

# **The Patron Saint of Liars Study Guide**

**The Patron Saint of Liars by Ann Patchett**

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



# Contents

|  |                    |
|--|--------------------|
| <a href="#">The Patron Saint of Liars Study Guide.....</a>     | <a href="#">1</a>  |
| <a href="#">Contents.....</a>                                  | <a href="#">2</a>  |
| <a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>                              | <a href="#">3</a>  |
| <a href="#">Part 1, Habit and Part 2, Rose: Chapter 1.....</a> | <a href="#">5</a>  |
| <a href="#">Part 2, Rose: Chapter 2.....</a>                   | <a href="#">7</a>  |
| <a href="#">Part 2, Rose: Chapters 3-4.....</a>                | <a href="#">9</a>  |
| <a href="#">Part 2, Rose: Chapter 5.....</a>                   | <a href="#">11</a> |
| <a href="#">Part 2, Rose: Chapter 6.....</a>                   | <a href="#">12</a> |
| <a href="#">Part 3, Son: Chapters 1-2.....</a>                 | <a href="#">14</a> |
| <a href="#">Part 3, Son: Chapters 3-4.....</a>                 | <a href="#">16</a> |
| <a href="#">Part 3, Son: Chapter 5.....</a>                    | <a href="#">18</a> |
| <a href="#">Part 4, Cecilia: Chapter 1.....</a>                | <a href="#">19</a> |
| <a href="#">Part 4, Cecilia: Chapters 2-3.....</a>             | <a href="#">20</a> |
| <a href="#">Part 4, Cecilia: Chapters 4-5.....</a>             | <a href="#">22</a> |
| <a href="#">Part 4, Cecilia: Chapter 6.....</a>                | <a href="#">24</a> |
| <a href="#">Characters.....</a>                                | <a href="#">26</a> |
| <a href="#">Objects/Places.....</a>                            | <a href="#">30</a> |
| <a href="#">Themes.....</a>                                    | <a href="#">32</a> |
| <a href="#">Style.....</a>                                     | <a href="#">35</a> |
| <a href="#">Quotes.....</a>                                    | <a href="#">37</a> |
| <a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>                     | <a href="#">38</a> |



# Plot Summary

The Patron Saint of Liars is the first novel by Ann Patchett. In this novel, Rose is a beautiful woman who cannot find contentment in long term relationships. Rose marries a good man, but when she learns she is pregnant she cannot imagine the life that will unfold if she tells her husband. Rose arranges to go to a home for unwed mothers and leaves without telling her husband she is pregnant. At this home, Rose decides she wants to keep her baby so she marries another man she does not love. Rose works hard in the kitchen of the home as her daughter grows up in the care of the same unwed mothers who have come to give up their own children. When the past catches up with Rose, she runs again, leaving behind all she has created here, including her child. The Patron Saint of Liars is a novel of selfishness, of love, and of the mysteries that drive us all.

Rose has left her husband after learning that she is pregnant. Rose has never felt content in her marriage, always had a pain in her chest that was only relieved when she was behind the wheel of her car. Rose drives across country to Tennessee, intent on getting as far from her life in California as she can. When she arrives at St. Elizabeth's, Rose thinks about going on, about having her baby somewhere else. However, Rose knows that she has few choices now that she has left her past behind her. Rose quickly settles in at St. Elizabeth's, making friends with those girls due before and after her.

Rose begins working in the kitchen, helping the elderly nun who cooks the three meals a day the girls need. Rose begins to find peace in cooking and she finds friendship in the old nun, Sister Evangeline. One day Rose learns that Sister Evangeline has a special gift in which she can talk to babies. Sister Evangeline tells Rose that she will have a girl, that she will stay at St. Elizabeth's and raise her child there. Rose does not believe her, but her roommate Angie is excited by this and insists that Rose take her to talk to Sister Evangeline. When she does, however, Sister Evangeline becomes upset. Afterward, Sister Evangeline tells Rose that Angie's baby will die.

One of the girls at the home who is due a few weeks before Rose decides she wants to have her labor at the old hotel in order to have the hour's drive to the nearest hospital to hold her babies. Rose goes along with this plan, watching as her friend labors all day long. Late in the night, near dawn, the babies are ready. Rose gets Sister Evangeline who successfully delivers twin boys. As Rose watches them go away in the ambulance, she begins to regret the impulse that led her to choose this avenue for herself. Rose wants to keep her baby. Son, the groundskeeper at St. Elizabeth's, offers to marry her so that she can keep the baby. Rose jumps at the idea and forces him to marry her immediately.

Angie has her baby a few days before Rose and it dies, just as Sister Evangeline said it would. A few days later, Rose gives birth to a girl whom she names Cecilia, inspired by a tattoo on Son's arm. Son does not like this because Cecilia was a girl he once loved who drowned when they were both seventeen. When Rose comes home from the



hospital, she goes right back to working in the kitchen, leaving the baby with June Clatterbuck, the owner of the land on which St. Elizabeth's sits.

