

# **Play It as It Lays Study Guide**

## **Play It as It Lays by Joan Didion**

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# Plot Summary

Maria Wyeth grew up in the Las Vegas desert with a gambling father and mother. She didn't know what she would end up doing in life, but she knew she wasn't going to live in the desert forever.

She eventually ends up in Beverly Hills, married to a filmmaker, Carter. Maria stars in his first two films as the lead actress and so begins their Hollywood life. They have a daughter, Kate, who is in a mental institution. They rarely get a chance to visit her, and when they do, the visits are dramatic and emotional.

This life is a gamble, just as Maria's father said it would be: the parties and fame and fortune and drugs and alcohol eventually drive a wedge between Maria and Carter.

Carter's first two films, the ones that Maria acted in, have made him a huge success and a much sought-after film director. Maria is proud to have been part of those early films, but quickly becomes jealous of her husband's newfound fame and all those who are clamoring for his attention. His new fame means many film offers for him and he is frequently on location, far away from Maria.

In her husband's absence, Maria misses the attention she received as an actress and begins going to parties and drinking too much. She begins having an affair with Les Goodwin, a family friend. She calls her agent for more acting work. Upon getting the work, she decides she'd rather not do it. Then she changes her mind and says yes—any work is better than idly sitting around, drinking way too much at parties and sleeping in late.

While Carter is still on location, Maria accidentally becomes pregnant while sleeping with Les Goodwin. For several weeks Maria notices the signs in her body, but refuses to acknowledge what has happened. She tells herself she is imagining it and will not admit she is pregnant. When Carter comes home from being on location for a few days, Maria finally gets up the courage to tell him. Carter gives her the name of a doctor who can perform a discreet, safe abortion. Maria tries to get out of it several times and begins fantasizing about what her life would be like if she could keep the baby. But Carter stays on her and she eventually finds herself in a house in Encino, where the abortion is performed.

The abortion is the beginning of Maria's final unraveling. Her inability to see her daughter Kate for longer periods of time, her inability to get work as a leading film actress, her husband's constant absence and being forced to give up a baby she secretly wanted to keep all reduce Maria to a shadow of her former self. Maria and Carter eventually divorce, and her only contact with him is via BZ who updates Maria on Carter's whereabouts, on what film he's shooting and when, and who he's dating and why.



Alone and in despair, Maria slowly loses control by taking more drugs, drinking heavily, and refusing to leave her house for days at a time. When BZ and Helene try to help her, try to get her to clean herself up and focus on getting better, Maria pushes them away too.

These events, coupled with the pseudo-glossy veneer of Hollywood, cause Maria to lose her sense of identity. She drifts among the characters that populate Los Angeles and the desert just outside Las Vegas and wonders if she'll be dealt a winning hand or if the darker side of Hollywood will destroy her.

When Maria makes her way to the desert for Carter's most recent film and finds that Carter is having an affair with Helene, BZ's wife, all bets are off.



# Chapters 1 - 3

## Chapters 1 - 3 Summary

Maria is in a hospital and is being asked a list of routine questions about who she is and why she is there. Maria sits in her hospital room, thinking back on the earlier years of her life, musing about how dangerous snakes can be and how Darwinian it is that a coral snake needs neurotoxic poison to survive but that a very similarly marked king snake needs none. This unfairness, she fears, will prevail throughout her life.

Maria grew up in Silver Wells, Nevada, which at the time had a population of twenty-eight, but now has a population of zero because it is in the middle of a missile range. Maria was born in Reno, Nevada but moved to Silver Wells after her father lost their home in Reno gambling. He either won the town of Silver Wells in a bet or inherited it. Through a series of gambling turns, her father won and lost many things in Silver Wells, including a cattle ranch, a ski resort, and a motel. While those things came and went, what existed at Silver Wells was very real—while it lasted. At Silver Wells they had three hundred acres of mesquite, a zinc mine, a trinket shop, a midget golf course, a reptile museum, and a restaurant with a few slots and craps tables.

Paulette, who used to work at the restaurant, had an affair with Maria's father, and sometimes let Maria play "cashier". When the highway that would make him rich never ended up getting built, Maria's father lost all his money and her mother got sick. Her father's business partner, Benny Austin, moved to Las Vegas to recoup his losses.

Years later, Maria runs into Benny Austin and finds that he thinks fondly of the heady times of building up Silver Wells. When Benny orders a round of Cuba Libres from the bar for himself and Maria, Maria excuses herself from to the restroom and never returns. She gave him the slip because she didn't want Benny to see what kind of man she was with—a high roller who was playing baccarat with hundred dollar bills, but she suspects the real reason is because she didn't want to think about Silver Wells as it was.

After graduating high school at nineteen, Maria goes to New York to take acting lessons, and quickly gets work as a model for agencies and magazines. On the night of her mother's death, Maria was with a drunk rich boy at a bar. Maria learns of her mother's death from a letter from her father. Midway through the letter, she learns that her mother drove her car off the highway and was eaten by coyotes. After reading the letter, Maria stopped working for a month.

After a month off, Maria resumes working, but has problems. Shortly thereafter, she married Carter and then lost track of her life and time. As she waits in the hospital, she tries to focus on the here and now, rather than all the places she's lived and all the things she did or didn't do.



Helene drives an entire morning to visit Maria in the hospital. In the hope of seeing Maria, Helene brings a New York Times article about Maria's ex-husband, Carter and a letter from Ivan Costello, an old boyfriend of Maria's. Maria will not speak to Helene and will not even see her.

As Helen waits to see Maria, she imagines her lying by the pool in the same bikini Maria wore the summer she killed BZ. Maria never puts on weight, the sure sign of a selfish woman. Helene doesn't blame Maria for what happened, but Maria's actions have caused Helene to suffer and resulted in Helene's loss of BZ and near loss of Carter. Maria a selfish girl who has never been able to deal with the career success of her ex-husband, Carter.

Carter, Maria's ex-husband, remembers a few scenes from his time with Maria. In the first scene, they are at a dinner party and he says to the dinner guests that he likes to go to the Wilshire or the Beverly Hills hotel to eat breakfast alone while reading the papers. Maria interrupts his story and says that he doesn't always go out for breakfast alone—the last time was on "April 17th". The dinner guests are uncomfortable with her comment and looks away from her, but BZ stares directly at her. Maria begins to cry at the dinner table.

Carter also remembers when Maria is outside playing on the lawn with their daughter Kate when she was a baby. Maria is tossing drops of water into the air from a plastic hose and letting them fall on the baby. Carter stands on the terrace watching, and tells Maria to be careful that the baby doesn't catch a chill. As soon as he says this, Maria gets up, drops the hose, walks away from the baby, leaving her alone on the lawn. She then looks at the baby and says "Your father wants to talk with you". Carter reflects that after BZ's death he replays instances and scenes like these over and over in his head, trying to find a pattern, some sense in all of it. He finds none.

## Chapters 1 - 3 Analysis

Maria is taking stock of her life in the opening chapter. As she waits for her daughter in the hospital, she thinks back on her life and muses about where she might have gone wrong, where her parents might have failed her. She wonders what chances she missed along the way, what opportunities she didn't take that perhaps she should have taken. In particular, Maria doesn't want to think about her life in Silver Wells as it was when her father was dreaming big and thought it would eventually be a true destination. His dream crumbled, all his money was lost. Years later, it is clear this has had a profound effect on Maria. This dramatic loss of fortune after a childhood of so many wins and losses overwhelms her when she thinks of it. This loss, coupled with the loss of her mother loss and her eventual father's death, seem to set Maria adrift in New York.

Maria has difficulty living in the now, focusing on what is happening in the present; however, as much as she thinks about her past, it is also painful. Maria admits to losing track of time, to losing whole years and not being sure quite what she did with her time or her life. There is also the possibility that Maria is not in full control of her mental



capabilities. Now, as she waits in the hospital for word of what is wrong with her daughter, the big questions in life have come very clearly into focus and she must deal with them, with all of the choices she's made up until this moment. She has no choice.

Helene is bitter at her loss of BZ and she believes that Maria is responsible. She makes the long drive to visit Maria in the hospital, hoping to talk with her. Helene brings with her several things that Maria had "at the beach"—a clear reference to a time when the women were much closer. Yet, it is unclear what she hopes to talk about, given how bitter Helene is about Maria and how selfish she thinks Maria is. Helene feels the loss of BZ deeply and views Maria as a selfish woman who only puts herself first. Helene makes it very clear that her visit isn't for Maria's sake, which further indicates she was hoping to talk with Maria about something specific . . . something that Helene is interested in learning or understanding. As Maria refuses to talk with Helene because she is "resting" by the pool, Helene's anger flares and she begins to think about all the suffering Maria has caused her.

Carter uses the two scenes in this chapter to demonstrate the mental deficiencies of Maria. He uses two chilling examples to show her bizarre behavior and strange reactions to people and situations. Carter is mining these experiences for reasons why Maria would have killed BZ, trying to make sense of it all. Could these earlier scenes have predicted what she would do in the future? Was there some pattern to her madness that he just couldn't see? Maria's unfriendliness and weird, erratic behavior has led her to kill BZ. Carter's attempt to make sense of it signifies a deep need to understand why she did what she did and, possibly, if he would have done something to prevent it. These examples offer up the first concrete signs that Maria suffers from some degree of mental illness or instability.

