roommate's mother is clearly trying to provide something for her daughter, even if she does end up sending her something she dislikes. The author, throughout the novel, indicates that people do the best they can with what they have to offer, which is sometimes not what the other person wants or needs.

Chapter 49

The shopping trips are Lucy providing for her children in a way that her own mother never could. Lucy didn't care about the clothing, that's why she only went when she was with her daughters. Her love for them is shown by her always getting an apartment that has a spare room for them to visit, even though they never do. Lucy relates herself to Kathie at the end of the chapter. Because she was the one that left William, she's seen as being the villain by her family. This is an example of why it is bad to judge someone so harshly. Lucy's daughters don't try and understand why Lucy left, or that she specifically waited until her children were in college before doing so.



Chapter 50

Lucy is afraid that her daughters are going through the same thing that she did as a child. Lucy knows the impact that family can have on the rest of someone's life. She doesn't want her children ending up angry and bitter like Vicky, or carrying around the same pain that Lucy bears.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the theme of Imperfect Love.

Discussion Question 2

Compare Lucy to the rest of her siblings. How is it that she turned out so differently?

Discussion Question 3

What does the term 'ruthless' come to mean to Lucy?

Vocabulary

cognizant, didactic, dour, ebullient, inimical, extol, noisome, ostensible



Chapters 51-55

Summary

Chapter 51

Lucy briefly expands on the rage of her children. Her youngest, Becca, said that after spending 20 years with them, she couldn't just start over with someone else, and all Lucy could do was agree.

Chapter 52

Lucy remembers when the World Trade Center Towers fell. She was with her daughter watching the news, and her daughter was so distressed. Every time she thinks about 9/11, she remembers how much her daughter needed her. Lucy then thinks about Sarah Payne, saying that she only had one story to tell. Sarah had written many books, which left Lucy wondering what Sarah wasn't saying.

Chapter 53

Lucy reveals that when she's alone in her apartment, she sometimes screams for Mommy. She isn't sure if she's screaming for her mother, or if she's just remembering the way that Becca called for her. She goes on to say that the story she's writing is hers, even though it's a story shared by many.

Chapter 54

Recently, Lucy reveals that her oldest daughter said that she wished her stepmom would die, and that Lucy's new husband would die so they could go back to being a family. This reminds Lucy of the pain children experience when growing up, and how only too often they can't just let it go, because it belongs to them.

Chapter 55

In this final chapter, Lucy remembers the way that the sun used to set around the small house that she grew up in. She remembers how peaceful and quiet everything was, and ends the book saying how much life amazes her.

Analysis

Chapter 51

Becca's anger isn't directed just at Lucy. She's more upset that her family was split apart. Lucy understands why Becca is upset. Even with everything that happened with her own family, Lucy never felt like they had left, they simply stopped talking. It also



relates to the difficulty Lucy had in leaving William. She did manage to get married to someone else, but she still admits that she thinks about William from time to time, and everything that was left behind.

Chapter 52

Sarah and Lucy's relationship is another example of people needing to live life to their fullest, which is one of the predominant themes. Sarah was trying to pass a message along to Lucy and the other writers. She didn't want them to keep their important stories a secret, like Lucy believed she was doing. Lucy's earlier interactions with her daughter are important to show that, just like with Lucy, her children haven't completely written her out of their life. She's still their mother, and they do want to have her around, but at the same time there's also a lot of anger for her being the one to split them apart in the first place.

Chapter 53

Lucy recognizes that she isn't alone in the world. Many other people have experienced similar grief to hers. She knows that other people have lost their parents, have had troubles with their family, and have grown up poor. What Lucy is declaring is that this particular story belongs to her, and nobody can take that away from her.

Chapter 54

Lucy knows that the pain her daughter feels is the same pain that Lucy felt when she was growing up. Despite how much it hurts, Lucy knows that her daughter isn't going to ever let go of her pain fully, because the pain belongs to her. This is the same way that Lucy never let go of her pain, because that would mean having to let go of her family. Even though they aren't together, that pain still means they had something, which is why they both hold onto it.