Several years pass. Sissy, Rose and Son's daughter, grows up with the unwed mothers, learning early that they all leave eventually. When Sissy is ten, June Clatterbuck dies and leaves everything to Son. Son quickly moves his family into the farmhouse, but on the first night, Rose feels she cannot stay. Rose moves back into the groundskeeper's house, separate from her family. Five years later she is still apart from her family, refusing to connect with her husband or her daughter in any meaningful way.

When Rose surprisingly begins giving Sissy driving lessons, she learns that her mother is more willing to talk about the past in the car. Sissy asks all kinds of questions about her grandparents and her mother's love of driving. Before she can learn a lot, however, Rose receives a letter that frightens her. The following morning Rose is gone. Sissy and Son both know she will never come back, but Sissy finds herself hoping. Thomas Clinton arrives at St. Elizabeth's a week later. It was his letter, announcing his visit, that sent Rose running again. Son is terrified Thomas will guess his relationship to Sissy, but Sissy never even suspects. Thomas shows her some pictures of her mother, leaving her with one, and goes back to California, leaving her to face a future without her mother.



# Part 1, Habit and Part 2, Rose: Chapter 1

## Part 1, Habit and Part 2, Rose: Chapter 1 Summary

Rose is a young Catholic girl growing up in San Diego, California. Rose's father dies when she is only three. Rose believes she has memories of him, but later realizes she does not. Rose is devoted to her religion and believes God will give her a sign that tells her if she should marry and have a family, or become a nun.

In Habit, a spring bubbles up to the surface in a pasture belonging to farmer, George Clatterbuck. Clatterbuck notices it first when he is out hunting for his family's dinner. The spring smelled bad and he thought it meant bad luck. However, when George's horses get free and drink from the spring, they suddenly overcome minor ailments. As George's cows become ill and stop nursing their young, George decides to take them to the spring and see if that will heal them. It does. Some time later, when George's three year old daughter, June, becomes ill, he brings her some of the water and it heals her. George tells everyone he knows and soon people are coming from all over the country to drink from the spring. One of these is a wealthy horse breeder, Lewis Nelson, who brings his wife Louisa to hopefully heal her of her arthritis. When she is healed, Nelson decides to build a hotel near the spring. The hotel is large and luxurious, catering to the very rich, leaving the townspeople feeling ostracized. When the spring mysteriously dries up, the hotel closes and the Nelsons donate it to the Catholic Church. The church first uses it as a home for retired nuns, but then changes its name to St. Elizabeth's and turns it into a home for unwed mothers.

In part 2, chapter 1, Rose Clinton is driving out of Ludlow, California on her way to Kentucky. Rose has left her husband without telling him she is pregnant. Rose had been a typical teenager, drinking and partying with her friends, but she never broke any of the guidelines of the Catholic Church. Rose believed in God and thought he would someday give her a sign that would tell her what to do with the rest of her life, either becoming a nun or getting married. Rose had grown up with her widowed mother, a makeup counter girl at the local I. Magnin's. Rose often resented her mother's advice to her, but would accept her advice when it came to makeup. Rose remembers once when her mother told her pretty girls have it harder, especially in love. Rose always believed her mother was talking of herself and her decision not to remarry after her husband died in a car accident. On their first date together, Thomas Clinton told Rose that he had followed her around for months before he got up the courage to ask her out. Rose recognized Thomas's devotion to her and took it as a sign from God that they should marry. Rose and Thomas married a few months later and moved into a small apartment near the university he was attending. The following year they moved to Marina del Rey where Thomas got a job as a math teacher in the local high school



## Part 1, Habit and Part 2, Rose: Chapter 1 Analysis

The story of the Hotel Louisa is laid out in the first part of the novel, Habit. In this part, the reader learns about a spring that miraculously saves the life of June Clatterbuck. June is only three at the time, but the reader should take a special note of her because she will appear again later in the novel. The hotel, built by a rich horse breeder, is supposed to be a place where people could stay when they came to visit the springs, but it turns into more of a resort for rich people, excluding the poor people of the small town of Habit where it is located. When the spring dries up, the hotel is turned into a home for unwed mothers. This illustrates the time period in which the novel is set because being unwed and pregnant in the decades before the eighties or nineties is considered a horrible shame and is often hidden. This home gives these girls a place to go, to hide, until their child can be placed for adoption.

In the first chapter of part 2, Rose, the reader is introduced to Rose Clinton. Rose is a married woman who decides to hide her pregnancy from her husband and run away. The reader is not told immediately why Rose has decided to run away, so the reader begins to suspect something abusive in her marriage. Rose tells the reader in this first chapter about her childhood with her widowed mother and her decision to leave her future up to God as she spends her adolescence looking for a sign that would tell her if she should marry or become a nun. This causes Rose to marry the first man to show a devotion to her, Thomas Clinton. Rose describes their first year of marriage in simple detail, not expressing much emotion about the match and leaving the reader to feel that there is a lack of devotion on her part toward Thomas. Again, this seems to point to some sort of abuse that has caused her to leave Thomas and go to Kentucky.