When viewed together, these first three chapters provide an insight into these character's minds, their specific points of view. All subsequent chapters of the book are told in the third person. These first chapters, then, offer the only glimpse directly into the thoughts of the main characters of the novel.



# Chapters 4 - 11

## Chapters 4 - 11 Summary

In the first month after Carter, Maria's ex-husband, leaves her, she takes to driving her Corvette along the freeways in Southern California, hurrying to be on the freeways by ten o'clock in the morning. She is afraid to be caught on surface streets or freeway entrances at that time, because she fears she could lose the entire rhythm of her day if she is not on the freeway every morning by 10 am.

She spends the entire first month driving the freeways—from San Diego to Hollywood, to Santa Monica, Santa Ana, Pasadena and Ventura, and back. Every day she becomes more attuned to the road and often returns to her Beverly Hills home at night and dreams of the freeway signs in her sleep. Sometimes the freeway ends, dropping off into a scrap yard or an abandoned lot.

Maria eats only hard-boiled eggs and drinks Coca-Cola at the gas stations along the way. When she is tired of being alone for such long stretches of time, she strikes up conversations with the gas station attendants about tire air pressure, oil filters, and directions.

During this first month without Carter, Maria starts sleeping outside on a chaise lounge by the pool, using beach towels to cover her up. She tries to convince herself that sleeping outside is something she has to do—even if only temporarily—because it is so hot inside the house and the Los Angeles fires are still burning. She also convinces herself that she has to sleep outside because inside the house there is no one to wake her up in the mornings and she worries she will oversleep and not get up in time to get on the freeway. If she slept outside, she reasoned, she would wake easily on her own each morning. Knowing she would easily wake made sleeping much easier, and she feels she needs ample sleep to drive the freeways all day.

Maria puts seven thousand miles on her Corvette. Sometimes, at night, dread overtakes her and she thinks about Carter and Les Goodwin in New York, about BZ and Helene in the desert, and wonders about the things she could not change. The freeway driving is the only time she doesn't think about the things she had done and the dread she feels.

Maria frequently reminisces about two of Carter's films that she was in. The first film, Maria, is seventy-four minutes of footage that Carter shot of Maria as she lived in New York. Once they moved to Beverly Hills, he cut and edited the film together and it became one long film of Maria going about her daily life. It won a prize at a film festival and many film students and film makers wanted to cast her in big budget films after that, but Maria was never interested. This first film is difficult for Maria to watch and she doesn't understand why other people like to watch it either. She is uncomfortable that BZ plays the film over and over for Helene.





In the second film, *Angel Beach*, Maria plays a girl who was raped by the members of a motorcycle gang. Carter managed to make the film for \$340,000 and the film grossed eight million dollars. Carter became a huge success. Maria prefers this film as she doesn't recognize the person on the screen as herself. The person she sees on screen seems to "have a definite knack for controlling her own destiny". The first film, however, reminds Maria of a woman who doesn't have "a knack for anything"—something Maria doesn't want to admit about herself.

Maria visits Freddy Chaiken, her film agent, unannounced, but he is unavailable. Maria worries that even the receptionist can sense her desperation. In the elevator, she meets an actor and his agent. The actor, realizing Maria is Carter Lang's wife, makes a pass at her.

Maria lays on Kate's empty bed at home. BZ, the producer on Carter's latest film, is at Maria's house. Maria talks to BZ about his wife, about parties, about films, about who is in town and for what. BZ doesn't mention Carter. Maria finally asks, just as BZ gets up to leave, if her husband is having an affair with someone on the set. BZ tells her to leave her husband alone and give him room to finish the picture. BZ tells Maria to stop being so suspicious, especially because Carter wanted Maria to be in the film and she said no.

Maria doesn't believe him, but lets him go anyway. As BZ goes to leave, he runs his fingers along Maria's bare back and asks her if she's going to the party next door. She says no. Later that week, she is annoyed to read that BZ went to that party with a client and a famous starlet.

Freddy Chaikin, Maria's agent, calls her back. The last time he got her work she walked off the set and never worked again. He offers to hook her up with Martin Landau, and says he'll show Martin Landau some of her film work before he sets up the meeting. Maria is upset; she is so good Landau shouldn't need to see her film work. Freddy tells Maria that if Carter "were around", he'd tell her to do it. Maria says Carter "is around". Freddy says he's sorry, all he meant by "not around" is that Carter is in location.

Maria drives as far as Baker, close to where Carter is filming. She imagines him in his hotel room, having drinks with BZ and Helene. Maria stares at a gas station pay phone and imagines the conversation she would have with Carter if she got up the courage to call him. She knows it would end badly, that they would argue again and that he would blame her for making him feel bad. She imagines that he might even tell her to kill herself, which he has done before.

Maria decides not to call him. She takes two Fiorinal tablets with her Coke and waits for the drug to take over so she can stop thinking about her husband. BZ calls Maria and invites her to a party. She doesn't want to go, but decides to after BZ mentions her husband, Carter, is coming back into town for a week because there was a fire on the set.



Maria feels forced to smile and purse her lips throughout the party, and she doesn't like anyone she meets. Larry Kulik and BZ admire a young girl in a white halter dress and hatch a plan to seduce her. BZ suggests that Maria had an affair with Les Goodwin. She gets defensive, but does not deny it. When Les Goodwin calls her the next day, she starts to cry and thinks of how happy he made her. BZ calls Maria to tell him how it went with the girl in the white dress after he left the party. Maria asks him if he ever tires of doing favors for people. BZ says "you don't know how tired".

## Chapters 4 - 11 Analysis

When Carter leaves Maria, she loses all sense of direction, time, and space. She doesn't know what to do with herself, and to keep from going mad she drives the freeways. It provides a sense of order and control in her life that she desperately needs, especially with everything else in her life spinning out of control. Maria's intense focus on the details—from only eating eggs to only drinking Coke—and her desire to be as efficient as possible with her time indicates a need for extreme control of the small things in life, as the big things are now beyond her control. By choosing to sleep outside near the pool, instead of inside the home she shared with her ex-husband Carter, Maria demonstrates that she is unable to face what has happened. She is unable to deal with the fact that her husband left her. By using the beach towels, she keeps telling herself that her sleeping by the pool is only temporary. She knows how close she is to going over the edge and becoming something "unnameable".

While it is still unclear exactly why Carter left her, it seems likely that Maria had a hand in BZ's death. She alludes to this later in Chapter 4. Perhaps this is why Carter left her. Maria feels the weight of what she's done and it weighs heavily upon her. The only time she doesn't think about what she's done is when she's driving.

Maria is both comfortable and uncomfortable with her role in the two films and the recognition she has received from them. She prefers the second film, in which the character she plays has control over her life—a clear indication that Maria wishes to have more control over her own life. Her frustration at Carter for filming her in New York and then making the first film, *Maria*, based on this early footage highlights potential areas for disagreement early on in her relationship with Carter. It may signal the beginning of the end. Maria rightly wonders why BZ and Helene watch footage of her over and over. This odd behavior on their part and her concern about it lay the groundwork for a potential confrontation with BZ that may be what leads to his death at Maria's hands.

Maria knows she is desperate by showing up at her agent's office without an appointment. She knows that desperation is the kiss of death in the film business and she tries to act casual and nonchalant about her visit, but then ends up leaving without talking to him. It is not clear in this chapter why Maria visits Freddy's office. It is odd that when she learns of her husband's success, she isn't happy for him—or even upset—but focuses on the actor in the elevator and how funny it might be to call and tell Les



Goodwin about it. As soon as she realizes she can no longer call Les Goodwin, it is apparent that something went terribly wrong between them.

Maria doesn't trust her husband while he is away shooting his film on location. She hopes that by having the producer over to her house she'll be able to get some information about how her husband is doing and if he is having an affair. She is certain he's having an affair because BZ won't tell her anything, other than to ask her let Carter finish the film. Maria is shrewd, she knows how this business works and she's irritated with BZ for not giving her the proof she wants.

Maria wants to work again, but clearly feels she is so talented she shouldn't have to audition or have her film work reviewed by anyone. When Freddie reminds her that she blew up and walked off the set of her last film, it is clear that whatever she learned about her daughter Kate a year ago upset her so much she quit the film. Maria remains highly sensitive to any indication that her husband is cheating on her while on location.

Maria drives to Baker without realizing that she's driven straight to Carter. He has left her, she knows this, but she can't help herself. She imagines that he might be happy to see her, but after remembering their last few fights, she realizes that he would not be happy she came to see him. As she sits staring at the pay phone, it becomes clear that Maria is deeply conflicted. She wants to be with her husband but knows that they will only end up fighting. She knows they are not good for each other. By taking drugs, she is sliding deeper into despair.

Maria is lonely and goes to a party she doesn't want to attend just so she won't be alone. She is trying very hard to maintain appearances as the "director's wife" even though she and Carter have split. Her affair with Les Goodwin, however, sheds light on why Maria and Carter may have split. Maria can't stand BZ, yet she continues to talk with him because he's her only link to her husband.