Chapter 55

This brief chapter adds an optimistic note to Lucy's story. This is important, since Lucy was just discussing how much pain she and her family were in, as well as what she had lost. By ending the chapter on a hopeful note, Lucy is saying that the world has darkness, but it isn't all bad. All of the pain she experienced is just part of life, and it should in no way diminish her future. The theme of Appreciating Life is once more restated.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss Lucy's family dynamic (her past family and her current family).



Discussion Question 2

How is Lucy's new husband better suited to her than William?

Discussion Question 3

What is Lucy's philosophy as far as the pain of childhood goes?

Vocabulary

pithy, quaint, serendipity, tome, upbraid, vestige, wanton, yoke, truculent, travesty



Characters

Lucy

Lucy Barton is an older woman with grown children. She lives in New York and is an accomplished writer. She's remarried a man who understands her much better than her first husband, William did. However, for all of her success, she still harbors the deep psychological scars from growing up in an impoverished family, whose poverty also extended to their ability to openly express care and love for one another.

Much of Lucy's motivation stems from her desire to avoid loneliness ever again. Initially, anyone that showed her the tiniest bit of kindness she immediately latched onto, such as her third grade teacher, Mr. Hanley. When he stopped the children from making fun of her, he became her hero.

Later, this same sort of adulation came when the doctor at the hospital recognized her deep need for a connection with people. He took the time to visit with her, even speaking with her occasionally after she left the hospital. Lucy was able to overcome her feelings of inferiority, to some extent, and to learn to love herself enough to stand up for her own dreams and aspirations.

Lucy's Mother

Lucy's mother came to see Lucy and stay with her while she was at the hospital. It was through these interactions that the reader gains a feel for who the mother must have been, wanted to be, and never would be.

Lucy's mother worried that she wasn't a good enough mother, that she didn't give her children enough. Later, she tried to make peace with the poverty and the simple way they had to live by internalizing that all rich people were unhappy and rude, something that she managed to pass along to her two other children, but a philosophy that didn't remain with Lucy.

Despite her inability to tell her daughter that she loved her, in her entire lifetime, her actions, Lucy says, speak louder than her words ever could. She stayed with her daughter for many nights at the hospital, even though hospitals terrify her.

William

William is Lucy's first husband. He is German and Lucy's father didn't like the fact that he was German because in the war he had to shoot two young German boys. He felt that God was punishing him with William.



William seems, by all rights, to be a good and decent person. He tried to give Lucy the attention that she needed, to tell her that he loved her, but in the end, she needed more than he could give and they parted company.

Vicky

Vicky is Lucy's older sister. She is depicted as bitter and angry all of the time, as it is the only way she knows to exist. Lucy feels sorry for her and tries to take care of her monetarily, something that her sister doesn't seem to be grateful for at all. Whereas Lucy was able to rise above their childhood, Vicky has never been able to do so.

Kathie

Kathie is a wealthy woman that used to come to Lucy's mother to have her clothes altered. Lucy's mother liked to gossip about how Kathie left her husband for another man who turned out to be gay. Kathie and her husband should have reconciled, but could never overcome their pride.

Mr. Haley

Mr. Haley was Lucy's third grade teacher who encouraged her as well as taught her about prejudice and standing up for those who aren't able to do so. He defended her from some of the class bullies.

Sarah Payne

Sarah Payne is a well known author that Lucy met in a bookstore, though at the time Lucy didn't know that Sarah was an author. Sarah's example is what spurred Lucy's desire to become a writer, as they both came from similar circumstances.

Aunt Harriet

Aunt Harriet is Lucy's mother's sister. They discussed her while they were in the hospital and the reader learns that she wasn't any happier than Lucy's mother was. She worried about everything.

Molla

Molla is Lucy's one true and good friend. Molla doesn't press her for intimate details about her life, and respects Lucy's need for privacy.

The Doctor

The Doctor, who is never given a name, was the doctor that treated Lucy while she was in the hospital. He saw that she was someone that needed human interaction, and lots of it, so he made a point of visiting her several times a day just to talk.