## Part 2, Rose: Chapter 2

### Part 2, Rose: Chapter 2 Summary

Rose's mother refused to drive throughout Rose's childhood because of the accident that took her father's life. However, upon her marriage to Thomas, Rose quickly learns to drive and cannot get enough. Rose drives everywhere, except in San Diego where her mother might see her. After her wedding, Rose begins having this heavy pain in her chest when she is at home that will only go away when she drives. Rose only works on occasion for a temp agency, so when she is not working she drives for hours, often forgetting to return to pick up her husband at work. Upon learning about her pregnancy, Rose goes to Father O'Donnell, her parish priest from her childhood. Rose always looked up to Father O'Donnell as a surrogate father and turns to him now to make him an accomplice in her plan. Rose asks Father O'Donnell to recommend a place she can go to have her baby. Father O'Donnell tries to talk Rose into telling Thomas about the baby, or at least her mother, but Rose refuses. Rose also begs Father O'Donnell not to tell them either. Rose thinks that by not telling her mother, this is her punishment for leaving, the necessity to give up her mother.

As Rose makes her way cross country, she entertains many doubts. Rose worries that the doctor was wrong about the pregnancy. Rose finds it uncomfortable to make the drive in the heat and worries about having car trouble. During the long, quiet hours Rose composes letters to her mother in her head, but she cannot come up with the right words. Her mother has remarried since Rose herself married, as though she had been waiting for Rose to grow up and get a life of her own. This causes Rose to feel guilty about her mother's lost years. Rose calls her mother from New Mexico, but refuses to go home. In Oklahoma Rose picks up a hitchhiker, a soldier who has gone AWOL. Rose allows the young man to drive while she sleeps. Later, Rose takes the boy straight to his door. The family allows Rose to spend the night and even invites her to stay. Rose promises to think about it, but then disappears before they wake the next morning.

### Part 2, Rose: Chapter 2 Analysis

Rose becomes obsessed with driving after her marriage. Contrary to the impression given in the first chapter, Rose is not an abused woman. In fact, Thomas is a patient, kind husband who indulges Rose in her every whim. Thomas is the kind of husband every woman dreams of, but Rose is unhappy. Rose feels a tightness in her chest when she lies in bed at night, when she thinks of a future married to Thomas, a man she now realizes she does not love. Rose panics when she learns she is pregnant and she will be forced to commit herself to a family. Rose tries to explain how she feels, but the reader is unclear where these feelings come from until Rose tells the reader that her mother has remarried. It seems that perhaps Rose has realized that her mother waited for her to grow up before having a life of her own and now there is no going back to the way things were. Rose feels stuck, feels as though she must live a life she does not



want. Rose needs to get away, so she plans to go to a home for unwed mothers, St. Elizabeth's, in Kentucky, the same home that was once Hotel Louisa as mentioned in the previous section.





## Part 2, Rose: Chapters 3-4

### Part 2, Rose: Chapters 3-4 Summary

In chapter 3, Rose stops at a gas station on the road to Habit and asks about St. Elizabeth's. The reaction of the woman at the gas station is rude, reminding Rose of the purpose of St. Elizabeth's. When she arrives, Rose spends a long time reading a sign in the yard that tells the history of the Hotel Louisa. Inside, Rose meets Sister Bernadette, a gentle nun who immediately takes her to the supervisor, Mother Corinne. Mother Corinne questions Rose about her pregnancy. Rose tells her that the father of the baby is dead, died in a car accident, and later learns that all the girls say this. Mother Corinne sends Rose to her room, which she will share with a girl named Angie. Rose sleeps briefly and is crying when she wakes. Angie is there and they talk for a minute, getting to know one another. Rose and Angie go down to have tea on the porch with the rest of the girls before dinner. Rose is overwhelmed with the number of heavily pregnant girls there. At dinner, Rose meets the other girls due around the same time as her, including Beatrice and her roommate Regina. A girl goes into labor during dinner, causing a mild uproar as she is escorted out of the dining room. Rose asks what will happen to her and is told she will be taken to the hospital in Owensboro, an hour's drive away. Afterward, Rose learns, the girls are sent home, never to return to St. Elizabeth's.

In chapter 4, Mother Corinne makes it clear to Rose that she will be expected to do chores at St. Elizabeth's. Rose is assigned to help in the kitchen. The kitchen is run by Sister Evangeline, an old nun who was once mother superior at St. Elizabeth's. Sister Evangeline is not a good cook, so Rose begins studying cookbooks in a desire to improve the food at the home. Sister Evangeline touches Rose's belly one day and tells her she is going to have a girl. Sister Evangeline says she can talk to the babies. When Rose tells Angie, she insists that Rose take her to talk with Sister Evangeline the following day. Angie then tells Rose about the father of her baby, a business owner with whom she had an affair. The next day, Rose meets Son, the groundskeeper for St. Elizabeth's who lives in the small groundskeeper's house behind the old hotel. When Angie comes to the kitchen, Sister Evangeline is hesitant to talk to her about her baby, afraid Mother Corinne will find out and punish her. However, Sister Evangeline does and becomes upset. All Sister Evangeline will tell Angie is that she is having a girl, but later tells Rose that the baby will die at birth. Rose falls into a depression after learning this news and goes to sit in her car despite the cold. Son finds her there and takes her to June Clatterbuck who still lives in her family farm house across the pasture from the hotel. June is kind and befriends Rose immediately.