# Chapters 12 - 28

## Chapters 12 - 28 Summary

Carter returns to their house in Beverly Hills. Maria asks if they are separated or not. He says they are but he is willing to give the relationship another go if she is. She says yes. Then she says no. She starts getting ready to get see their daughter Kate. When Carter asks her how many times she has been to visit Kate she lies, saying only a few times in the past few weeks. Carter knows she's been there too many times. Maria's unscheduled parental visits disturb Kate's development. Maria is about to cry and Carter tells her not to. She doesn't.

Maria and Carter are outside at BZ and Helene's house. Maria tries hard to ignore the banter of BZ and Helene's guests, who she finds irritating and full of themselves. Maria realizes that she hasn't menstruated in five weeks, and wonders if she is pregnant.

On the way home, Maria admits to Carter that she thinks she pregnant and she's fairly certain it isn't his. Carter asks whose it is and Maria says "you know". Carter walks out on Maria, wondering aloud what he is supposed to do now that she is pregnant with someone else's child. He misses two important meetings and doesn't call to cancel the meetings. Maria thinks that she's finally done something to get Carter to notice her.

Carter calls Maria from his hotel back in the desert, giving her the number of a doctor for an abortion. When Maria says she might want to keep the child, Carter threatens her by saying he will take Kate. Maria hangs up but calls back, agreeing to have the abortion. She asks Carter to promise that if she goes through with it, he won't give her any trouble about her legal right to parent Kate in the future. Carter says "we'll see". Maria schedules the abortion.

As Maria watches Helene and Carlotta play solitaire, she thinks of her call to the doctor. He knew what she wanted when she called, he knew her name and he told her it would be expensive. On the set day, she was to bring a pad, a belt, and \$1,000. Maria wakes in the morning and begins crying because she misses her mother. She thinks again, as she often does, about the events surrounding her mother's car accident. Maria tries to guess at what she was doing in New York at the exact time her mother was lying in the desert, dying.

Carter calls her as she is crying. He asks if she's called the doctor. Maria tells Carter that the doctor will call her and when he does, she will meet him with a pad, a belt, and \$1,000. Maria hopes she can keep the baby and hopes she isn't pregnant. She starts sleeping in the house again, naked between white sheets. She hopes that sleeping in white sheets will encourage her body to start bleeding. She throws away her tampons, reasoning that without tampons, her period will surely start.



She buys a bassinette and tells the parking lot attendant she's having a baby. When she can't fit it in her car, she starts crying. Maria learns that she's had three phone calls from Les Goodwin, possible father of her child, and she doesn't call back. Maria finally receives a call from the abortion doctor with a date and time for the procedure. She will learn the location later.

Maria calls Les Goodwin in a fit of worry. His wife, Felicia, tells Maria that they'd been calling her for days. Maria plays dumb, as if she hasn't received their messages. Felicia puts Les on the phone, but Les can't hear Maria talking because she's in a phone booth and there's traffic outside. Maria asks Les to call her, then instantly regrets it.

Maria gets \$1,000 in cash from the bank. She thinks of Les Goodwin and is sad she isn't able to talk to him about this. She thinks about all the men she's had sex with and feels that her entire life is one big sex session, that they all run together and that she cannot remember the men or the sex as distinct experiences. Les Goodwin calls Maria and tells her he knows something is wrong, and that he's coming out alone on Monday at four o'clock and wants her to meet his plane. She tells him she can't but doesn't tell him why. Her abortion is scheduled for Monday night at five o'clock.

Maria has a dream in which she gives birth to the baby and is living happily with the baby, Kate, and Ivan Costello. Maria visits Kate at the hospital the day before the abortion. She yells at Kate's nurse about changing her medication and then Kate starts screaming. The nurse tells Maria that it would have been better if she had come to visit next week. Maria says she will be gone next week and can't visit. She then realizes that she has been afraid that she will die during the abortion.

She runs back into Kate's hospital three more times to kiss Kate goodbye and tell the nurses what kinds of noises she makes when she sleeps and how to tell if she's having a nightmare. Maria returns home and calls Carter about the abortion. He's already on set for the day and Maria decides this is a sign. She will go ahead with the abortion.

Maria nervously awaits the moment when she must meet the doctor for her abortion. The doctor calls to give her directions and tells her to meet him beneath the big red "T" of the Thriftimart. She drives carefully, through post-fire stillness, to be sure she doesn't miss the "T". The "doctor" met Maria and asked her to drive her car to the location where the abortion is to take place. The man is dressed in all white and Maria finds this odd.

They pull into the driveway of a tract house, with the floor covered in newspapers. There is a doctor with a doctor's table, but instead of stirrups, there are two chairs where she must place her feet. During the procedure, Maria tries to think of other times in her life—any other times—that will help keep her mind off the events taking place in the room. She examines the wallpaper and wonders what kind of woman chose that wallpaper and what kind of furniture had originally been in the room where she is now, being scraped by a doctor she does not know.



The TV is on loudly and the man in all white is sitting in the TV room watching a movie. Maria can hear the movie during the procedure. The volume is very loud and she suspects that is because women often scream from the pain. When it is over, the doctor tells her that he got all of it and points to the bucket where "it" is. He gives her medication and tells her she should get her period again in the next six weeks. When Maria leaves, she feels relieved and thinks the sunset is one of the prettiest she has ever seen.

## Chapters 12 - 28 Analysis

Maria is quickly deteriorating, and her constant visits to Kate are a way to provide some structure in a life that is becoming very unstructured and scary for Maria. Carter returning home forces Maria to face their relationship problems. Even though Maria hates BZ and Helene, her husband adores them and works with them, so she must tolerate them. As she sits in the sun, her irritation with the guests is evident. When Maria discovers she might be pregnant, it raises the question who would be the father. Carter? Les? Someone else?

Maria's convoluted plan to find a doctor she doesn't know and that doesn't know her just to have a test that she doesn't call to get the results of right away highlight her mindset and how manic she has become. Carter's description of her, that she feels if she ignores something it will just go away, is apt. It quickly becomes clear that Carter knew about her affair with Les all along.

Although not an ideal situation, Maria has finally done what she unknowingly set out to do all along—get Carter to notice her. Carter leaving and missing his important meetings shows how much this situation has affected him. He doesn't know what to do. The manipulation between Carter and Maria runs deep and is evident in the way he negotiates the abortion with her. He uses their daughter Kate as a blackmail tool. Maria is in denial about how far along her pregnancy is and how she is going to deal with the aftermath of the abortion.

Maria's guilt over her mother's death colors all of her actions, all of her thoughts. She knows she was out of touch with her mother and didn't know about the exact date or time of her mother's death for awhile, so she never knows exactly what she was doing in New York on the day her mother died. Her love for her mother—and her terrible guilt—is evident in her anecdote that she saved up enough money to send her mother on a trip around the world, but lent the money to a boyfriend instead. Then her mother was killed and she wasn't able to give her mother the trip she saved up for.

Maria is still struggling with the idea of the abortion and is short with Carter when he presses the issue. Maria is fluctuating wildly between hoping she isn't pregnant and hoping she can keep the baby. She doesn't know what she wants and every decision reduces her to tears. Her crumbling relationship with her husband and the impending pregnancy or abortion is forcing her to face up to the affair she had. Her mental stability



is deteriorating at this point and she seems unable to make a clear decision about how to move forward.

Maria's worry over the abortion arrangements—and who exactly it is Carter had her arrange them with—distracts her from the present moment. She isn't sure she's doing the right thing. Maria wants to speak with Les badly, to tell him about her pregnancy. Yet as soon as she reaches out to him, she regrets it. She seems unwilling to go through with the abortion, but unwilling to break up Les's marriage to Felicia by telling the truth. Maria loses her perspective on reality and is unable to remember her lovers distinctly. Instead, her sexual experiences all run together in her mind and in her memory, indicating that she refuses to own the consequences of her actions.

Maria cannot face the reality of her situation. She hangs up quickly and doesn't tell Les she's pregnant with his child, although before hanging up, she makes sure to tell him how happy he makes her. Her mind and her emotions are conflicted and she isn't sure what to do. Maria fantasizes, again, about having the baby. Her subconscious is trying to work through her difficult emotions and only in sleep is she able to find a place where she is happy, where her current problem is no longer a problem. Upon waking, she again avoids reality by ripping the phone out of the wall. If the phone isn't working, she can't be responsible to listen to the message on the other side.

Maria's guilt over the decisions she has made in her life is acute and affects every decision she makes—or ignores—in the present. Her belief that adultery results in terrible things happening to your children and her belief that a loveless marriage results in cancer demonstrates how severe her worldview has become. Maria believes in punishment for wrongdoings and she believes she's committed far too many wrongs to escape punishment. Her realization that she is afraid of dying during the abortion is both dramatic and honest, the first time Maria has plainly stated her fears and faced them.

Her willingness to go through with the abortion so that no one "can touch her again" speaks directly to her feelings of guilt at the life choices she has made. The calm, still, windless scene Maria drives through to get to Thriftmart reflects her interior state. Even though the area had been ravaged by fires, it is now calm, not even the palm trees are moving. This stillness, this "clarity", reflects the possible sense of correctness Maria feels with the decision she has made. Maria's admiration of the woman in Vogue, who seemed able to make decisions and stick to them, further highlights her desire to make a choice, stick with it, and feel good about it.

