

The Middle Place Study Guide

The Middle Place by Kelly Corrigan

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Plot Summary

Kelly Corrigan is a young wife and mother who finds a suspicious lump in her breast one afternoon. Kelly is smart enough to know that the size and hardness of the mass is not a good sign. She maintains her cool as she tends to her three-year-old daughter, Georgia, and one-year-old daughter, Claire. She calls her husband Edward, who is out of town on business, to tell him about her discovery. He feels positive that the mass is probably benign given Kelly's young age and her seemingly good health. One of Kelly's good friends and neighbors is a physician. She rushes over to her friend's house and just as she feared, the doctor confirms that the rigidity of the mass is a matter of concern.

Kelly is very close to her parents, especially her father, George. She decides not to tell them about her lump because she does not want to alarm them. They are so far away in their home in Philadelphia where she grew up; they would feel helpless and would worry unnecessarily. A few days after discovering the lump, Kelly has a mammogram. The physician at the clinic tells her that the size and shape of the lump—it has tentacles—is indeed, very suspect. When Edward learns of the doctor's concern, he flies home immediately so that he's with his wife during the biopsy. The biopsy is positive and the lump is cancerous.

Kelly has no recourse but to tell her parents. They are naturally upset. George, who is an extremely upbeat person, gives his daughter a pep talk and assures her everything will be fine. Mary, who is a little more down to earth, shows her concern and worry. But both her parents, in their own ways, are fully supportive of her. Kelly begins treatment with four brutal chemotherapy sessions that have vicious side-effects that range from nausea to fatigue and wear on her nerves and cause stress in the family. She eventually loses her hair but makes lemonade out of lemons by having a friend shave her head in front of the girls in a party-like atmosphere.

But Kelly gets through her chemo and then goes onto the next step in her cancer ordeal. She has to undergo a lumpectomy and another biopsy to make sure there are no signs of cancer in the lump or in the surrounding lymph nodes. She is cancer-free but shortly after gets the horrifying news that her beloved father had blood in his urine, is checked out, and diagnosed with bladder cancer. It is frightening news, but the irony that both Kelly and her father, who shared the closest relationship in the family, going through cancer treatment at the same time was not missed. Kelly was militant in demanding that George get the proper treatment.

Kelly is one mass of worries during this period of her life. She worries about herself, her kids, and husband being without her, her father's disease and the potential of her mother being without her father. But Kelly makes it through and after radiation is done, she is cancer-free. Her father does well with his treatment and his disease seems to disappear. Kelly wasn't sure if it was the prayers of his family and friends that cured him or if it was her unwavering insistence that he get the right treatment.



Chapters 1 through 4

Chapters 1 through 4 Summary and Analysis

Chapter One

Monday, August 2, 2004

Just before her 37th birthday, Kelly Corrigan found a suspicious lump in her breast. Her husband, Edward, was away on a business trip. When she discovered the lump, she was bathing with her two children Georgia, three, and Claire, one. She panicked and called a close friend, Emily Birenbaum, who was a physician. Emily lived nearby and told Kelly to come right over. After checking the lump, Emily told Kelly that it was a bad sign because it was so hard but since Kelly was young, it probably was just a cyst. Emily promised to schedule a mammogram for Kelly in the next few days. When Edward called that night, Kelly told him about the lump. He was optimistic that it was just a cyst.

Chapter Two

Kelly grew up in the suburbs of Philadelphia in a happy, close-knit family. She had two older brothers, Booker and GT, who were both sports fanatics and who hosted many games in the family's large backyard. Her father, George Corrigan, grew tomatoes in the yard and would make sure not to interrupt the game when he was tending to his plants. He was the coach of a kid's hockey team. One day there was quite an uproar with Kelly's dad "sneezed out" his front tooth. The kids all crawled around in the grass looking for it. Kelly's dad offered a reward of \$5.00 for whoever found the tooth. But no one could find it and Kelly went with her dad to the dentist's office.

The dentist couldn't see George for an hour so he and Kelly did a few errands. George didn't mind that a tooth was missing and happily told everyone what happened. He always paid more attention to the positive than to the negative. When Kelly was in high school, George took over the chore of getting her and her brothers up in the morning. He was so positive about the wonderful world that was waiting out there for them, waking up a pleasant experience.

Chapter Three

Wednesday, August 4th

Sophie, Kelly's seventeen-year-old babysitter, came over to watch the girls for Kelly's appointment at the imaging center. At the center, several pictures were taken of each breast. The technician told Kelly the doctor wanted a few more pictures. The physician, Dr. White, was quite concerned about the mass and scheduled a biopsy for Friday. Kelly was terrorized. Tears streamed down her face. The doctor told her not to get ahead of herself.



Kelly was panicked as she left the clinic. She called Edward and told him that the doctor said the lump was the size of a credit card and had tentacles. Edward promised to fly home immediately. That evening, Edward tried to be optimistic but Kelly was sure the doctor thought her lump was cancerous. Later, Edward's true feelings emerged. He was scared, too. Kelly was irreplaceable to both him and the daughters.

Chapter 4

Kelly's parents had a solid marriage but although they loved each other, it wasn't particularly romantic. It was more like a corporation. Her mother, Mary, was head of finance and operations. Her father took care of family name branding and sales, selling the kids that playing in the snow in the backyard was as good as a ski trip to Vermont. Kelly's mother was strict about curfews and her father was the enforcer. If Kelly was out past her curfew, George would go find her and bring her home. But he was pleasant about it. Kelly was touched when she found a large cache of love letters in an old trunk her parents exchanged before they were married.