### Part 2, Rose: Chapters 3-4 Analysis

Rose arrives at St. Elizabeth's and finds herself hesitant to go inside. Rose is not like the other girls in the fact that she is married and her baby would not bring shame on her family if she were to tell them. It is this way for the other girls, touching on the setting of



the novel, and necessitating a place like St. Elizabeth's. However, Rose pretends that she is just like the others and moves into the home. Rose learns immediately that when a girl goes into labor, she is taken to the hospital, her baby taken away, and then sent home without having the chance to say goodbye to the other girls at St. Elizabeth's. This treatment only adds to the shame that overshadows this place and these girls, and it also makes it impossible for the girls to see or hold their babies because, again touching on the time period of the setting, women are anesthetized to have their babies and are not conscious upon their birth.

Rose begins working in the kitchen and meets Sister Evangeline. Sister Evangeline is an old, kind woman who has the gift of talking to the unborn babies, of learning of their sex and their future. This gift tells Rose that she will have a baby girl, but it also predicts that Angie's baby will die at birth. Rose falls into a depression and thinks of leaving again, but knows that, with the baby, she will have no where to go. At the same time, Rose meets Son, the handyman who lives on the property. Son is a giant of a man, but gentle and appears concerned with each of the girls who come to stay. Son takes Rose to meet June, the little girl who was saved by the spring in the first part of the novel. June is an older woman now, living alone in her family farmhouse. June is kind and befriends Rose immediately, foreshadowing a long friendship for Rose with both June and Sister Evangeline, June's good friend.



## Part 2, Rose: Chapter 5

### Part 2, Rose: Chapter 5 Summary

Several months have passed and Rose's belly begins to expand, causing her to feel uncomfortable in her own body. Angie is also approaching her due date and has begun crocheting clothing for her baby. Angie pushes Rose to think about her baby, to pick a name, but Rose is determined not to become attached. At the same time, Rose has essentially taken over the kitchen. Sister Evangeline does not seem to mind. In fact, the sister seems to enjoy Rose's constant companionship. Son has begun taking his dinner in the kitchen at night while Rose does the dishes. Rose pushes him to eat with the rest of the girls, but he refuses and Sister Evangeline hints that he does it to be with Rose.

All the girls at St. Elizabeth's are expected to attend church services. This includes mass said by a local priest in the hotel three weeks a month and a trip to the Owensboro church once a month. This trip includes a reception with the St. Vincent de Paul Society women after mass. One time a new mother forces her infant on Angie, causing her pain because she will be giving her own baby up. Rose takes the baby from her, taking her pain. Afterward, the girls are allowed to shop for an hour and a half before returning to the home. That day, Beatrice tells Angie and Rose that she intends to keep her labor secret when it begins in order to have the hour's drive to Owensboro to hold her babies. Angie and Rose promise to help. That night, Rose sends a postcard to her mother via the main post office in Chicago.

### Part 2, Rose: Chapter 5 Analysis

As Rose's pregnancy progresses, she becomes more determined to ignore it, to not become attached to the baby. However, Angie has gone the opposite way, making gifts for her child and fantasizing about the people who will adopt her. When Angie and Rose are forced to hold a newborn after church services one day, they are both hurt by the knowledge that they will never hold their own child. This shows the reader that despite Rose's determination not to become attached to her child, she is and she might regret her choice to a degree. Beatrice tells them she plans to labor at the hotel so that she can hold her babies. Rose and Angie agree to help, but do not expect her to go through with it, based on the pain that she will be experiencing. This suggests a time when they will have to put this theory to the test. Finally, Rose sends a postcard to her mother, showing the reader how deeply she misses her mother. Perhaps one day she will tell her mother where she is and go home.



## Part 2, Rose: Chapter 6

### Part 2, Rose: Chapter 6 Summary

Christmas comes and goes, leaving many of the girls heartsick for home. Rose receives a cookbook and a chair from Son, a chair he made himself for her, giving her the first piece of permanence she has had since coming to St. Elizabeth's. A few days later, Beatrice goes into labor and is determined to do it at the home. Angie, Rose, and Regina stand by her, helping her disguise her labor pains all through dinner and through the long night. Beatrice is strong, refusing to make any noise that might give her away. In the early hours before dawn, Beatrice tells the girls that it is time. Rose rushes to the kitchen and wakes Sister Evangeline.