As the guy talks about his Camero, Maria realizes that she had not expected her abortion to be like this, with an odd man wearing all white and talking about a Camero. She is already so afraid, so concerned. She wants to be firm in her decision but it wasn't her decision, it was Carter's. She is also scared and doesn't know what to make of the scene. Maria follows through with the abortion, almost as if to become a woman who sticks by her decisions, perhaps for the first time in her life. The procedure isn't pleasant, but Maria focuses her mind on other things, a very different control and focus than in previous chapters where Maria can't stop her mind from wandering and from

losing control of her emotions. The seriousness of the situation forces Maria to get a hold of herself, and she does.





# Chapters 29 - 39

## Chapters 29 - 39 Summary

Maria meets Les Goodwin after her abortion. She asks for a very large steak and three martinis. Maria remembers her last visit to see her mother in Silver Wells. She flew in for the weekend and had Sunday dinner with her father, mother, and Benny. Maria asked Benny if everything was alright with her mother, and Benny said her mother was fine, just a little depressed. Maria studied her mother and tried to see if anything was wrong. When Maria flew back home that Sunday night, she watched her father, mother, and Benny wave at the wrong plane from the waiting area.

Carter calls Maria and tells her she should go visit Helene in Pebble Beach for the weekend. Maria tells her she can't. When Carter asks why, Maria says "She's not my mother". Maria begins bleeding, as the abortion doctor said she would. Maria goes to her regular doctor who tells her the abortion was done well and gives her some drugs to stop the bleeding.

Maria, however, doesn't think she's bleeding from menstruation and thinks it could be something else. She spends the night with a bottle of gin next to her bed and misses her mother. Maria has drinks with her agent Freddy and learns that Martin Landau liked her films and wants to offer her a two-part role on the show Interstate 80. Maria tries to sound happy, but instead tells Freddy that she doesn't feel well. Freddy is frustrated as he just spent all his time trying to get her work. He reminds her that not working doesn't pay the bills.

Maria decides to take the job on Interstate 80. Unfortunately, by her third day on set, Maria's bleeding gets so bad she is almost unable to work. She thinks of calling Les Goodwin, but does not. She calls Carter instead and he tells her to call the doctor. She doesn't want to call the doctor because she doesn't want to miss work. Instead, she takes medication and hopes it goes away.

The next morning, while on set, she finds a large piece of bloodied tissue on her pad and delivers it to her doctor's office. The doctor calls Maria to tell her it was part of the placenta and that should be the last of her bleeding. Maria returns home and sleeps soundly for the first night in two full weeks. She is an hour late for her on set call the next morning.

Larry Kulik tells Maria that people are talking about her. People are saying she is ready for the "nuthouse". Maria begins having nightmares about plumbers telling her they need access to her house to fix her pipes. The man dressed all in white who drove her to the abortion appears in her dreams, as does her agent. Maria tries to wake herself up from these dreams but cannot.



One day, an actual plumbing back-up takes place in Maria's Beverly Hills house. She finds an apartment in Hollywood on Fountain Avenue. Maria gets Kate for three days during the Christmas holiday and has dinner at Les Goodwin's house with his wife Felicia. In a fit, Kate smashes the doll Felicia gave her against a mirror and shatters both the doll and the mirror all over the floor. Maria stops talking to people, stops reading the newspaper. She is afraid of the stories she will read in the paper—the stories about children in danger and things ending badly.

Maria spends her time in her new apartment completely removed from the outside world. When Maria is waiting in line to use the pay phones at the grocery store because the phone in her new apartment isn't working, a mentally ill woman begins talking to Maria about how difficult it is to be mentally ill. Maria says she understands how difficult it can be to get through the day and tells the woman she should go see a doctor, that it will make her feel better. The woman says she has been to the doctor and no one understands.

As Maria watches the people using the phone, she notices a girl with a baby who is calling a taxi to pick her up from the grocery store. Maria wonders what could have happened that a girl with a baby needs a taxi. Maria is so caught up in this girl without a car that she ignores the mentally ill woman and upsets her. Carter doesn't understand why Maria is living in an apartment when she has a house in Beverly Hills. She tells him she's not "living" in the house, only "staying" in it.

Maria spends the day watching disaster on television. All this devastation makes Maria realize she is not only safe in her house, but that she is doing alright. She watches her performance in Interstate 80 and thinks she looks good. She falls asleep content.

The next morning, the shower drains slowly and Maria worries that the plumbing is about to get clogged. She packs up her things and heads back to the house in Beverly Hills, deciding that there will always be plumbing to deal with no matter where she goes.

## Chapters 29 - 39 Analysis

Immediately following her abortion, Maria manages to meet up with Les, but has obviously been traumatized. In an effort to forget what she's just been through, Maria orders several drinks and a large steak. For a woman who rarely eats and is overly conscious about her weight, her order indicates a strong desire to sabotage herself. Maria misses her mother and is trying remember, through re-creation, the last time she saw her mother. She is attempting to figure out what went wrong, how things got so off track. Maria is clearly missing her mother and is offended by any suggestion that other women in her life might take the place of her mother.

Maria is not convinced that the abortion was successful. It is unclear if she hopes it was or if she secretly wishes she is still pregnant. These emotional events make her long for her mother. Maria's up and down, chaotic mental state becomes a problem again. Just as she gets the thing she asked for, she is no longer interested in doing it. In the end,



Maria is more concerned with being wanted by someone in the industry, rather than actually working again. She wants to be desired, to be deemed an "it" girl that everyone wants to work with. If it can't be a big film, she isn't interested. It seems that a role on a television series insults her.

The break-up of her marriage to Carter has broken her down and she is now adrift, unsure what she wants any longer. Despite her reservations about taking the job, Maria has not only decided to work, she is adamant about keeping her job. Her fierce need to keep her job highlights the guilt she feels over losing a job a year earlier by walking out because she didn't feel well. Even though she feels terrible and is bleeding badly, she is determined to stay on set and finish her work.

There is a subtle shift going on here, where Maria is slowly beginning to make decisions and stand by those decisions. Maria is beginning to take control of her life. Despite facing her fears and keeping her word by working on set, it is difficult for Maria to hear that others think she isn't doing well. Maria has internalized the abortion and feels violated. Her dreams of people demanding to "fix her pipes" is a direct correlation to her own internal pipes, to her uterus, and her body. Her subconscious is wrestling with these feelings of others having control of her body, of others placing demands on her. She feels helpless and violated and is trying to work through these emotions.

Maria's decision to leave the house she once shared with Carter is a bold move and an attempt at changing her life. Yet in leaving the house so unexpectedly she is also fleeing from the problems it represents. The scene with Kate has a dramatic effect on Maria as she starts living in a silent fog after dropping Kate back off at the hospital.

The silliness of Maria's situation has become apparent. Even though she has a perfectly nice home in Beverly Hills that has a working phone, she is standing in line at a grocery store to use the pay phone to call the phone company to get service working in her new apartment. Maria is once again living in a fog, not making the smartest decisions or using her time wisely.

Ironically, the mentally ill woman who talks to Maria perfectly reflects Maria's own inner state. Maria knows how difficult it is to get through a day and her suggestion of going to a doctor to feel better is a telling one, as Maria has just been through a very difficult time with doctors.

The plumbing metaphor is fully realized in this chapter as Maria is finally able to come to terms with her abortion and what happened to her. Just as the pipes in her house—any house—may clog from time to time, she will have to deal with it. She can't keep moving into a different house each time there is a problem, just as she cannot escape her own body and mind when something happens she'd rather not face. Maria's happiness with her performance in Interstate 80 and her ability to be content even while watching disaster is a significant step in her progression to getting her life back in order.



# Chapters 40 - 60

## Chapters 40 - 60 Summary

When Carter returns to Beverly Hills in February after finishing his film, he and Maria decide to get a divorce. Helene acts as her witness and meets Maria for lunch before the afternoon court hearing. Over lunch, Helene tells Maria she looks like hell. Maria notices that Helene looks healthy and radiant. In court, Maria's lawyer claims Carter mentally abused her; he does not contest this. As they wait for the papers to be signed, Maria sits quietly with her hands in her lap. Helene leans over Maria to gossip with Carter while they wait.

After some time has passed, Carter calls Maria to find out what she's been up to since the divorce. She tells him that BZ has been coming over a lot. This triggers Maria's memories of the first time she met BZ. Maria entered BZ's home and he had the film with her in it playing. While BZ talked to Carter about technical aspects of the film and how he had missed part of the story, he never took his eyes off Maria as she moved about in the film. Maria felt uncomfortable and out of control.

Maria tries to convince herself to call Les Goodwin to "save her from her peril". She lets herself imagine that she could get Kate out of the hospital and that the three of them, Les, Maria, and Kate would live happily in a house by the sea. After spending whole nights imagining what might be possible, she would wake in the bright light of her Beverly Hills home and realize that she was merely dreaming, that the complications of her life and Les' life and Kate's life were too much to join peacefully.