Symbols and Symbolism

Hospital View

When Lucy is in the hospital, she spends a lot of her time watching all of the people walking by. Seeing everyone with the freedom to go about and freely live their lives inspired Lucy to do more with her life when she got out of the hospital.

Lucy's nicknames, "Wizzle" and "Button"

When Lucy's mother came to visit, she referred to her as Wizzle. This was her way of showing affection and saying that she still loved Lucy, even though they hadn't spoken in years. This is especially important, since Lucy's mother was unable to say that she loved Lucy.

The nickname Button is spoken by Lucy's husband. This is also his way of showing his love and affection. He knows that people have said they love her before, but he's the only one that's ever called her Button, so it's a special sign of affection between them.

Cold

Throughout the book, Lucy talks about how much she hates the cold. Whenever she's cold, she's reminded of how lonely and isolated she is. Whenever she feels warm, she's with someone that makes her feel safe.

Tilly's Story/Books in General

As a child, Lucy was constantly reading. The books always represented hope to her, and she thought that books were a way of making people not feel lonely. Tilly's story stood out in particular, because that was the first book that had a meaningful impact and made Lucy want to write.

Chrysler Building

Lucy enjoyed the bright lights that came off of the Chrysler Building. To her, it was an example of everything great with New York, and all of the potential that mankind had to create beauty.

Hiding Gossip Magazines

Lucy was given some gossip magazines to read when she was at the hospital. She hid them when her doctor was around, and didn't want to read them when her mother was



around. She didn't want her mother to think she'd become obsessed with pop culture, since they grew up without any knowledge of popular culture, and she knew that her mother generally disapproved of it. With the doctor, she didn't want him to think of her as ditzy.

Starving Father Statue

At a museum, Lucy found a statue of a starving man. His children are at his feet, begging for him to eat them. To Lucy, this statue represents the love that family can have for one another, and how the children just want to do anything they can to protect their family. The father shows this as well, by denying his children and trying to do what's best for them.

Lucy's Mother's Stories

Throughout her visit, Lucy's mother told stories about other people's marriages failing, or stories about impoverished people getting money and becoming miserable. The stories have many different meanings. First, it's Lucy's mother trying to apologize for - but also justify - their poverty. She was still a good mother, even if she couldn't always provide for Lucy, and she was also trying to say that things might not have been better for her if they did have money. She was also saying that the family stuck together, no matter what, while more privileged families kept abandoning one another, so in that sense, Lucy was lucky that they weren't more privileged.

Letter from Lucy's Mother

The letter from Lucy's mother is another sign of her affection, since she wasn't able to verbally say that she loved Lucy. The letter had an image of the Chrysler Building on front, which was meaningful to Lucy. Just getting that was also meaningful, since Lucy's mother had to go out of her way to find it, given that she lived in an isolated area far away from New York. Putting in this extra effort goes to show that she knew what's important to Lucy, despite them not always communicating, and she was willing to put in the extra effort because she cared about Lucy.

Mother's Handprint

When Lucy was in the hospital she tearfully asked her mother not to leave her. When Lucy woke up in the morning, her mother was still there, and where she's kept her hand on her daughter's leg all night, there was a handprint. This handprint represents the fact that her mother cared very much, and moreso that parents leave an imprint on the lives of their children.



Settings

The Hospital

Most of the first half of the book is set at the hospital where Lucy spent 9 weeks with an unexplained illness.

Childhood Home

Most of the reflection that Lucy offers in the first part of the book, and throughout the last part, happens in her childhood home. This is where most of her pain, and her joy, comes from.

The School

School was a refuge for Lucy because it was warm, there were books to read to escape from her own reality, and Mr. Haley, her favorite teacher encouraged her.

Bookstore

Many of Lucy's life-altering, course correcting moments have happened in a bookstore. This is where she initially meets Sarah Payne.

New York

Lucy likes New York because of all the people. Living there she doesn't feel alone.