Sister Evangeline once delivered many babies, but it has been a long time. Sister gathers all the things she will need and rushes to Beatrice's side. Everyone is concerned because the doctor thought that Beatrice is carrying one, large baby. However, Beatrice quickly and silently delivers twin boys. When Mother Corinne comes, the girls lie and tell her that Beatrice's labor progressed too fast for them to take her to the hospital. An ambulance is called and Beatrice is able to hold her babies as she had wanted to do. Rose follows Beatrice out to the ambulance and then begins walking down the road in nothing but her nightgown despite the cold. Rose is frightened and confused. Son finds her and takes her to his house where he warms her. When Rose wakes that afternoon, she tells Son she no longer wants to give up her baby. Son suggests they marry so that she can stay there with her baby. Rose agrees and insists they do it immediately, before she can change her mind. After the ceremony, Rose tells Angie and Sister Evangeline, who are both happy for them. That night, Rose sees a tattoo on Son's shoulder that says Cecilia. Rose decides that that will be their baby's name despite Son's clear reluctance.

### Part 2, Rose: Chapter 6 Analysis

Son gives Rose a chair, showing the reader how much he cares about her, something Rose has been too preoccupied to notice. A short time later, Beatrice has her babies at the home so that she can at least hold them for the hour it will take to get to Owensboro. This episode is dramatic and upsetting for Rose. Rose decides she does not want to lose another thing that is important to her, referring presumably to the loss of her mother. For this reason, Rose decides to marry Son and keep the baby. Rose makes it clear to the reader, but not to Son, that she is marrying a man she does not love because she believes this is what God wants of her. Rose believes that these things have happened so that she can remain at St. Elizabeth's and cook for the girls. Rose shows her character here, showing the reader the depth of her selfishness as she decides to use Son in order to do what she believes is right for her. It never occurs to Rose that she is hurting Son, especially when she decides to name her baby for a

woman Son once loved enough to have her name tattooed to his shoulder. This sets a precedent that will overshadow the rest of the novel's plot.



## Part 3, Son: Chapters 1-2

### Part 3, Son: Chapters 1-2 Summary

In chapter 1 of part 3, Son argues with Rose for weeks about naming the baby Cecilia, after his tattoo, but she refuses to back down. Rose asks him about the tattoo often, but never asks about the girl whose name it showcases. Son never asks Rose about her past, either. It is like an unspoken rule between them. On the day Angie goes into labor, Rose insists that she and Son will drive her. Rose is nervous while Angie labors in the hospital, constantly asking the nurses how she is doing. Finally the doctor comes out and tells Rose that the baby had the cord around its neck and died. Rose insists on knowing if it could have been prevented and learns it could have, had the doctors known in time. Rose visits Angie and tells her a lie, that Sister Evangeline did not know the baby was going to die. A week later, Rose has her baby. Rose forces the nurses to allow her to fill out the birth certificate. When she does, Rose puts Cecilia as the baby's name. Son then goes to a tattoo artist in Owensboro and has the date placed under his tattoo and a Rose underneath to make it appear as though the tattoo was originally intended for his daughter.

In chapter 2, Cecilia is a girl Son loves from the time he is a small child until they are both seventeen. Cecilia is often with Son, only to break up with him, sending him from the heights of euphoria to the depths of despair. Son's parents do not approve of Cecilia, are afraid of the pain she brings their son. However, Son continues to be with her. When the Japanese attack Pearl Harbor, Son decides to enlist in the marines along with dozens of his friends. When Cecilia learns this, she agrees to marry him. However, she insists on waiting until he returns from boot camp so that she will be a war bride. At boot camp, Son shows Cecilia's picture to all his new friends. One of these soldiers, Sam Dixon, takes an especially strong liking to the picture. On their first Cinderella leave, Son and his friends get drunk and decide to get tattoos. This is when Son gets the tattoo with Cecilia's name on his shoulder. Sam gets a similar tattoo, causing Son to beat him up. A day later, Son has midnight to four guard duty. A corporal of the guard comes to have a smoke with him and is showing him his side arm when it accidentally goes off. Son is shot in the knee.

### Part 3, Son: Chapters 1-2 Analysis

In this new part of the novel, Son takes over the first person point of view narration. Son tells his impressions of Rose, showing the reader how deeply he loves her and how willing he is to put up with her distance if it means being blessed with her as a wife. Son is much older than Rose and he simply feels lucky to have her. At the same time, Son is frustrated with Rose for refusing to consider other names for her daughter, other than Cecilia. Once again, Rose is single-minded about this situation and refuses to consider Son's feelings in regards to the name of her child. Rose shows the reader that she considers Son's feelings second to her own and that she still thinks of the child as her



own even though Son has placed himself in the position of father. Son then goes on to tell the story of the first Cecilia, helping the reader to understand his reluctance to have his child, a child he has fallen deeply in love with from the first moment he held her, be called by a name that only represents guilt and hurt for him. Son is a good man, the reader can see that in his actions with Rose and his desire to be a good father. His character represents for the reader a contrast to Rose's more self-centered behaviors and it also suggests that the child, Cecilia the second, will have at least one good parent to rely on.