Chapters 5 through 8

Chapters 5 through 8 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 5

The day arrived for Kelly's biopsy. Edward was staying cool, calm and collected. Kelly was nervous as she registered with an unfriendly nurse. During the biopsy, the young physician poked her left breast repeatedly, complaining that it was difficult for her to get a good tissue sample. Finally, the biopsy concluded and Kelly eyed the four pieces of her breast tissue that the doctor had slipped into separate vials. Kelly tried to fool herself that she wanted a bad diagnosis to see how she'd react to such adversity. But on the way home, she ended that fantasy and prayed for a diagnosis of no cancer.

Chapter 6

Growing up, Kelly and her brothers all had household chores for which they were paid. George decided that the boys needed to branch out and showed them a bright green t-shirt that said "Corrigan Cutters" in bold white lettering that he had made for them. It was time to bring in money from outside sources. The boys were less than thrilled. Kelly thought she had escaped George's latest sales innovation but she was wrong. He pulled out another t-shirt that said, "Corrigan Cleaners." Kelly could make some money cleaning houses. Kelly was relieved when the cleaning business failed to take off. Booker got into it and in no time had saved \$50.

Booker bought a twelve-inch boa constrictor at the pet store and a white mouse to feed it. The neighborhood kids all came over to watch the snake eat the mouse. Kelly locked her door and stuffed a towel under her door. When her father came home, she demanded that he make Booker take the snake back. A compromise was reached and the snake was moved to the basement. Kelly was still upset that the snake was anywhere in the house. She sneaked downstairs and secured the lid firmly on top of the snake's tank, making sure that he couldn't get out but also eliminating his only air supply. The next morning the snake was dead. Everyone thought he drowned in his water but Kelly knew what really happened.

Chapter 7

A week after the biopsy, Emily Birenbaum called Kelly and told her that it was cancer. Kelly was understandably upset. Edward asked if the tests are always accurate. Kelly proceeded to call her friends and family to tell them the news. She felt a lot of support from everyone, especially her brothers who were still protective of her. Edward called his parents to let them know. Kelly called her parents last. Her father wasn't home so she told her mother who was naturally very upset. George called her back later and gave her one of his rousing pep-talks but she could read between the happy words and knew he was very worried. Kelly sent an email out to her friends and families. She



sounded very much like her father, telling everyone what a great team of doctors she had and that she was sure everything would be fine.

Chapter 8

Kelly knew at a young age that she wasn't good at tennis or lacrosse so she took up diving. Her parents supported her sport and she did quite well at it. She liked the attention and enjoyed winning awards and trophies for her efforts. Her family came to every meet and her father never even missed a practice session. Another member of the swim team, Emelyn Wampler, began to advance past Kelly. She was able to do a reverse in layout. George encouraged Kelly to start practicing the dive. With George at her side, Kelly was able to master a reverse in pike which was more difficult than Emelyn's reverse in layout. Kelly always remembered her father's love and support.



Chapters 9 through 12

Chapters 9 through 12 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 9

Saturday, August 21

George flew into Oakland to stay with Kelly. She was due for her first chemotherapy treatment. Kelly couldn't help but cry when she brought up her appointment. George and Edward both agreed that everyone had to stay positive and that she was going to make it through. Kelly talked her father into getting a pedicure with her. Some friends came over that night. Everyone drank too much wine while Edward played the guitar while everyone sang along. The room was filled with true happiness.

Chapter 10

On balance, Kelly would rather know that something bad was coming. A warning was better than being hit from behind. Fifth grade had gone well but it was followed by a sixth grade that did not go well at all. Kelly and her friend, Allison Mundth, did everything together, from entering drawing contests to creating their own exclusive clubs. Kelly started middle school full of optimism. Kelly and Allison became friends with a girl named Claudia Regan.

Claudia began being more friendly with Allison and basically taking her away from Kelly. The girls participated in a truth telling game where they would confront each other with their flaws. Claudia told Kelly that she had horse teeth and shouldn't smile so much. Claudia had a sleepover and didn't invite Kelly. Claudia was behind other cruel things that happened to Kelly and to other girls. She was finally disciplined by the principal and her popularity began to decline. Years later Kelly's mother revealed to her daughter how she had suffered through Kelly's sixth grade with her.

Chapter 11

At her first chemo session, the first two bags of medication didn't seem bad. The first was saline and the next was anti-nausea medication. The third bag was the anti-cancer drug, Adriamycin. The nurse, Catherine, infused the cherry red medication manually, telling Kelly to let her know if it became too unbearable and she would slow up the infusion. Kelly learned that she would get only a total of four doses of this medication because it was very hard on the heart. Even if she got cancer in twenty years from then, she probably would not receive more of the drug. That's how powerful it was. Next she was given Cytosan that was infused over the next several hours.

Another patient who had been receiving chemo for a while told Kelly about some of the side effects she had, including weight loss, mouth sores, pain in her extremities and numbness in her fingers. Catherine intervened and told Kelly that everyone has different



reactions to chemo. After four hours, she and Edward left and told each other it wasn't that bad. Kelly suffered from nausea and sleepiness for days. Georgia was upset that Kelly stayed in bed so much. She missed her mother.