Themes and Motifs

Appreciate Life

This theme is prominently displayed during the course of the story, most notably through Lucy and Lucy's mother. The first example comes nearly right away at the start of the story, when Lucy is discussing about how she had to spend nine weeks in the hospital. During this time, she watched everyone passing by from the window. Lucy was envious of how they had the freedom to go about and live their lives. She wanted nothing more than to be outside of the hospital with her family. It was even more distressing, since at the time the doctors had no idea of why she wasn't getting better, and she didn't know if she would ever get out of the hospital.

The theme is demonstrated in several of the stories that Lucy's mother told to Lucy in the hospital. The first story was about someone named Kathie. Kathie married someone wealthy, but she was never happy. She always complained about everything in her life, and she eventually left her husband for someone else, because she believed that person would make her happy. He left her, and Kathie was left with nothing. She didn't appreciate all of the good in her life, and by constantly ignoring what she had she kept searching for new ways of happiness, but it just ended up destroying her life.

Lastly, the theme is demonstrated with the differences between Lucy and her sister, Vicky. Lucy was able to turn her life around and find things that made her happy. She started a family, married twice, and was able to create a successful career. Even when she was younger, she found ways to keep warm and stayed after school to do work and read. In comparison, her sister, Vicky, is miserable. Vicky went on to marry and have her own children, but she's too bitter and angry at the rest of her family to appreciate what she has, so she's always unhappy. Lucy even tries to go out of her way to provide for Vicky and give her more reasons to be happy and appreciate her life, but Vicky remains miserable.

Pride leads to Misery

This is another theme that is told primarily through the stories of Lucy's mother. After hearing about Kathie's divorce and subsequent failed relationship, Lucy asked about what happened to her ex-husband. Lucy's mother told her that Kathie tried to get back together with him, but he refused because he was too proud to take someone back that divorced him. Kathie pretended like things were fine, instead of trying to go to her family and ask for help or explain what she was going through. Both Kathie and her husband were miserable because they couldn't swallow their pride.

When Lucy's mother brought up celebrities, she was also bringing up how pride was their downfall. She talked about how Elvis came from a small town before becoming famous. She went on to say that his lavish lifestyle led to him doing drugs, where he



eventually died of an overdose. Lucy's mother pointed out that he was fine, and he never would have turned towards drugs if he hadn't embraced such a prideful celebrity lifestyle.

Lastly, the theme is shown through Lucy's interaction with her family. Lucy tried to reach out to her family when she had her children and when she got married, but her family stubbornly brushed her aside. In their eyes, Lucy was corrupted because she was wealthy and successful, even though Lucy never tried to throw that in their faces. When William first met her family, he offered to take them out to dinner. They were offended, even though William was just trying to be polite and not make any statements about his wealth.

Lucy's family was insulted, because as parents they felt they were the ones that were supposed to be providing. They knew that they couldn't, but they refused to admit that they needed the help, or even that there was nothing wrong with accepting help. They were also too proud to ever try and reach out to Lucy in the following years, only getting in touch when they were on their death bed. Their pride led to them going years without speaking to the daughter that they loved and missed.

Judgment is Destructive

This theme is largely shown through Lucy's backstory. Lucy frequently discusses how she came from poverty, especially in the beginning of the book. As a young child, Lucy's teachers looked down upon her and her siblings because they always looked so dirty. Everyone in church, except on Thanksgiving, judged them for their appearances. This bullying had a profound effect on Lucy, hurting her and making her feel even more isolated and lonely. It wasn't until high school when Lucy finally had a teacher that took an interest in her, going out of his way to protect Lucy when other students were making fun of her.

Another aspect of her life that Lucy brings up in the beginning of the book is her time in college dating one of her professors. Lucy was happy when she was in college. She felt like she was uneducated as far as popular culture went, but school was a place where she was able to be away from her family and learn, eventually leading to her getting a career. The one negative part of her college time she focuses on is how the professor judged her for the way that she dressed. He made a point of dressing in fancy clothing, and he chastised Lucy for not trying to do the same. This again had a profound effect on Lucy, and she continued to think about him well into her adulthood.