## Part 3, Son: Chapters 3-4

### Part 3, Son: Chapters 3-4 Summary

In chapter 3, Rose returns to work in the kitchen at St. Elizabeth's just three days after Cecilia's birth. Rose has arranged for June to care for the baby during the day to protect the unwed mothers from having to see the infant. Son is unhappy with this because he feels that the baby, whom he calls Sissy, should be with her mother. Sissy brings everyone great joy, but Son questions why Rose decided to have the baby if she is unwilling to spend time with her. As Sissy grows older, she begins to notice that the girls disappear after their babies are born. Sissy asks Rose about it, who tries to explain, but Sissy is too young to really understand. Sissy becomes something of a plaything for the unwed mothers as she grows out of infancy. The unwed mothers like to fuss over her. Sissy becomes close to one of these mothers, Alice, who begins to dote on little Sissy. Sissy even stays the night at the home with Alice once, despite Son's concern. When Alice leaves the home, Sissy is heartbroken, referring to Alice as her mother despite Rose's presence beside her. During this time, Angie comes to visit with her new baby, Duane. Angie married her boyfriend and is happy, but her thoughts still linger on the infant she lost.

In chapter 4, Son returns to his story about the first Cecilia. Son was discharged from the military hospital and sent home a hero even though he never saw any action in the war. Cecilia is around constantly at first, happy to have Son home. However, as Son's leg heals and other young men who go to war die, Cecilia becomes less content. Son works at finishing high school from home and refuses to go out and see anyone, claiming his knee is too painful. This frustrates Cecilia and she eventually tells Son that the only reason she continues to come around is because everyone keeps telling her what a good person she is sticking by her injured fiancé.

One afternoon that spring, Son's father persuades Cecilia to take Son to the quarry to get a little son. When they arrive, Son takes off his shirt and Cecilia sees his tattoo for the first time, the only person beside his father who knows about it. Cecilia becomes angry and goes for a swim to get away from Son. Cecilia swims for a long time. Eventually Son begins to watch her, growing bored with his book. Cecilia dives under the water and comes up with a wound to her head. Son watches as she repeatedly goes under the water. Son dives in and finds her, but by this time she has already drowned. The town is heartbroken over this death and Son is filled with guilt, thinking he could have saved her had he gone into the water sooner. Finally Son leaves his hometown, unable to face the constant reminders. Son travels around for several years, finally coming to St. Elizabeth's where Sister Evangeline is the mother superior and gives him a job.





## Part 3, Son: Chapters 3-4 Analysis

Rose returns to work immediately in the kitchen even though Mother Corinne refuses to pay her. This necessitates Rose leaving Sissy, the baby, with June all day. Son is against this, feeling that the baby belongs with her mother. Rose insists it will not hurt the baby. In fact, it brings great joy to June. Son once again backs down because he does not want Rose to take the baby and leave. Son understands that Rose is a leaver, that she is always the person to leave and that she more than likely will leave him eventually. However, Son loves the baby more than anything and the last thing he wants is for her to go out of his life. Therefore, the reader is left with the impression that Son will do anything to keep Sissy, even go against his gentle character and lie or cheat for her, as any good father would.

Son finishes his tale about the first Cecilia, telling the reader almost directly with the use of an authorial voice, as though he is writing in a diary or a letter to a friend. Cecilia turns out to be a lot like Rose, self-centered and too selfish to care about those who love her. Cecilia wants to marry Son when she thinks he will be going to war. However, when Son comes home early after being shot accidentally, Cecilia is bored and ashamed, unwilling to marry him. However, Cecilia finds herself in a position where if she should break off the engagement she will reveal her heartlessness to those around her. Cecilia hangs on, but makes it clear to Son she is not happy about it. The day Cecilia drowns, Son is hurt and finds himself disliking Cecilia. When she begins to drown, Son recalls watching her drown and doing nothing. Son has lived with the guilt of those moments since that day, believing he might have saved her had he acted sooner. This again shows the reader the depth of Son's compassion, of his kind heart and caring soul. Son is a good man who was hurt once by a selfish woman, and the reader fears he will be hurt once again.



## Part 3, Son: Chapter 5

### Part 3, Son: Chapter 5 Summary

One afternoon when Sissy is ten, Sister Evangeline goes to June's house to watch their show together and finds her dead. Sister Evangeline gets Son who moves June to the couch and waits with Sister until the funeral home can come get her. The service is attended by the entire town due to June's family connection to them, with the town on one side and the girls from St. Elizabeth's on the other. After the funeral, Son gets a call from June's lawyer, asking him for a meeting. Son tries to get Rose to go with him, but she refuses to leave the kitchen. Son goes alone and learns that June has left all the land and the buildings, excluding the hotel, to Son. It turns out the Clatterbucks continued to own the land, even the land where the old hotel stands. Now it is Son's. Son tells Rose and she instructs him to not tell Sissy until she is grown so that she will not stop working hard for what she wants.