Chapter 12

As it turned out, both Kelly and GT were going to Booker's prom. Mary was worried about Kelly going since she was so much younger than most of the kids. Even though Kelly was going with a nerdy guy, Mary was afraid that some of the older boys might take advantage of her. Mary made sure that Kelly's dress was conservative which Kelly was less than thrilled about.



Chapters 13 through 16

Chapters 13 through 16 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 13

Friday, September 10

Kelly hadn't lost her hair yet but her oncologist assured her she would. Kelly met with Susan, a psychologist, to learn the best ways to deal with her children during her illness. So the girls wouldn't be startled at her impending baldness, Kelly had a friend shave her hair right in front of the girls who actually had fun during the event. Privately Kelly was honest with herself. She didn't relish her baldness although Edward told her she looked beautiful. A few days later, she decided to take her "new look" out and take the girls to school. She picked up a neighbor's little boy who attended the same school. When he got in the car, he told her she looked like a monster. That comment destroyed her. Later she called Edward, crying and wailing about what the little three-year-old called her. Edward called the little boy a not-so-nice name that convinced Kelly that Edward was her hero.

Chapter 14

In her teen years, Kelly's father was a lot more lenient than her mother. She realized years later that Mary was acting out of love and concern for her daughter but at the time she was sure her mother was bent on ruining her life. More than anything, Kelly was dying to have a pair of Guess jeans. But at over \$50 a pair, Mary refused to buy them for her daughter. To earn her jeans money herself, Kelly got a job at The Limited at the mall. But Mary would not allow Kelly to drive to and from the mall by herself and Mary wasn't about to drive her. Kelly was enraged that she would again be denied the chance to have a pair of Guess jeans. But Mary relented and got her the jeans as a Christmas present. Mary always stressed that Kelly wouldn't find a husband if she wasn't "pure." Kelly was a virgin until her first year of college.

Chapter 15

Monday, September 13, 2004

Kelly was getting used to her new reality of being bald with a tumor. To encourage everyone who was worried about her, she sent out an upbeat email. She received a lot of responses one of which was from her cousin Kathy whose twenty-year-old son died in a car accident the year before. The death had devastated Kelly and George. Kathy said in her message that there were a lot of things worse than death. And as Kelly reflected on that statement, she thought of her friend Luke who was going through another painful divorce and had an anorexic daughter who was slowly killing herself. Another friend dreamed of being a mother all her life but had grown too old to realize that dream. Another friend's mother had died of complications from brain surgery. It was



sad to lose a mother—the only person who would remember your first haircut and your Halloween costume in fifth grade. Kelly desperately wanted to be there for her kids.

Chapter 16

After college, Kelly traveled to Australia because of the wonderful tales GT told her about the country. He had been there for a while as a lacrosse coach and had raved about Australia. Kelly applied for a job as a nanny for two children who lost their mother when she was seven. Kelly had applied to be a nanny to a different family before that but it didn't work out. The family expected Kelly to watch their children and do everything else from cleaning the pool to folding newsletters for their business. Peggy Taylor had recently died of cancer and John, her husband, was trying to pick up the pieces. Kelly got the job and stayed with the family for four months. Now that she was going through her trial, she thought back to struggles that those children, Amelia and Martin, those kids endured without their mother.



Chapters 17 through 20

Chapters 17 through 20 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 17

Tuesday, September 28

The day before Kelly had taken eighteen pills. Her side effects were ranging everywhere from nausea to runaway infections. Each side effect could be treated by medications which caused their own side effects. She had completely forgotten her mother's sixty-fifth birthday but her mother understood. Kelly felt gratified when she was able to comfort Claire through a rough night of teething. She hadn't been able to devote much attention to them since she was usually sleeping or drowsy. Kelly was experiencing severe bone pain and nausea in the mornings. There was an outbreak of West Nile virus and with her weakened resistance she feared she would contract it. Edward reminded her that she would be done with chemo by Christmas.

Chapter 18

After her adventure abroad, Kelly returned to the family home. She had gone parasailing in Thailand, bungee jumping in New Zealand and tried kangaroo meat in Australia. It was Christmas time and Mary had a party planned for the next evening. Kelly showed her mother photos from her adventures and told her about her experiences and the people she met along the way. It was then that Mary showed Kelly a photo of George taken in the hospital after surgery for prostate cancer, the same disease that took his father. They hadn't told Kelly about it. The family decided there was no reason to ruin her trip.

George's prostate was removed but the complications he suffered afterward stemmed from an accidental nick on his bladder from the surgeon's scalpel. He had a catheter for a while during his recovery and suffered from multiple infections. Kelly was shaken by the news but felt better after George assured her he was totally cured.

Chapter 19

Wednesday, November 24

Mary called Kelly and told her that there had been some blood in George's urine. He had gone to see a urologist and it was cancer. The next day was Thanksgiving and Edward's father was visiting. Kelly began to cry and then felt rage burning inside her. It wasn't fair.

Chapter 20



When Kelly was 29, she upset her parents when she decided to spend the six weeks between Thanksgiving and New Year's hiking in Nepal. Kelly hiked up the mountain where the bus left her off. After about four hours, during which time she wasn't sure she was lost or not, she found a village where she rented a room. She watched the Nepal people in their normal everyday duties. There were merchants, farmers, people on bikes, and kids playing in the street. No matter what time anyone arrived at the settlement, dinner was at seven. Wood was scarce so they would only build one fire per day. The meal usually consisted of vegetables and lentils in gravy. Dinner was followed by tea and political discussions.