The abortion of Les's child still haunts her. She dreams of fetuses floating in the river, she remembers a girl she used to work with that had an abortion and goes over every detail of what the girl told her, again and again. She becomes so overwhelmed with thoughts of the abortion that she seeks out a hypnotist who tells her she might have concerns that reach all the way back to the time she was conceived and in her mother's womb.

To distract her from thinking about the abortion, Maria begins drinking heavily and going out with gay men as their accessories at parties. She eventually arranges a time to see Les Goodwin at a hotel room in Oxnard. Maria is so anxious to see him she can't contain herself and spends the day straightening everything in the hotel room and reading the phone book. When Les finally arrives, they embrace and begin talking about all the places they could go, all the things they could do. Maria begins to cry; Les lying to his wife has cast a bad feeling over the whole affair. They agree to part ways and see each other again under better circumstances. Maria never mentions the abortion.

When Maria returns, Carter calls to tell her that his film will be showing at Cannes and that he'll be out of town for awhile. If Maria needs anything, Carter tells her to call BZ. Carter catches her in a lie when she tells him she liked his film. She then buys every



insider movie magazine to track his whereabouts. After speaking to Helene about Carter and his film and his travels, Maria has a car accident. She learns from her bank that her account is overdrawn. Shortly after, she learns that her doctor will no longer refill her subscription for painkillers. Maria is relieved in an odd way.

At the request of her agent, Maria agrees to meet with a director for a part in a new film. She believes she will be auditioning for the lead role, but when she arrives at the audition, the director isn't there and she learns that she was supposed to audition for the role of the teacher. She hurriedly leaves the audition and drives along the Los Angeles freeways for miles. When she finally stops, she is crying. She cries for her embarrassment, for her mother, for Kate, and for her realization that this day would have been the day that her baby would have been born if she hadn't aborted it.

Desperate for someone to talk to, Maria calls Ivan Costello, her old flame. Drunk, Ivan reminds her that she hasn't had time for him these past few years, that she's always made him schedule time to talk with her through her agent. Ivan wants to know what has changed, what she could possibly need to be calling now. Before Maria can even tell him anything, Ivan spits in the phone and says "This is what I think of your life". Dejected, Maria calls Larry Kulik for comfort.

## Chapters 40 - 60 Analysis

Maria deciding to get a divorce and then following through with it is another step toward gaining healthy control over her life. It wasn't an easy decision, but the constant arguing and trying to make it work had worn them both thin. That Maria can see this and follows through with it is admirable, as it is clear she doesn't want to be alone but would rather do the right thing rather than stay in a bad marriage.

The clean break from Carter clears things up for Maria . . . at least for awhile. She tries to fill the void in her life with Les Goodwin and begins fantasizing about the kind of life they might have together. Yet it quickly becomes clear that because Les is married and Maria knows his wife well, they can't make a relationship work.

The abortion of the child she would have had with Les is ever-present on Maria's mind and she spends countless nights over several months going out with different men, all in an attempt to stop thinking about the abortion and the life she might have had if she never went through with it. The regret and denial pattern of behavior takes over for Maria and she lives life after the abortion in a fog. It plagues her in her dreams and in her waking moments. The dreams of aborted fetuses, the visions of human tissue floating in the ocean and her inability to stop counting the days until the baby would have been born all point to her obsession with the baby she aborted.

It becomes clear in these chapters that the only control Maria could have over the situation is tell someone, anyone, what she has been through. Keeping this information to herself is tearing her apart and is consuming every thought. Yet, when she has the chance to tell Les about the baby, she doesn't.



Maria's attempt to reach out to Ivan Costello highlights how low she has gotten. Maria's need to communicate, to share with someone what she has been through is so strong she is willing to talk to the one person she loathes most and has been avoiding for years. In this moment of vulnerability, though, she doesn't get the comfort she needs. Instead, Ivan Costello reminds Maria of the way she has treated him and what a miserable person he thinks she is. Unable to connect, unable to share with someone what she's endured, and now fully aware of how crummy she has been to others, Maria calls Larry Kulik, the one man who will not ask any questions and who cares very little about her.



# Chapters 61 - 87

## Chapters 61 - 87 Summary

Maria travels to Las Vegas with Larry Kulik to take her mind off her troubles. While lounging in The Flamingo casino, she meets Benny Austin. All the memories of her father and her mother come rushing back and it's too much to take, so Maria tells Benny she'll be right back and goes upstairs to Larry Kulik's suite. Maria feels so guilty about ditching Benny that she eventually calls him and apologizes, saying she had to leave because she didn't feel well. He understands and they agree that he will come visit her in Los Angeles. Just before she hangs up the phone she asks Benny if he remembers that day she came out and visited and they all had dinner together. That was the last day she saw her mother alive. Benny says he remembers it, but Maria isn't convinced. She believes she's the only one who remembers that day clearly.

Maria leaves a party with an actor she has just met and goes back to his house. After they have sex she gets up, gets dressed, and takes his car. She drives to Las Vegas. Along the highway, she is pulled over for speeding and the office notices the car she's driving was reported stolen. She is taken to jail. Maria's agent, Freddy Chaiken, pulls many strings and gets her out of jail and flies her back to Los Angeles on a Leer jet he borrowed from a client. On the plane, Freddy tells Maria he is very worried about her and that he thinks her behavior is self-destructive. Before Maria can tell him off, she falls asleep.

The next day, Maria receives two dozen roses from the actor. Maria knows they were sent by his manager instead. When the actor calls Maria, he gets upset with her not for taking her car, but for not telling him who she was, that she was Carter's wife. Helene comes over to check on Maria, who tells Helene to leave her alone. Maria slides further into a funk when she gets a letter from Benny Austin telling her that he has several of her father's things he'd like to give her and a leaves her a number to call when she's ready to talk to him.

Maria becomes very drunk at a party and wakes up not remembering exactly what happened, but she sees that Helene has a black eye and that she's been undressed and put in bed. She vaguely remembers them driving her from the party and she remembers throwing up on Helene's lap and calling BZ a degenerate. When BZ comes back with her car later that morning, they call get into an argument and BZ hits Helene in the face. Maria begs him to stop hitting Helene.

Maria leaves town and tries to contact Benny Austin at the number he gave her in the letter, but the number has . His phone has been disconnected and his mail box now belongs to someone else. She spends the next two weeks aimlessly wandering around Las Vegas. She reaches a point where she doesn't know where the air ends and she begins and she starts to quietly go mad. Frustrated and out of sorts, Maria goes back to



Los Angeles. She calls Freddy the next day and asks him to pay her Las Vegas hotel bill and to bring all her clothes back to Los Angeles for her.

Carter becomes so concerned about her condition that he begs her to come to the desert with him when he shoots a film in a few weeks. Maria resists at first, but eventually goes. Carter and Maria agree to give their relationship one more try, but this is quickly tested when Maria finds out that Carter is not only sleeping with the leading lady, but also with Helene. During a big trip to Las Vegas at the end of the film shoot, Maria and BZ refuse to go with the rest of the group and stay behind.

Maria wanders into BZ's room. BZ is going to commit suicide by taking thirty Seconal pills. He's tired of it all. Maria tells him not to and asks him to just lie down with her. They hold hands and fall asleep. When Maria wakes, she sees BZ taking a few pills and notices that he's already taken most of the pills that were on the bed. She goes back to sleep. Maria is awoken the next morning, in the bright sun, by a screaming Helene. BZ is dead and Maria is still holding his hand. Carter and Helene blame Maria and assume that she had something to do with BZ's death. They send her to a neuropsychiatric hospital, the same hospital that Maria is in during the opening chapters of the novel.

## Chapters 61 - 87 Analysis

The opening chapters of the novel depict a Maria in a hospital room thinking about Benny Austin and growing up in Silver Wells. The reader is told early on that Maria has killed BZ and that Helene and Carter think she is responsible. These opening chapters raise important questions that propel the reader forward and keep the reader guessing for the rest of the novel: how did Maria kill BZ and why?

In these final chapters, the novel comes full circle. Maria is back in contact with Benny and seeks closure with the death of her father and mother. Benny represents the one innocent connection to her past, the one person who knew Maria before she became the miserable woman she is by the end of the novel. Benny represents a chance for Maria to get back to a better place in her life and to finally come to terms with the loss of her parents.

It is also in these final chapters that the big questions are answered about how and why BZ dies. It becomes clear that BZ committed suicide because his wife was having an affair with Carter and because he is so tired of the life they've all been living. Maria simply held his hand. While she was present during BZ's death, she didn't cause it. Or did she, indirectly? Helene and Carter blame Maria, despite the fact that their affair caused all of these relationships to disintegrate. Because Maria has been such a nuisance to them for so long, draining them both of emotional and financial resources, Carter and Helene see BZ's death as an opportunity to get Maria the help she needs, and admit her into a mental facility.

The novel ends with Maria thinking about a day when she might get out, a day when she'll have her daughter by her side and be able to do some canning with plums and





apricots. Maria is clearly not in her right mind, even in these last moments. She knows she has not lived a good life, she knows that there have been many miserable years. But, she notes, at the very end, despite all she's done to hurt people, she is still Benny Austin's goddaughter and she is still her parent's daughter. That, Maria feels, is something.