As Son, Rose, and Sissy make plans to move into the old farmhouse, Rose suffers the wrath of Mother Corinne who thought that the land would go to the Catholic Church upon June's death. Rose stands up to her for once, refusing to allow Mother Corinne to push her around any longer. The first night Son, Rose and Sissy are in the farmhouse, Son has a dream about the first Cecilia, imagining her coming and approving of Son's family. When Son wakes from the dream, he finds Rose fully dressed and preparing to leave. Rose tells him she cannot sleep and that she wants to go back to the old house, to get a few things. Son watches her leave, powerless to make her stop.

### Part 3, Son: Chapter 5 Analysis

June is the last connection to the days before the Hotel Louisa, to the time before St. Elizabeth's. When June dies, it is as though the past has gone with her, touching on a theme of the novel. June's funeral seems to personify the division between the people of Habit and the Hotel Louisa/St. Elizabeth's when everyone seems to separate themselves over the grave, refusing to accept or to mingle. The people of Habit have always mistrusted the Catholics and this funeral reveals that that mistrust is still alive in that tiny town. It increases the sense that the people of St. Elizabeth's are an island to themselves.

When Son inherits the land under and around St. Elizabeth's, he has the option to ask the Catholics to leave the building, but he chooses not to. This is a way of life to Son and he cannot imagine changing it. He does, however, move his family into the larger farmhouse. This move causes Rose to panic, to feel caught in a life she does not want. Rose moves back to the groundskeeper's house and Son does nothing to stop her. This act once again shows Rose's selfish side and it makes Son look as though he is weak. However, Son is not weak. Son is in love.



## Part 4, Cecilia: Chapter 1

### Part 4, Cecilia: Chapter 1 Summary

In chapter 1 of part 4, Sissy comes home from school to find a girl reading the sign out in front of St. Elizabeth's. Sissy ignores her as she has been taught to do by her mother and goes inside to find a letter waiting for her from her pen pal in Spain. As Sissy reads the letter, the girl comes inside. Sister Bernadette sits her down and goes to find Mother Corinne. Sissy talks to her to appear polite, advising her not to tell Mother Corinne the baby's father has died because everyone says that. The girl, Lorraine, asks Sissy what excuse she gave. This shocks Sissy, being mistaken for one of the mothers, and she leaves to sit in the field and think it over. Sissy has never had sex and cannot imagine doing it any time soon even though she is now fifteen, about the age of most of the girls at St. Elizabeth's. Son finds Sissy lying here and is anxious because he thinks she is hurt or ill. Sissy makes him sit down and suddenly realizes how old her father truly is. Son celebrates his sixtieth birthday only a few months before.

Sissy and her father go to the house where they discover Rose has recently been. Rose leaves behind a skirt she made for Sissy. Sissy pretends to hate it, but really likes it. Sissy thinks about a time when she accuses her parents of adopting her. It is then that Sissy learns her full name and that her middle name, Helen, is her maternal grandmother's name. Sissy goes to the kitchen and talks with Sister Evangeline. They play their favorite game in which Sissy provides a date and Sister Evangeline talks about a Saint somehow connected to that date. Today Sister talks about St. Isidore. When Sister suggests that anyone can be a saint, even Sissy, Rose laughs.

### Part 4, Cecilia: Chapter 1 Analysis

Sissy is nearly grown now and coming to the same age as many of the girls at St. Elizabeth's, presenting her with a unique problem. Sissy feels less knowledgeable than these girls because she has had no experience with sex. This suggests a time when Sissy will feel pressured to learn more about sex. This chapter also shows the reader some tension between Sissy and her mother. Sissy has become a fixture at the home and her father still dotes on her like he did when he was little. Even Sister Evangeline still finds joy in Sissy and her daily visits. However, Sissy clearly feels abandoned and neglected by her mother and this has caused them to have a difficult relationship. This knowledge foreshadows a time when Sissy and her mother will either continue to grow apart or will find some common ground on which to rebuild their relationship.



## Part 4, Cecilia: Chapters 2-3

### Part 4, Cecilia: Chapters 2-3 Summary

In chapter 2, it is the first day of summer break and Sissy goes to the kitchen at St. Elizabeth's to have lunch. Rose offers to give her driving lessons. After some hesitation, Sissy insists that her mother take her in her own car, the Dodge Duster she drove from California. Rose agrees. As Sissy slowly gets over her fear of driving, she notices that her mother is more willing to talk about herself in the car. Sissy learns that her mother used to love to drive and that her father died in a car accident. Sissy has always felt abandoned by her mother, especially after she moved back to the groundskeeper's house. Learning new things about her mother is like a gift she never thought she would get. The next day, Sissy runs into Lorraine again and they talk for a few minutes before Sissy goes to the kitchen to check on Sister Evangeline. When Sissy is sure Sister Evangeline is okay, she asks her mother for another driving lesson. This time Sissy asks about her grandmother and learns that she got married again after Rose was grown. Rose also tells her how she used to drive around a lot. Then Rose announces that she is tired of driving in the pasture, so they pick up Sister Evangeline and go on the road.