During her stay, she met a German woman named Sabine who was there were her three-year-old son, Peter. She was a student of Buddhism which she explained had four truths. The first was that suffering was inevitable; the second, the suffering was caused by craving pleasure; the third, suffering will end when you eliminate your desires such as possessions and relationships; the fourth was called the Eightfold Path which was too complicated to understand in one sitting.



Chapter 21 through 24

Chapter 21 through 24 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 21

George had bladder cancer. It was confirmed by several doctors. Kelly did some on-line research to try to learn what her father's chances were. She needed a bit of information from her mother. Was George's bladder cancer invasive? Kelly found the name of the foremost bladder cancer physician in the country, Mark Schoenberg. He practiced at Johns Hopkins which was near Philadelphia. Kelly sent her father the book that Schoenberg wrote. She insisted that George get an appointment with him. Mary got on the phone but neither she nor George knew if his cancer was considered invasive.

Kelly and her family had Christmas with her brothers in California. Her parents stayed in Philadelphia getting ready for George's first chemo session. Kelly was upset that her parents wouldn't be there. But Mary was firm. They were staying home. Her brothers and Edward understood. She was just looking out for George. It might be too much for him. Kelly knew she was acting like the kid who wanted a pony even though she was old enough to know her parents couldn't afford one. Kelly, Edward, GT, and Booker were at a friend's party when the doorbell rang and who walked in but Mary and George. It was a surprise for Kelly. It was better than getting the pony.

Chapter 22

In 1999, Kelly was in San Francisco trying to be the next new millionaire on the Internet. She was developing software that would teach English students the classics and make Cliff Notes passe. After six months of work with a small group, Kelly's first lesson was issued and she was interviewed on NPR about her venture. After decent initial sales, the business dried up. Kelly tried to sell her idea to a huge corporation and traveled to New York to meet with representatives of the company. Kelly experienced a near panic attack at the meeting. She left the meeting for her parents' house and told her mother that she was having a breakdown. Kelly stayed two weeks and saw several anxiety experts. To relieve stress, Mary paid off Kelly's Visa bill and postponed her flight when Kelly was too afraid to fly.

Kelly returned to the east coast for a big retirement party being held for George. Her appearance was a surprise that delighted the guest of honor. The night ended with a rendition of the Corrigan fight song and George's signature move—the leaping leprechaun heel click—which made his nuclear family very nervous.

Chapter 23

January 2005



Kelly and Edward had an appointment with a genetics counselor to see if genes were responsible for Kelly's cancer. There was a question about whether the blood in George's urine was due to a medication he was taking. Mary clung to the hope that there was a misdiagnosis about his cancer. But she wasn't being realistic. Kelly reminded her that the biopsy was conclusive. George scheduled an appointment to meet with Dr. Schoenberg that week. At the genetics counsel, Kelly told the counselor about the large number of relatives on her father's side who had cancer. Mary's brother died of brain cancer. Given the history on her father's side, the counselor told her she was a good candidate for the genetics testing which would have to be approved by the insurance company since the cost was \$3,000. The counselor said the test would indicate if Kelly has a carrier gene and if so, she would have an eighty percent of recurrence.

Chapter 24

Kelly first met Edward at a friend's party. Three months later, they met at another party. Edward told her she looked like Monica Lewinsky on her best day. Kelly was not totally thrilled with that but she let it pass. He asked for her phone number and she didn't think much more about him. He called the next week and they started dating. In a short time they were in love. George came out to visit, probably on Mary's orders to check Edward out. She warned Edward that George was a little eccentric. She hoped Edward liked her father since it meant a lot to her. George and Edward hit it off. The thing that impressed George the most was the loving way Edward looked at his daughter.



Chapters 25 through 28

Chapters 25 through 28 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 25

Still January 2005

Kelly was concerned because George had not had treatment and it was six weeks since his diagnosis. Kelly called her parents and pleaded with them to get the treatment started. Kelly did an art project with her daughters because she knew she hadn't been giving them enough attention. With her own problems and George's cancer, Kelly was losing patience with her daughters. She had a battle with Georgia who refused to get dressed for a play date they had planned. Claire was getting in the habit of hitting her sister and being sent to her room quite often. But Kelly patched everything up. She wanted her daughters to remember their mother as nice and fun, not as a shrew.

Chapter 26

Kelly's first professional job was with the United Way. She called Edward with the news that she was starting with an annual salary of \$85,000. Edward's job at a tele-com company was paying him only \$75,000. Kelly and Edward were living together by then. Kelly was all dressed up to go out to dinner to celebrate her new job but Edward seemed strangely disinterested. She felt hurt by his blasé attitude. Kelly wanted Edward to be like her over-enthusiastic father but he told her that he wasn't like him and in fact, no one was.

Chapter 27

Still January 2005

Surgery was scheduled for the next week which would be followed by thirty-three radiation sessions. Kelly used her pre-op time to harass George's doctors about his condition. George asked her to lay off on Schoenberg but Kelly was determined to learn as much as she could. The possibility existed that his bladder would have to be removed but Schoenberg was totally against doing so. His other physician, Dr. Ellis, feared recurrence and favored removing it. Mary was most concerned with George's quality of life and wearing two bags the rest of his life did not qualify as "quality."

Kelly hated that she lived so far from her parents especially at a time they really needed her. She was being selfish by living in California for the weather, the food, and the large population of liberals. George called and asked for her opinion on his treatment. She told him she supported Schoenberg's opinion of not having surgery.