# Characters

## Maria Wyeth

Maria, pronounced Mar-eye-ah, is the main character of the novel. She is thirty-one, married then divorced, with one daughter, age four. She grew up in a town called Silver Wells, Nevada, a town her father owns. Maria grew up around gambling and expects that many things in life can be won or lost with a simple roll of the dice, with a simple game of chance. This upbringing propels her into a life in Los Angeles where she gambles, in many ways, with her life every day.

Maria marries Carter, a film director, and lives in Beverly Hills. She is an actress and starred in his first two films. Their marriage is a rocky one. They both have affairs during their marriage and Maria gets pregnant during her affair with Les Goodwin and Carter forces her to have an abortion. They divorce soon after. Maria may suffer from a mental illness. She is often depressed and eats little more than cottage cheese. She is very thin, takes drugs often, and frequently drinks to excess. She is a drifter, never sure where she wants to be and never sure where she is going. Maria is constantly seeking the affection and admiration of others, but rarely gets it to her satisfaction. When she is ignored by people she wants attention from, she becomes self-destructive and drains all those around her.

Maria wishes to be part of the slick Hollywood fast life: the parties, the wardrobe, the drugs. Yet every time she participates in that life, she quickly becomes too involved in it and sees how ugly the underside of such glamour can be. Maria wavers between begging her agent for more work and then behaving badly on set as soon as she gets the work. She doesn't want to be part of it all, yet as soon as she decides she's done with it, she realizes that she misses the limelight, the attention, the excitement.

Maria misses her mother a great deal and obsesses over the last day she saw her mother alive. The loss of her mother, coupled with the abortion that Carter forces her to have, are the catalysts for a gradual downward slide into depression and emptiness for Maria.

She becomes so despondent and so upset at the state of things that she willingly holds BZ's hand after he's taken enough pills to kill himself. Maria does nothing and simply lets life happen to her, as she always does.

## Carter Lang

Carter is Maria's ex-husband. They were married for many years and he made his first two films while married to her. Both films feature Maria as the lead actress. Through these films, Carter is introduced to the producer BZ and his wife Helene. They quickly become friends and begin seeing each other socially and working on more films together.



With his new success, Carter quickly becomes enamored with the Hollywood scene and begins partying heavily and having affairs with actresses. He rarely invites Maria to the movie set in the desert and even when he's not shooting he rarely comes home to visit Maria. When Maria visits Carter on set, he is rude to her in front of others and explosive and abusive behind closed doors. He repeatedly tells Maria she is crazy and that she is the reason he chooses to stay away from her for long stretches at a time. Maria always leaves in desperation—not sure if she should continue to fight for him or if they should just end their relationship and each go their separate ways.

They become estranged and he begins to get increasingly angry with her, even hitting her a few times. When he learns that Maria has also had affairs and that she is pregnant with Les Goodwin's child, he forces her to get an abortion because he doesn't want anyone to know about it, even though everyone knows about his own affairs.

After the abortion, Carter agrees to divorce Maria and agrees with all her accusations during the divorce proceedings. He travels extensively and does not come back to see Maria for many months. When he finally returns, he is concerned about Maria's ill health and her seeming inability to take care of herself. He invites Maria to the desert while he shoots his next film, hoping this will help her get better. Maria agrees to go, but quickly learns that Carter is having an affair with BZ's wife, Helene. During these weeks in the desert, Carter repeatedly tells Maria he wishes she would die, that he can't wait until she kills herself. When he finds Maria in bed with BZ after BZ commits suicide, Carter agrees with Helene and commits Maria to a mental institution.

## **Kate**

Kate is Maria's daughter who is permanently hospitalized in a mental illness facility. Maria is able to visit Kate once in awhile and is only rarely able to take her out to visit others outside of the hospital. On one of these off-site visits, Maria brings Kate to BZ and Helene's house and Kate makes a scene and starts screaming, so Maria has to bring her back to the hospital. Maria doesn't take Kate out for day trips after this incident.

## **Benny Austin**

Maria's godfather and her father's business partner in Silver Wells, Nevada. Benny is a minor character in this novel, but represents an important link to Maria's past. Both the opening and closing scenes of the novel show Maria remembering Benny and how much he reminds her of her lost family.

Benny sees Maria as a daughter, and in the few moments they share he tries to guide her to get a hold on her life and make something of herself.



## BZ

BZ is the producer on Carter's film and Helene's husband. BZ was taken with Maria from the first moment he met her and they develop a friendship over the years in which BZ works with Carter. When Carter and Maria's relationship falls apart, BZ still calls Maria to check in and to let her know what Carter is doing. BZ frequently encourages Maria to go on holiday with his wife Helene.

As a film producer in Hollywood, BZ parties a lot and has many affairs. Helene knows this and has affairs of her own. Yet when Helene begins sleeping with Carter, it is too much for BZ to handle and he commits suicide.

## Helene

Helene is BZ's wife. On the surface, she is Maria's friend and often has lunches with Maria, takes vacations with her, and generally tries to cheer Maria up. Yet, Helene eventually has an affair with Maria's husband. Helene blames Maria for BZ's death, even though BZ committed suicide. Helene eventually has Maria committed to a mental institution.

## Freddy Chaikin

Freddy Chaikin is Maria's agent. He not only tries to find work for her in film and television, but he acts as part of a support system for Maria, helping her out when she's in trouble, consoling her when she is sad, convincing her to get her act together when she is falling apart. Freddy understands that Maria has a bad reputation in Hollywood for walking off sets and therefore he has a difficult time finding work for her. Yet, he still tries to, even though many times Maria turns him down after she has just asked him to find her work.

Freddy is part of the Hollywood system, the agent that tries to protect his client from bad PR and tries to prop them up when they are low. Yet because he is part of the Hollywood system, he knows all the gossip about Maria and Carter and he often acts as the only person in Maria's life who is willing to tell her the facts and force her to deal with them.

## Les Goodwin

A friend of Maria's. When Carter is away on location, Maria has an affair with Les and gets pregnant. She aborts the baby at her husband's urging and never tells Les about it. Les and Maria try several times to have a real relationship, despite the fact that he is married. They meet a few times in different hotels but it never works out.



Les becomes the object of Maria's fantasies when she becomes so depressed about her abortion that she doesn't know where to turn. Les cares for Maria but knows he could never leave his wife, Felicia, to be with Maria. If he knew about the baby, he might have changed his mind, but Maria never gives him this chance.

## **Felicia Goodwin**

Les Goodwin's wife. It is never entirely clear from the novel if Felicia knows about her husband's affair with Maria, but Felicia is a strong woman in her own right and seems to know that Maria holds a special place in her husband's heart.

On a few occasions, Felicia acts as a friend—even mother figure—to Maria when she is particularly down and out. Felicia even invites Maria and her daughter Kate over to the Goodwin home for Christmas dinner.

## **Larry Kulik**

An attorney who lives near Maria and Carter's home. He throws several lavish Hollywood parties and invites Maria to come over. On several occasions, Larry makes advances towards Maria and indicates that her husband has been less than faithful to her.

Larry makes Maria's stomach turn and she tries to avoid him whenever she can, calling him a "gangster" and finding him especially revolting when he and BZ invite several women back to their home for an orgy.



## Objects/Places

### Silver Wells, Nevada

A small town in Nevada that had a population of twenty-eight when Maria first moved there, but as of the telling of the story, no longer has any residents. It is a small town that at one time, thanks to Maria's father, contained three hundred acres of mesquite, a zinc mine, a trinket shop, a midget golf course, a reptile museum, and a restaurant with a few slots and craps tables.

This is where the characters return several times throughout the novel and it is where BZ eventually commits suicide.

### Beverly Hills

Where Maria has her home with her husband and the scene of many arguments and dramatic blow-ups through the novel.

### Angel Beach

A film of Carter Lang's in which Maria starred.

### Interstate 80

A television show that Maria works on for two episodes with Martin Landau.

### The Desert

The scene of most of Carter's film shoots and the place where Maria frequently returns to again and again when she's running from trouble or avoiding a situation back home in Beverly Hills.

### The Flamingo

Hotel and casino where Maria sees Benny Austin after many years. This meeting and this hotel trigger many memories of her childhood and her family.

### La Brea

Famous street in Los Angeles filled with shops and restaurants. Maria frequently drives this street during her aimless driving through Los Angeles.



## **Port Hueneme**

Another location with gravelly beaches that Maria liked to visit when she was in the habit of driving all over Southern California to avoid her life.

## **Oxnard**

Another location just south of Los Angeles that Maria liked to visit when she was in the habit of driving all over Southern California to avoid her life.

## **Encino**

The suburban, tract-home neighborhood where Maria's abortion was performed. After the abortion, Encino looms large in her mind throughout the rest of the novel and is directly associated with her shame and guilt at having agreed to the abortion and going through with it.

## **Wilshire Blvd.**

A famous street in Los Angeles that runs the entire length of the city, from Santa Monica in the west to East Los Angeles. Maria has several meetings in the novel on Wilshire Blvd. and frequently drives it. The most notable location on Wilshire in the novel is Maria's doctor's office, the doctor who examines her after the abortion and prescribes pills. This is the doctor's office where Maria drops off pieces of fetal tissue for examination.