Lucy's family is presented as being judgmental as well. Vicky judges the rest of the family for their inability to provide. Lucy's mother is very judgmental as well. While she tells Lucy's stories to get a message across, she's also looking down upon everyone in the story, in no small part because they were looking down on her. They acted like they were better than her, so in turn she acted like she was better than them whenever anything bad happened in their life.



Lucy herself admits that she judges people, although she usually feels bad about it after the fact. When this happens, Lucy goes on to say that it's human nature to judge people. While she isn't proud of that fact, she accepts that it's impossible to live without judgment, but how people express it and let it impact them is what really matters.

People can Love Imperfectly

This theme is demonstrated during most of Lucy's interactions with her mother. During the book, Lucy talks about how lonely that she feels, and she admits that her family wasn't there for her in the way that she needed them. While her parents were out working, they left Lucy alone in a truck. They didn't understand that she was terrified during these moments. She was deeply affected by what happened, unable to go into greater detail when it comes up in conversation. Her parents weren't trying to be abusive, and in their mind they were just trying to provide for their family in whatever way they could. To them, this is their way of expressing love, by trying to take care of Lucy and the others, but it wasn't the love that Lucy needed.

The theme is brought up again through Lucy and William. Throughout most of the book, Lucy talks very positively about William. There are a few hiccups in their marriage that she does address. Just like her parents, William was very busy working when she was in the hospital, so he couldn't come and visit her. Besides that, she painted him as being a very good husband. She admits much later on that, in the present, she and William are divorced and both remarried. She goes on to explain that while William loved her, and she truly loved him, he didn't understand the life that she came from. He wasn't able to give her the love that she needed, because he wasn't able to truly understand her, despite his best efforts.

This similar interaction is shown with the rest of Lucy's family. Her mother couldn't verbally express her love, and Lucy knew that she did things that made her mother uncomfortable, even though they were just her attempts at showing affection. Lucy has a hard time showing her daughters affection as well. They got upset when Lucy divorced William, not understanding why Lucy had to do it, or ignoring that Lucy stayed with him for as long as she did because of her children. Lucy's children avoid visiting her after that, but they do let her occasionally visit. Lucy still loves them, and they still love her, that's why her older daughter comments she wishes both of her parents would get divorced and remarry. They all love one another, but not in the perfect way that they wish.

Style is Substance

This is one of the themes that Lucy outright states when she's talking about her time with the professor. When she was dating the professor, he was married to someone else. He would comment that he enjoyed Lucy's substance more, but he enjoyed the style of his wife, referring to the fact that she dressed in fancy clothing. Lucy argues that style is substance. What she means is that the way Lucy dresses is part of who she is.



She didn't dress in fancy clothing because of her background. As Lucy constantly expresses throughout the story, her difficult childhood is a huge part of who she is.

Lucy comments, that with the exception of the Professor, she never actually felt bad about the way that she looked. She was unhappy that her family was poor, but that was because it made her feel alone and isolated. That was the same reason she disliked being bullied, because of the feeling of isolation, not because what they were saying about her appearance. Lucy was never ashamed about looking dirty, because it was part of who she was.

While Lucy spends most of the book not caring about her appearance, there are a few exceptions. When Lucy is going to visit the doctor, she always spent time on her appearance. Throughout the book, she admits that she loved the doctor for his kindness, so she wanted to make a good impression on him. Dressing up had substance, because it was her way of sending a message to him. Lucy also makes a message when she starts seeing a plastic surgeon because she doesn't want to look like her mother. This was a deliberate choice of Lucy, because she wants to distance herself from being like her mother. Lucy understands that the way a person chooses to dress says a lot about themselves, and isn't just a superficial choice.

Loneliness

Loneliness is one of the major themes running throughout the novel, second only to the theme of Imperfect Love. Because of her intense loneliness as a child, that feeling of abandonment, of not being good enough, and of being a burden to her parents, Lucy grew up craving attention and love. However, as an adult, she's lived without that sort of attention and love for so long she finds it difficult to accept it when she does have it. Her parents' imperfect love has, in many ways, crippled their daughter.