Chapter 28



Kelly's mother had always hinted that she was "picky" and had her expectations too high. That's why she was single so long. One night after work, Kelly came home to find Edward in a suit holding a big bouquet of roses. Edward proposed to her and she accepted. It was one year after they started dating. He gave her an unusual engagement ring made of ametrine. It was not a diamond but Kelly loved it none the less. Edward had arranged a surprise engagement party at a friend's house. The next day, they flew to New York where Edward had arranged another surprise party. Her parents were there and were thrilled with Kelly's engagement.



Chapters 29 through 32

Chapters 29 through 32 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 29

Still January 2005

Kelly was warned that after her lumpectomy, she could not lift her daughters or drive for at least a week. If her tumor required more surgery, she would face months of recovery. George had started chemo sessions and was feeling exhausted. Edward and GT accompanied Kelly to the hospital for the surgery. The surgeon, Dr. Laura Esserman, told Kelly that a biopsy would be performed during the lumpectomy to make sure the tumor and lymph nodes were free of cancer. After the surgery, Kelly woke up to the news that the biopsy and the nodes were clean—no cancer cells. Kelly was home by the next afternoon, taking it easy and being bolstered by all the good wishes she was receiving. There was a message from Dr. Schoenberg in her in-box. He validated the technical aspects that Kelly had asked him about. At the end of the message, he told Kelly he empathized with her position because he had lost his mother to bladder cancer.

Chapter 30

During Kelly's first pregnancy she was worried about her weight gain and about whether she could cope with the stress of a colicky baby. Kelly was seven days late when her water broke. She got hold of Edward and told him to get home before she had her baby in the kitchen. On her 34th birthday, Kelly became a mother. Georgia was named after her grandfather who flew out to stay a few days. Mary would come out after George returned. Kelly still went by her maiden name but George thought she should go by her married name, Lichty, now that she had a child. Kelly insisted that Edward didn't mind that she still went by Corrigan. George talked Kelly into taking the baby to a Giants game and out to restaurants. When Mary came out, she did everything but breast feed. She wanted Kelly to rest and pamper herself. Mary was hands-on with the baby and tended to her more than Kelly wanted or expected. But Mary thought she was helping Kelly.

Chapter 31

(finally) February 2005

Kelly's genetic testing was completed and revealed that she was not a carrier. She would not need a mastectomy or have to have her ovaries removed. George went to a retreat for a little introspection and came back spiritually renewed. He was even thinking of studying the Jesuits. She wondered how much her father prayed for a cure of his cancer and how much he prayed for her disease to disappear since he always thought general prayers were more beneficial than specific ones.



Kelly, Edward and the girls took a vacation to Mexico with some friends. The friends wanted to know all the details of her ordeal and what she thought saved her. While dinner was being prepared, Kelly and Edward discovered that Claire was missing. Everyone panicked but finally found her asleep under a sheet in another room. During the time they could not find Claire, Kelly made a silent deal with God to trade her father for Claire. She felt very guilty about it.

Chapter 32

After five years of living in California, Kelly and Edward thought seriously about moving to Philadelphia. There would be many benefits living close to her parents. Edward interviewed with a venture capital firm in Philadelphia but did not get the job. Although Kelly still pushed a move, Edward decided that if he wanted another job it would be best to get stay in California rather than in Philadelphia. Kelly was disappointed but listened when Edward said that her family's future was there in California with him and Georgia.



Chapters 33 through 36

Chapters 33 through 36 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 33

Still February 2005

Kelly and Edward always wanted four children. Kelly wanted a son, thinking that her relationship with a boy would be like the one she had with her father. Kelly was disturbed when her doctor told her she must begin estrogen therapy; that is, eliminate it from her system as a precaution against "growing" more cancer. She'd have to wait for more children for at least five years. But she'd be 42 by then, she reminded the doctor. He responded that she did have two beautiful daughters. She was angry but finally Edward was the voice of reason and told her that he and the girls needed her. Edward had business in Philadelphia and had plans to get together with George. It was a red flag when George called Edward and canceled the meeting because he wasn't feeling well.

Chapter 34

Kelly had induced labor when she had Claire. The labor was horrendous and she hated everyone in the room, including Edward, who was urging her to push. Finally, after several big painful pushes, Kelly gave birth to her large, ten-pound second child.

Chapter 35

March 2005

Kelly began her radiation treatments. She hated the waiting room where everyone talked about their tumors, chances of recurrence and friends or family members who had died from undetected tumors. One time when Kelly was being prepared for her treatment, the technician noticed that her skin was burned. He reminded her to use aloe. Several pictures were taken during each visit. The techs had to be careful because Kelly's heart was so close to the target area. Later, Edward reminded her that she had just three weeks more of radiation and the whole cancer ordeal would be behind them.

Kelly wished that it was over for George. He would be checked soon to see how effective the treatments were. For a man of seventy-five, he was holding up very well and was maintaining his usual positive attitude. In a get-together with friends, Kelly became resentful when two of the very athletic men at the gathering claimed you could make your body do whatever you wanted to by staying active and exercising. None of them had cancer, Kelly reminded them. Later Edward told her that the guys deserved the tongue-lashing. They needed a dose of reality.



Chapter 36

Five months after Claire was born, Kelly and Edward left the kids with Mary and George and stayed a few nights in a New England bed and breakfast and a night in New Haven where Yale, Edward's alma mater, was located. Kelly picked a fight with Edward about his calling home to his parents so often. In the end, she admitted to herself that she was jealous of the way his parents always supported whatever he did and didn't interfere in his life.