## **Baker**

Location in the California desert where Carter is shooting his film. Maria "finds" herself in Baker after driving aimlessly. Her arrival results in a nasty argument between her and Carter, but Maria had to see for herself if Carter was behaving himself on set or having an affair.

## **New Havana Ballroom**

A club on Sunset Blvd. that Maria drives to when she has taken too much medication and needs to call her therapist. She calls him from the pay phone inside.

# Themes

## Loss of Identity and Control

This novel examines the loss of identity and each character's desire to gain some control over the course of their lives. Some have more success with this than others. Maria allows others to make decisions for her—from where she lives and what she does to the biggest decision of all, the abortion. This loss of herself, of control over her own actions and decisions and life direction, is reflected in her manic freeway driving. When Maria can't handle what is happening, she "runs" by getting in the car and driving aimlessly for hours. These freeways, this open road, and this distancing herself from her life is an attempt to control the situation. Several of these freeway drives bring her to the desert and very close to her childhood hometown. With every difficult situation, Maria is, in effect, running home. But her parents are long gone, as is the town of Silver Wells itself. Yet she keeps driving, endlessly.

This attempt at control is also seen in Maria's desire to continue working as an actress, to separate herself from the identity she's been given as "Carter's wife" and little else. She makes tentative steps by asking Freddy to get work for her. When she does work and sees the results of her work on television, she is proud, if only for a moment, that she's been able to do something beyond just be Carter's wife.

This loss of identity is also seen in Maria's desperate need to connect with others and win their approval, even if only for her body or for the cachet of being Carter's wife. Her affair with Les and with many others seem to disgust her, yet she needs the attention more. Her inability to make firm decisions further underscores this point. She threatens to leave Carter and BZ and Larry Kulik over and over again. Maria starts to pack, then stops. She shouts about leaving and then doesn't. Other times she does leave, but quietly as a mouse, without any shouting or fanfare. Maria is unpredictable and is trying to find a way to get back to who she was, even if that requires returning to her hometown and starting over, wiping the slate clean.

## Life is a Gamble

The novel opens with Maria explaining her father's philosophy on life: life is a gamble, a crap-shoot, a chance to cheat the odds or lose everything. When her father leaves behind a note, it says: "Don't let them bluff you back there because you're holding all the aces". She grew up watching him set up casinos and games and try to establish a business out of it. Similarly, the novel ends with Maria remembering her father's wisdom about gambling and life: "When I was ten years old my father taught me to access quite rapidly the shifting probabilities on a craps layout: I could trace a layout in my sleep, the field here and the pass line all around, even money on Big Six or Eight, five-for-one on Any Seven. Always when I play back my father's voice it is with a professional rasp, it goes as it lays, don't do it the hard way". This feeling that life is a gamble and that one





must "play it as it lays" feeds Maria's inability to make firm decisions. She goes with the flow, letting others make her choices for her.

This gambling metaphor is extended through Carter's involvement in the film industry. BZ, Helene, Carter, and Maria are all involved in an industry that itself is a gamble. One day you're up, one day you're down. Whether someone likes your work or not is entirely subjective, and what one producer likes another one might hate. As the dailies come back for Carter's films, sometimes he's painted as a genius and other times the studio is worried he's going to bankrupt them. Carter's celebrity is up and down as well—from traveling to Cannes to working on a small film again.

Didion hammers home this theme again and again: If one day is bad, just hold on because tomorrow might be down. The chips might be stacked in your favor if you can just make it to one more day. The relationships in this novel also embody this "whatever happens, happens" feeling as everyone has affairs with everyone else and there is little worry about repercussions. Maria is hurt that Carter is having an affair, but she stays for a very long time and even tries the relationship again.

## Imminent Danger

Several signs throughout the novel point to danger lurking all around. From the opening pages of the novel, it is clear that Maria has done something to BZ. The reader isn't sure what she's done, but this structure immediately sets up questioning for the rest of the novel. Did she kill him? If so, how? And most importantly, why? What could have happened that led to her killing him? These questions permeate the novel and at every turn, during every argument or confrontation in the novel, the reader wonders—will this be the moment she kills BZ? The suspense and imminent danger are present up until the very end of the novel for this reason.

The snakes Maria mentions at the opening of the novel are a symbol of danger, of chance. This motif is touched upon again as Maria goes to have her abortion and isn't sure where she's being taken and what might happen to her. BZ and his crowd of party-going friends also stirs up questions in Maria's mind about her own safety. Even Maria's crazy freeway driving and wandering through empty gas stations on the highway carry a sense of danger, a sense of "something bad might happen here".

Yet the urgency and apparent danger Maria feels reaches a powerful climax when the pipes become clogged in Maria's home. She is so wrought with guilt for having the abortion and so unable to stop thinking about the baby that was never born that she imagines her pipes are clogged with fetal tissue and body parts. Maria is unable to see that this is her guilt manifesting itself and instead flees her home to take up residence in a rental apartment. This "clogging of the pipes" serves as a metaphor for Maria's own clogged pipes, for the years of shame and guilt she feels over her the way she has lived her life. She is, of course, unable to see how this imagery relates to her own subconscious. While staying at the rental apartment, she at least realizes that "all pipes will clog eventually" and returns to her home, danger averted for the moment.



The final and most dramatic scene of this danger at play is the last scene, in which BZ takes his own life. The reader has waited patiently through the entire novel wondering how his death will come to pass and the tension is high. Will a gun be used? Will there be a struggle? In the end, Didion has BZ take pills to end his life. This choice removes all imminent danger, and reveals this tension and suspense as unnecessary, as a construct in the reader's own mind that wasn't needed.



# Style

## Point of View

Several points of view are employed by Joan Didion in this novel. The first chapter is told from Maria's first-person point of view. The second chapter is told from Helene's first-person point of view. The third chapter is told from Carter's first-person point of view. Beginning the novel with these three distinct first-person voices immediately draws the reader into the conflict, into the different thoughts of the three main characters.

These first-person narratives act as a sharp contrast to the following chapters which are told from the third-person point of view. This shift creates questions right up front about who might and who might not be a reliable narrator. The reader sees early on from Maria's point of view that she believes she is sane, yet Helene's and Carter's first-person narratives suggest otherwise.

The close third-person point of view carries the novel swiftly forward, offering a close view of Maria's thoughts and a more distant view of Carter's, Helene's, and BZ's. Yet, a few first-person narratives are interspersed throughout, and each of these are again from Maria's point of view. These brief first-person accounts are no more than a few sentences and offer a quick glimpse into Maria's mind at critical junctures in the story.

The overall effect of these shifting points-of-view is haunting as it becomes clear the main character, whose thoughts the reader is closest to, is unreliable and possibly unstable.

## Setting

The majority of the novel takes place in both Beverly Hills and "the desert" outside of Las Vegas. Both settings offer a perfect reflection of the inner states of the main characters.

Beverly Hills with its perfect facade and movie-star life acts as a perfect foil for the misery of the characters that live there. It is bright and sunny with perfect pools and perfect lawns and perfect houses, yet the story reveals that none of the characters who live in this setting are happy and perfect; in fact, quite the opposite. The selection of this setting highlights the contrast between the exterior world and the character's interior lives.

The desert offers a similar study in stark contrasts. The desert with its vast openness and dry, dusty heat provides a perfect foil for Maria's own wandering and confusion and isolation. It is also where she was born, so the emptiness of the desert also represents her only connection to her now-deceased family.



Setting the film shoots in the desert adds another layer of tension as the excessive heat, dry dust, and lack of anything to do adds to the listlessness of the characters and invites affairs and other foul play as they are so tired and so bored. Both locations reflect a particular despair and loneliness that perfectly reflect the despair and loneliness of the characters.

## Language and Meaning

Joan Didion's prose is spare, precise, cutting. The language is perfectly timed, perfectly succinct to clearly depict the character's thoughts. There is little exposition, few paragraphs about what people are doing or what they intend to do. Most of the action takes place through dialogue or the interior thoughts of Maria. This clipped language and the extremely short chapters allow Didion to skip all the extraneous detail of weeks or even months and get directly to the key plot points. This short prose style also places the reader directly into the action, directly into Maria's own clipped way of thinking, of having a thought and then losing several days in between the last thought and the next one.

Didion's prose style is often criticized for being too stylish—for relying too heavily upon imagery in sentences that shock the reader. Didion frequently uses an image of a flower and contrasts it with a needle, or uses the image of a dangerous snake in a beautiful garden. These dramatic contrasts in her sentences constantly support the story she is telling: all is not what it appears to be, danger lurks near beauty. These themes are especially true in *Play It As It Lays* as Maria moves in a world of actors and filmmakers who are focused on appearances but who end up being quite dangerous and violent, despite how they seem on the surface.

## Structure

Didion's novel of eighty-seven short chapters propels the reader forward, moving quickly through whole weeks and months in just a few short paragraphs. This quick pace of reading underscores the pace at which Maria's life is passing her by as she fumbles about in a muddled, dream-state. The physical progression of time is mirrored in the physical progression of the quickly turned pages.