The loneliness that Lucy feels came to her the most when she was at the hospital and she realized that she really had no one in the world other than her husband and her children. Her mother and father lived an impoverished life in the rural areas of Illinois and, as a result, she hadn't seen them in years. They spoke by phone, but it was not the same as being physically present. This is why it was particularly moving to Lucy when her mother came to the hospital.

When Lucy divorced her husband, it was because she had felt lonely for most of their marriage. She stayed with William as long as she did for the kids' sake, which forestalled her own happiness. Later, she expresses how happy she feels to be living in New York because there are so many people that she doesn't feel lonely or left out anymore.

Styles

Point of View

This book is told from the first person narration of Lucy Barton, a young woman battling an unknown illness in a hospital. Later, as a published author, the same Lucy Barton, older and somewhat wiser, expounds upon how her life progressed and turned out, and what she has learned along the way.

Language and Meaning

The language and meaning in this novel are both beautiful and rich in texture. Read for a surface story, it is compelling and offers enough intrigue to make the pages turn themselves. However, for those taking the time to read closely, it is a deep, introspective, courageous delving into the nature of love, relationships, and findings one's place in life.

Structure

The book jumps around in the main character's timeline, and is often told in flashbacks as she remembers key and significant instances in her life and the lessons she learned.



Quotes

Hi, Lucy," she said. Her voice sounded shy but urgent. She leaned forward and squeezed my foot through the sheet. "Hi, Wizzle," she said. I had not seen my mother for years, and I kept staring at her; I could not figure out why she looked so different."
-- Mother (1 paragraph 5)

Importance: This passage in the first chapter establishes the relationship between Lucy and her mother. This relationship is explored in much more detail throughout the rest of the book. The reader gets the important facts right away; about how long it has been since they were last together, but also that Lucy's mother clearly cares about her.

We were told on the playground by other children, "Your family stinks," and they'd run off pinching their noses with their fingers; my sister was told by her second-grade teacher—in front of the class—that being poor was no excuse for having dirt behind the ears, no one was too poor to buy a bar of soap."
-- Lucy (chapter 2 paragraph 1)

Importance: This passage foreshadows one of the themes, that too much judgment is a bad. It also sets up the poverty that Lucy grew up in. This is something that Lucy continually explores and references during the book.

How Vicky managed, to this day I don't know. We were not as close as you might expect; we were equally friendless and equally scorned, and we eyed each other with the same suspicion with which we eyed the rest of the world. There are times now, and my life has changed so completely, that I think back on the early years and I find myself thinking: It was not that bad."
-- Lucy (chapter 2 paragraph 5)

Importance: Despite everything that happened to Lucy, she isn't completely bitter about what happened in the past. This is one of the biggest differences between Lucy and Vicky. Lucy is also able to get rid of the mistrust that she had, something that the rest of her family was unable to do. This is foreshadowing another theme explored in the book, how important it is to embrace life.

She couldn't envy anything about me. Kathie always wanted something she didn't have. She had those beautiful daughters, but they weren't enough, she wanted a son. She had that nice house in Hanston, but it wasn't nice enough, she wanted something closer to a city. What city? That's how she was."
-- Mother (chapter 3 paragraph 3)

Importance: This is the first time that Lucy's mother told one of her stories. She continues to do this throughout her visit with Lucy, which is her way of trying to impart wisdom to Lucy. This sets up two different themes, about needing to embrace life, as well as pride leading to misery.



It was not until many years later, long after, that I learned from my brother how my father, in a German town, had come upon two young men who startled him, and my father had shot them in the back, he did not think they were soldiers, they were not dressed like soldiers, but he had shot them, and when he kicked one over he saw how young he was.

-- Lucy (chapter 4 paragraph 20)

Importance: Lucy's father only receives a little attention in the book, but he's still an important character. This explains why her father acts the way that he does, and the general mistrust that he has towards William.