Chapters 37 through 39 and Epilogue

Chapters 37 through 39 and Epilogue Summary and Analysis

Chapter 37

April 2005

Just before her last radiation session, the nutritionist advised Kelly about what the optimum diet for her was. The diet needed to be heavy in legumes, whole grains, bioflavonoids (dark green vegetables) and antioxidants. The nutritionist also told her to hold down her consumption of alcohol. In fact, she should not have more than two glasses of wine a week. An organic dairy diet was also important for estrogen-sensitive cancers like Kelly had. That evening she talked to George who had only two more treatments to go. Kelly, Edward and the girls celebrated with a party that night.

Chapter 38

Kelly worked with a real estate agent and found a large four-bedroom house in the Piedmont school district, one of the best. It was very expensive because it was near San Francisco and it needed a lot of work. It had a full lower floor with a bathroom where her parents could stay. She sent photos to her parents who both encouraged her to buy it.

Chapter 39

April 2005

While on a visit to Philadelphia, Kelly went to the treatment center and met George's technicians. They were all crazy about him and greeted Kelly very warmly. She noticed that the dishes and towels and bathroom accessories in her parents' home were getting old and worn. She stopped by a kitchen and bath shop and bought bagfuls of new things for her parents. Mary was less than thrilled with the new items. She liked her old ones. Kelly and George attended the funeral of GT's friend's father. He died of cancer. At the funeral, Kelly felt a panic attack coming on. She was able to maintain control but what had brought it on was that she was imagining that she was attending her own father's funeral.

Epilogue

By August 2005, all signs of George's cancer were gone. Kelly and George appeared on the Today Show in 2006 as a father/daughter cancer survival story. In 2007, blood appeared again in his urine and he began undergoing treatment and was doing well.



Characters

Kelly Corrigan

Kelly is a thirty-seven-year-old wife and mother who lives in the suburbs outside Oakland. One afternoon while she's bathing with her two young daughters, Georgia and Claire, Kelly discovers a lump on one of her breasts. It frightens her because she knows that a tumor that is hard and rigid is not a good sign. She stays calm for her daughters but later rushes to a friend who is a physician who confirms that the tumor is highly suspect. Kelly goes through a series of mammograms and a biopsy to learn that she, indeed, does have cancer.

Kelly naturally is terrified. She thinks of dying young, leaving her husband and children behind and the devastation that her disease and potential death would cause her parents. She withheld the news from her parents as long as she could but when she had to begin treatment, she had to tell them. Her parents, George and Mary, lived across country from Kelly but she was very close to them, especially her father.

While Kelly was in the throes of her ordeal, she learns that her beloved father had been diagnosed with bladder cancer. With the support of her husband, Edward, her parents and her brothers and friends, Kelly makes it through and is eventually declared to be cancer-free. Despite her own battle with health, Kelly was militant about her father's condition and made sure he was getting the appropriate treatment for his cancer.

George Corrigan

George Corrigan is Kelly Corrigan's father. Kelly was the youngest child of her parents and George doted on Kelly from the beginning. George was a very positive person and tried to instill in his children the importance of always looking on the bright side. But no one could compare to George when it came to being a Pollyanna. The glass was always half-full for George no matter what problems he faced.

George was an advertising executive and was good at his job and enjoyed it. But nothing pleased him more than coaching kids' sports teams. He loved working with kids and was the most popular coach in his community. Kelly joined a diving team and was supported by her entire family. George never missed a meet or a practice.

When George learned that his beloved daughter had breast cancer, he immediately flew out from Philadelphia to Oakland to support her and give her his famous pep talk. When a short time later, he learned that he had bladder cancer, he didn't slow down until the chemotherapy caused so much fatigue for the seventy-five-year-old that he finally had to take it easy.

George and Kelly were so close that the love they had for each other no doubt saw them both through in their toughest hours.



Edward Lichty

Edward Lichty is Kelly Corrigan's husband. Edward was a great support to Kelly during her illness. He was positive throughout that she would make it through.

Mary Corrigan

Mary Corrigan is Kelly Corrigan's mother. While Kelly's father, George, was the fun parent, Mary was the chief worrier and strict disciplinarian of the family.

Georgia and Claire Corrigan

Georgia and Claire Corrigan are Kelly and Edward's two daughters. When Kelly was struck with cancer, Georgia was three and Kelly was one.

Booker Corrigan

Booker Corrigan is Kelly's eldest brother. He saved enough money cutting grass one summer to buy a boa constrictor that terrified Kelly. Fearing that the snake would escape, she closed the snake's tank so tightly, that it died from lack of air.

GT Corrigan

GT Corrigan is Kelly's brother, the middle child between Booker and Kelly. He was so impressed with Australia that Kelly was inspired to go on an extended vacation there after she graduated from college.

Dr. Mark Schoenberg

Dr. Mr. Schoenberg of Johns Hopkins Hospital was the nation's foremost oncologist in bladder cancer. After Kelly's father was diagnosed with the disease, Kelly researched the Internet and bullied her father into seeking treatment from him.

Dr. Emily Birenbaum

When Kelly first discovered her tumor, she headed for her friend's house, Dr. Emily Birenbaum, who checked the mass and confirmed that it was worrisome because of its size and hardness.