These short third-person chapters are framed by three first-person narratives at the beginning of the book and are framed by seven first-person chapters at the end of the book. While the first three chapters offer three different perspectives—Maria's, Helene's, and Carter's—the last seven first-person chapters that are interspersed through the last quarter of the book are all from Maria's perspective. Maria directly addresses the reader through these last chapters, a final plea to connect, to offer up her side of the story, to gain sympathy and affection despite what she's done.

Didion also subverts the standard fiction story structure from the beginning, as it becomes clear from the very early pages that BZ is dead and that Maria had a hand in his death. Rather than wondering what will happen, as many narratives are structured,

the reader instead wonders how it happened and why. This guessing keeps the plot moving swiftly forward, even though Maria's continual problems and dream-like state often slow the story down.

This same subverted structure is applied to Benny Austin. His appearances act as bookends to the story. The reader is introduced to Benny Austin in the opening chapters of the novel when Maria leaves him sitting at the table and never returns. As he is introduced, it becomes clear that he represents the only link to Maria's family and, although Maria rejects him in the initial chapters, the reader learns at the end of the novel exactly why she did it. It is also revealed at the end of the book that Maria called Benny back, that he wrote her a letter, and that she attempted to get back in touch with him. This appearance of Benny at the end, as Maria is near her end, symbolizes a return to her roots, a desire to reconnect with her father and her mother, whom she has spent the entire novel mourning.



## Quotes

"What makes Iago evil? some people ask. I never ask." Chap. 1, p. 3

"Benny called for a round of Cuba Libres, a drink I have never known anyone but my mother and father and Benny Austin to order, and I gave him some chips to play for me and went to the ladies' room and never came back." Chap. 1, p. 6

"I mean maybe I was holding all the aces, but what was the game?" Chap. 1, p. 10

"If Freddy Chaikin thought she carried trouble with her he would avoid her, because trouble was something no one in the city liked to be near." Chap. 6, p. 22

"Whether or not Carter could afford the rent, whether it was a month like this one when he was making a lot of money or a month when they lawyers were talking about bankruptcy, the boy came twice a week to vacuum the pool and the man came four days a week to work on the roses and the water in the pool was 85 degrees." Chap. 7, p. 24

"There was a silence. Something real was happening: this was, as it were, her life. If she could keep that in mind she would be able to play it through, do the right thing, whatever that meant." Chap. 12, p. 41

"There was always someone Maria tried not to hear at BZ and Helene's. Either there were sulky young men BZ met in places like Acapulco and Kitzbuhel and Tangier or there were Helene's friends, the women with whom she shopped and planned restorative weeks at Palm Springs and La Costa, the women with the silk Pucci shirts and the periodically tightened eye lines and the husbands on perpetual location." Chap. 13, p. 43

"If she could concentrate for even one minute on a picture of herself as a ten-year-old sitting on the front steps of the house in Silver Wells reading the gray book with the red cross on the cover (splints, shock, rattlesnake bite was why her mother made her read it) with the heat shimmering off the corrugated tin roof of the shed across the road (her father was not in this picture, keep him out of it, say he had gone into Vegas with Benny Austin), if she could concentrate for one more minute on that shed, on whether this minute twenty years later the heat still shimmered off its roof, those were two minutes during which she was not entirely party to what was happening in this bedroom in Encino." Chap. 26, p. 80.

"While she was changing she found a large piece of bloodied tissue on the pad she had been wearing, and she put it in an envelope and dropped it by the doctor's on her way home from the studio. When she called the next day the doctor said that the tissue was part of the placenta, and that was the end of that. For the first time in two weeks she slept through the night, and was an hour late for her morning call." Chap. 34, p. 94



"The notion of general devastation had for Maria a certain sedative effect (the rattlesnake in the playpen, that was different, that was particular, that was punitive), suggested an instant in which all anxieties would be abruptly gratified, and between the earthquake prophecy and the marijuana and the cheerful detachment of the woman whose house was in the Tujunga Wash, she felt a kind of resigned tranquility. Within these four rented walls she was safe. She was more than safe, she was alright." Chap. 38 p. 104

"Instead of calling Les Goodwin she bought a silver vinyl dress, and tried to stop thinking about what had he done with the baby. The tissue. The living dead thing, whatever you called it." Chap. 44, p. 114

"To avoid giving off the signs, Maria shopped always for a household, gallons of grapefruit juice, quarts of green chile salsa, dried lentils and alphabet noodles, rigatoni and canned yams, twenty-pound boxes of laundry detergent. She knew all the indices to the idle lonely, never bought a small tube of toothpaste, never dropped a magazine in her shopping cart. The house in Beverly Hills overflowed with sugar, corn-muffin mix, frozen roasts and Spanish onions. Maria ate cottage cheese." Chap. 49, p. 123

"Everything Maria could think to do in town she had already done. She had checked into the motel, she had eaten a crab at the marina." Chap. 53, p. 129

"On the drive back they told each other that it had been the wrong time, the wrong place, that it was bad because he had lied to arrange it, that it would be all right another time, idyllic later. He mentioned the strain he had been under, he mentioned that the preview had gone badly. She mentioned that she was getting the curse. They mentioned Kate, Carter, Felicia, the weather, Oxnard, his dislike of motel rooms, her fear of subterfuge. They mentioned everything but one thing: that she had left the point in a bedroom in Encino." Chap. 54, p. 134

"Once in her car she drove as far as Romaine and then pulled over, put her head on the steering wheel and cried as she had not cried since she was a child, cried out loud. She cried because she was humiliated and she cried for her mother and she cried for Kate and she cried because something had just come through to her, there in the sun on the Western street: she had deliberately not counted the months but she must have been counting them unawares, must have been keeping a relentless count somewhere, because this was the day, the day the baby would have been born." Chap. 57, p. 141

"He had ordered Cuba Libres for the two of them and he had talked about as it was and finally she had run. He would be waiting there still, trying to run up a stake for her with the chips she had left, that was like Benny, he would play her chips until they were gone and then he would play his own for her, waiting, holding the Cuba Libre until the ice was gone. Benny would wait there all night. Benny would lay anybody in the Flamingo five-to-one that Harry and Francine Wyeth's daughter would not run out on him, and five-to-one were the best odds Benny would lay on the sun rising." Chap. 61, p. 148



"In the kitchen she danced by herself and felt a little dizzy but still good. She liked his not knowing her. She did not much like him but she liked him not knowing her." Chap. 63, p. 152

"The room was painted purple, with purple Lurex threads in the curtains and bedspread. Because her mother had once told her that purple rooms could send people into irreversible insanity she thought about asking for a different room, but the boy had unnerved her. To hear someone's voice she looked in the telephone book and dialed a few prayers, then took three aspirin and tried not to think about BZ and Helene." Chap. 67, p. 165

"By the end of the week she was thinking constantly about where her body stopped and the air began, about the exact point in space and time that was the difference between Maria and other. She had the sense that if she could get that in her mind and hold it for even one micro-second she would have what she had come to get. As if she had a fever, her skin burned and crackled with a pinpoint sensitivity. She could feel smoke against her skin. She could feel voice waves. She was beginning to feel color, light intensities, and she imagined that she could be put blindfolded in front of the signs at the Thunderbird and the Flamingo and know which was which." Chap. 68, p. 170

"In the heat some mornings she would wake with her eyes swollen and heavy and she would wonder if she had been crying." Chap. 76, p. 196

"My father advised me that life was a crap game: it was one of the two lessons I learned as a child. The other was that overturning a rock was apt to reveal a rattlesnake. As lessons go these two seem to hold up, but not to apply." Chap. 77, p. 200

"The heat stuck. The air shimmered. An underground nuclear device was detonated where Silver Wells had once been, and Maria got up before dawn to feel the blast. She felt nothing." Chap. 80, p. 204





## Topics for Discussion

What comment is Joan Didion making on Hollywood and the film industry by her portrayal of the characters in this book? Do you think her perspective and treatment of these characters and situations is accurate? If so, how? If not, why?

In what ways does Didion comment on the role women played in 1960s society? From her secret abortion at a home in Encino to her drifting ways, Maria does not fall into the stereotype of a "housewife". What does this character say about the struggles and desires of women?

How is mental illness portrayed in this book? What effect does mental illness, in one's self, in their children, in the people around them—have on life and one's ability to make rational decisions?

In this book, we see a marriage fall apart and end in divorce. What factors led to this eventual demise and how did the personalities, difficulties, and mental states of Maria and Carter affect the marriage? Is this indicative of the 1960s or are the same factors at work in every relationship?

What narrative techniques are used to tell this story? How is the ending revealed and how are the reasons for the ending revealed? Does this structure help the story or hinder it? How?

How is the loss of identity and the need for control examined in this novel? What techniques, images, and metaphors are used to explore this loss of identity and inability to make decisions?

Maria's abortion haunts her throughout the novel. What techniques, images, and metaphors are used to reinforce this sadness and sense of loss? What comment, if any, is made on the connection between one's own identity and their unborn child's? What larger themes does Didion touch upon by focusing on Maria's abortion?

How do the two main settings, Beverly Hills and the desert outside Las Vegas, further the story that is being told? How do they reflect the characters? Would the story be just as effective if set in other locations? If so, how? If not, why?