This strikes me as odd, so many years later. I was in the hospital, essentially so was she; what better time to read anything that takes the mind away? I had a few books from home near my bed, though I had not read them with my mother there, nor had she looked at them. But about the magazine, I'm sure it would not have made any dent in my doctor's heart. But that is how sensitive we both were, my mother and I. There is that constant judgment in this world: How are we going to make sure we do not feel inferior to another?"

-- Lucy (chapter 16 paragraph 1)

Importance: Lucy is constantly exploring what judgment means during the course of the story. This is one of the times where Lucy outright addresses it as being one of the themes. It also goes to show how important the doctor is to her, and the doctor's general kindness, since she identifies him as someone that wouldn't pass judgment.

"And so I listened to the sound of her voice; until these past three days it had been a long time since I had heard it, and it was different. Perhaps my memory was different, for the sound of her voice used to grate my nerves. This sound was the opposite of that—always the sense of compression, the urgency."

-- Lucy (chapter 18 paragraph 2)

Importance: Much of the earlier book is talking about how difficult Lucy's childhood was. This passage is important since it signifies to the reader that, despite what happened in the past, Lucy and her mother do love and care for one another.

I have said before: It interests me how we find ways to feel superior to another person, another group of people. It happens everywhere, and all the time. Whatever we call it, I think it's the lowest part of who we are, this need to find someone else to put down."

-- Lucy (chapter 19 paragraph 2)

Importance: This is another example of Lucy exploring the theme of judgment. This passage is especially important because Lucy recognizes that it is impossible to avoid judging people. What matters is that people don't judge too harshly, or use that judgment to hurt other people.

I feel that people may not understand that my mother could never say the words I love you. I feel that people may not understand: It was all right."



-- Lucy (chapter 29 paragraph 17)

Importance: This is a perfect example of Lucy's relationship with her mother. It is also another example of how people can love imperfectly. Lucy craved comfort and affection to ease her loneliness. Her mother tried to provide as best as they could, but they were very different people. Lucy accepted that her mother simply had a different way of expressing herself, and she truly appreciated the affection that she gave, even if it wasn't necessarily in the way that Lucy wanted.

It was almost nine years later. Why didn't I go there to visit her? To visit my father, and my brother and sister? To see the nieces and nephews I had never seen? I think—to say it simply—it was easier not to go. My husband would not come with me, and I didn't blame him. And—I know the defensiveness in this sentence—my parents and my sister and my brother never wrote me, or called me, and when I called them it was always hard; I felt I heard in their voices anger, a habitual resentment, as though they were silently saying You are not one of us, as though I had betrayed them by leaving them.”

-- Lucy (chapter 40 paragraph 1)

Importance: This is another example of the theme of needing to embrace life. Lucy was able to move on from the past and start her own life. The rest of her family stayed in the past. Lucy is shown to be the happiest and most successful out of her family. This is also another example of William struggling to be part of Lucy's life.

My father greeted me when I stepped off the elevator in the hospital, and I would not have known who he was except for the gratitude I saw in the eyes of this stranger, that I had come to help him. He looked so much older than I had ever thought he could be, and any anger I felt—or that he felt—did not seem connected to us anymore. The disgust I had had for him most of my life was not there. He was an old man in a hospital who had a wife who was going to die.”

-- Lucy (chapter 40 paragraph 3)

Importance: This is another important passage, since it follows so soon after Lucy saying that her family felt betrayed by her. It shows that their relationship wasn't perfect, but that Lucy's mother and father still cared about her.

Do I understand that hurt my children feel? I think I do, though they might claim otherwise. But I think I know so well the pain we children clutch to our chests, how it lasts our whole lifetime, with longings so large you can't even weep. We hold it tight, we do, with each seizure of the beating heart: This is mine, this is mine, this is mine.”

-- Lucy (chapter 54 paragraph 2)

Importance: Lucy understands that pain is something that can't just be forgotten. At the same time, it isn't something that can consume someone's life. Pain is something that shapes people, and is part of who they are, but it can't interfere with them having a life of their own.