Dr. Laura Esserman

Dr. Laura Esserman was Kelly's surgeon when she underwent a lumpectomy. After the surgery, she gave Kelly the good news that there were no cancer cells in the lump or in her lymph nodes.



Objects/Places

Oakland, California

Kelly Corrigan and her husband, Edward Lichty, and their young daughters, Georgia and Claire, lived in a large, four-bedroom house in Oakland, CA.

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Kelly Corrigan was born and raised in a suburb of Philadelphia, PA. She lived there with her parents and two brothers.

Australia

After graduating from college, Kelly and a friend traveled to Australia for a few months of adventure. Kelly was hired as a nanny for two children who had lost their mother to cancer.

New Haven, CT

Kelly's husband, Edward, went to Yale in New Haven, CT. Years later, Kelly and Edward visited the campus on a brief vacation without their children.

Imagining Machine

Kelly had to undergo mammography at an imaging center to determine the size and shape of the lump she discovered in her breast.

Chemotherapy

To "kill" the cancer in her tumor, Kelly had to undergo four devastating chemotherapy sessions which left her fatigued, nauseated, and depressed.

Radiation

After a successful lumpectomy, Kelly was still required to undergo ten weeks of radiation treatments that sometimes burned her skin.



LaCrosse

Kelly Corrigan's father, George, was the coach for many kids' sports teams. He especially liked coaching the kid's lacrosse team.

Diving Team

Kelly was on her high school's diving team. Her father, George, went to every meet and practice and coached her on her diving techniques.

New York City

When Kelly and Edward became engaged, he arranged a surprise party in New York City that was attended by her parents and brothers.



Themes

Facing and Coping with Serious Illness

After reading "The Middle Place," it is obvious that the first thought that a person who is diagnosed with a deadly disease is about oneself. Although the person has others in his or her life—in Kelly's case a husband, two children and her parents—it is human nature to contemplate the staggering possibility of the end to one's life. Like Kelly, most young mothers would soon think of the children but it is natural that the initial fear focuses on self. But soon reality hits and while Kelly may have felt like going in a corner and getting into a fetal position, she had two babies that needed her. She could not go crawl under the covers and feel sorry for herself. Her life was threatened and her very existence was at risk but life went on for her daughters who had no idea what cancer was and why mother was suddenly distracted and not as available.

Kelly learned her courage from her father and his pep talks—even though they were from across the country—helped to buoy her spirit and prod her onward. George, her father, never saw a crisis that could get him down, assured Kelly she'd make it through. The close and loving relationship between father and daughter demonstrated how the support of others can help get a person face and get through even the most dire of situations.

Caring for Children During Illness

When Kelly Corrigan discovered that she had a suspicious lump in her breast, her first thoughts were about her daughters. Kelly did not have a child until her mid-thirties. Once she had her children, they were the most important things in her life. When she was diagnosed with a potentially deadly disease, she was consumed with worry for those children.

Just like many young mothers who are faced with the possibility that they will leave their children mother-less for whatever reason, Kelly was consumed with the welfare of her children. Going through the rigors of chemotherapy, surgery, and radiation, parents like Kelly—especially mothers—harbor guilt about not being there for her children. Children, especially the very young ones like Kelly's daughters, do not understand why their mother who had always been there for them is suddenly bed-ridden and too tired or sick to cater to their every needs. Children struggle with their own guilt and uncertainty, perhaps worrying that they did something to make their mother mad.

Like many young mothers in her situation, Kelly had to make the best of what fate had handed her. A young mother who is sick cannot be too proud to ask for support. Kelly was lucky that her husband, parents and friends were able to pick up some of the slack when Kelly was just unable to fulfill her role as mother. Kelly was also innovative in dealing with her children and her devastating disease. When she knew she was going



to lose her hair, she had a friend shave her head in front of her daughters so they wouldn't be shocked when their mother was suddenly bald.

Kelly proved that a young mother who is sick is no less a mother. She just needs support and a little creativity to get her through.

Coping with Serious Illness of Loved One

Kelly Corrigan was seriously ill herself but it didn't deter her from devoting herself to helping her father, George, when he was diagnosed with bladder cancer. By focusing on her father's disease, Kelly was able to feel she could have a positive impact on a person she loved. She had spent many months wrapped up in her personal problems and depressed about whether she would survive. She had felt so powerless and useless while she laid in bed most days unable to function due to nausea, fatigue and depression.

As soon as Kelly learned that George had bladder cancer, she got right on the Internet to learn as much as she could about the disease. Kelly began to feel stronger, vital and necessary when she became a champion for her father's recovery. He had also been there for her and now it was her time to be there for him. Perhaps it was the irony involved in both Kelly and George—who shared the family's closest relationship—being stricken with cancer at the same time, that really hit home with Kelly. George buoyed Kelly's spirit because of his naturally positive nature and Kelly forced him into the best treatment because of her militant and tenacious nature.

Kelly learned that the country's foremost oncologist who specialized in bladder cancer was right in her father's backyard. Kelly's parents lived in Philadelphia and Dr. Schoenberg practiced at the renowned Johns Hopkins Hospital in nearby Maryland. Through Kelly's unwavering determination, George got to the best doctor and got the best treatment. Perhaps her victory in helping her father renewed her own spirit and help her to defeat her own cancer.



Style

Perspective

"The Middle Place," by Kelly Corrigan, is written in the first person. It is the story of the author's struggle with cancer - her own and that of her dear father, George. No one could better tell this story of dual survival than Kelly herself. Just as any person who goes through the long ordeal of dealing with a deadly disease, Kelly became somewhat of an expert about the rigors of coping with the harsh treatments that are necessary to battle this cruel opponent. She explains in details her chemotherapy, surgery, and radiation treatments and the side-effects that accompany them. No one would understand the suffering better than the person who endured these devastating but necessary steps to recovery.

Kelly also tells the story of her childhood and growing up in Philadelphia. She paints the picture of the strong relationship she had through the years with her father. It was ironic that the two people with the closest relationship in their nuclear family faced the same demon at the same time. The emotions, doubts, and concerns that Kelly experienced as a cancer patient and as the daughter of a cancer patient could only come from her own thoughts and heart.

Kelly is filled with angst that she will leave her two toddlers motherless if she does not survive and this heartfelt description provides the reader with an inside view of how a devastating disease reaches its tentacles out and impacts the entire family. Kelly and her father appeared on the Today Show after her book was published in a feature about a father and daughter survival team.

Tone

"The Middle Place," by Kelly Corrigan, is the author's story about her struggles with cancer—her own and that of her beloved father who both faced the disease at the same time. The book is structured in a unique way in that a chapter about her cancer ordeal is followed by a chapter that flashes back to her childhood and growing up years with her family and experiences before she married. It is not surprising that the chapters that focus on her cancer and that of her father's are more sober and serious in tone than are the more carefree chapters that tell the story of Kelly's life before being struck with a deadly disease.

However, even in those sections that focus on the struggles of Kelly and George, her father, in fighting cancer and surviving it, Kelly's great sense of humor shines through. Kelly encounters an old friend who is overly chatty. While she answers all the woman's questions about husband and kids, she tells the reader that she cannot get a word in edgewise with her long-winded friend but in the end she is glad that she didn't have to



go into all the awful details. She laughed to herself thinking how surprised the woman would be one day to learn how ill Kelly was when she spoke to her.

By alternating the cancer ordeal with the relatively happy tales from her life before the disease, Kelly is able to lighten the story and provide a break for the reader from the heaviness of Kelly's life and death struggles.

Structure

"The Middle Place," by Kelly Corrigan, is separated into two main sections. Part One contains Chapters One through Nineteen and focuses on Kelly's discovery of a lump on her breast and the initial treatment she undergoes to cure her of cancer. Part Two contains Chapters Twenty through Thirty-Nine and covers Kelly's continued treatment and recovery but also focuses on her father's cancer diagnosis and his treatment and recovery and Kelly's determination to find the best doctor and treatment for him.

The structure of the book is unique. The story begins with Kelly finding the cancerous lump in her breast. The next chapter flashes back to her childhood and life with her parents and brothers and growing up in Philadelphia. The entire book follows this pattern with each "current day" chapter being followed by a chapter about Kelly's previous life. Each of the two threads are told in chronological order so that their stories parallel each other and conclude with the last chapter in which the past catches up with the present.

An epilogue follows the last chapter that indicates that Kelly is still free from cancer several years after the book was written and that her father had a recurrence of his cancer but that he was responding well to treatment.



Quotes

"I start moving at a manic pace, directing the girls in that weird, strained way mothers do in movies when they find out a bomb is about to go off in their basement." (Chapter 1, p. 11).

"He says the mass is quite large, perhaps seven centimeters, and looks like explosion." (Chapter 2, p. 24).

"I thought if you died and someday I had to find another wife. . . I would be so mad at her because she wouldn't be. . .you." (Chapter 3, p. 28).

"Married people are often alone and together at the same time." (Chapter 5, p. 35).

"The bravest thing I ever did was kill a snake. It was an accident, but it still counts." (Chapter 6, p. 38).

"I step out of the running shower to hug him, and to be hugged, and to wail. After a minute, I pull back and hold his shoulders, like a dying matriarch who only has a few words left and must get through." (Chapter 13, p. 83).

"Married people are often alone and together at the same time." (Chapter 5, p. 35).

"The bravest thing I ever did was kill a snake. It was an accident, but it still counts." (Chapter 6, p. 38).

"I step out of the running shower to hug him, and to be hugged, and to wail. After a minute, I pull back and hold his shoulders, like a dying matriarch who only has a few words left and must get through." (Chapter 13, p. 83).

"While you boys are file in settle down, souls are burning in hell." (Chapter 31, p. 203).

"Would you say 'you do have nine beautiful fingers' to a man who lost his thumb? Unless you have eight fingers, I'd say you should keep your glass-half-full crap to yourself." (Chapter 33, p. 218).

"My therapy-loving friend once told me if something really bugs you about someone else, it's probably the very thing you most despise about yourself." (Chapter 36, p. 238).

Topics for Discussion

What kind of relationship did Kelly have with her father, George? What was her relationship with her mother?

How did Kelly deal with her children during her cancer ordeal? What impacts did their mother's sickness have on her daughters?

What type of childhood did Kelly have? Why did her descriptions of her youth add dimension to her story?

Why did Kelly try to pick a fight with her husband about the frequent calls he made to his parents? Why was her criticism of him unfair?

At least half of Kelly's story is about her parents and her relationship with them. How often does she include stories about Edward's parents and family? What does that indicate?

How many children did Kelly want to have? How did her disease impact that goal? Why was she angry with the doctor who warned her against having more children?

Even though she was closer to her father, Kelly was more like her mother. In what ways was she like her mother? What did she admire so much about her father?