In chapter 3, Sissy is about to leave the house when Son walks onto the porch bleeding profusely from his head. Son speaks her name, Cecilia, then falls unconscious to the porch floor. Sissy quickly wraps a table cloth around his head and lays him down on some pillows. Sissy then goes to the kitchen of St. Elizabeth's to get her mother, but discovers she is gone. Sister Evangeline calls the hospital for an ambulance, but knows it will be quicker if they drive Son there. Sissy grabs Lorraine and gets her mother's car. They load Son into the car and rush to the hospital. When Rose arrives at the hospital she is angry with Sissy for driving without a license. They argue for a minute before Rose is allowed to go back and see Son. Son receives more than fifty stitches in his head, but is allowed to go home. At home, Sissy settles Son on the couch while her mother goes to get some food for dinner. When Rose comes back, Sissy asks her why she moved out of the house. Rose tells her that she wanted to leave and that was the only way she could make herself stay. That night, Rose, Son, and Sissy have a family dinner for the first and only time in the farmhouse.

### Part 4, Cecilia: Chapters 2-3 Analysis

Rose is a distant parent and Sissy clearly resents this about her mother. Sissy feels that she does not get the affection or compassion from her mother that she deserves. However, when Rose begins giving Sissy driving lessons, she discovers that Rose will talk while in her car. For this reason, Sissy often asks for driving lessons and then carefully asks for the information she has wanted to know from her mother. Sissy loves her mother despite the tension between them and she wants her to be a part of her life, wants to know all she can about her. However, Rose is distant, unable to let go of the desire to leave, and she refuses to share herself with anyone, including her child.



Son hurts himself and Sissy is alone to deal with the crisis. Sissy feels ill-equipped for the job, but she manages to get her father the help he needs. This crisis leads Sissy to resent her mother for not being a part of their lives, for not being there to help. This anger and resentment gives Sissy the strength she needs to ask why her mother does not want to be a part of her life. Rose gives an unsatisfactory answer, replying that it is the only way she can stay. To the reader, Rose's selfishness comes out clearly again, her inability to put others before herself. This foreshadows a time when Rose will leave. The only questions are when, why, and if she will take her family when she goes.



## Part 4, Cecilia: Chapters 4-5

### Part 4, Cecilia: Chapters 4-5 Summary

In chapter 4, Lorraine has become a constant visitor at Sissy's house. Lorraine likes to talk about boys with Sissy, a subject Sissy knows little about and is embarrassed to admit she knows little about. Sissy is continuing the driving lessons with her mother and has learned about her mother's trip to Kentucky, including the hitchhiker she once picked up. After the lesson, Lorraine and Sissy go to the river for a swim. Lorraine is excited at first, but falls into a depression when she sees boys there. Sissy does not understand this mood and is glad when it is gone as they return to the home. When Sissy tells Son where she had been, he becomes angry that she went swimming without an adult nearby. Three days later, Sissy and Rose are preparing to leave for another lesson when Sister Bernadette came to tell them they have mail. Sissy's is from her pen pal, but she never sees who wrote to her mother. All Sissy knows is that her mother's mood suddenly changes. Rose does not want to go driving after all. That night, Rose is moody and Sister Evangeline refuses to speak at dinner, a highly unusual situation. Sissy knows Rose received bad news in her letter, but cannot imagine what. Sissy insists on helping with the dishes that night. When they are done, Rose tells her goodnight and sends her away. The next morning, Rose is gone.

In chapter 5, Sissy calls the police, but they tell her there is nothing they can do about her mother. Rose left instructions for the kitchen staff and a note, but it is written to everyone and is impersonal. Son refuses to talk about it, but Sister Evangeline will not stop talking about Rose. Sister tells Sissy that she is her salvation, her only way of getting through this dark time. Sissy goes to Rose's house and gathers up her things to keep close, her clothing and toiletries. Sissy is glad to see that her mother took all the gifts she had ever given her over the years. The kitchen duties are left to the girls at St. Elizabeth's, but in time Lorraine begins taking over much the way Rose once did. To cheer Sissy up, Lorraine gives Sissy highlights in her hair. Then one afternoon a week after Rose left, Sissy gets a call from Sister Bernadette letting her know a man has come to see Rose. Sissy goes to St. Elizabeth's and meets Thomas Clinton. Thomas tells Sissy that he was once married to Rose and has come to tell her her mother died. Thomas knew where to find Rose from some postcards she had sent her mother, postmarked from Habit. Lorraine goes to find Son and he comes in, looking scared, and is introduced to Thomas.

### Part 4, Cecilia: Chapters 4-5 Analysis

Sissy continues to learn things about her mother and it appears some of the tension has left their relationship. In fact, the reader is becoming optimistic that this mother and child will find a way to connect now that they have found some common ground. However, this impression proves to be false when Rose once again runs away from a situation she cannot handle, touching on a theme of the novel. Rose gets a letter and the next

day is gone with little explanation to the people who have loved and cared for her for more than fifteen years.

Sissy is heartbroken over her mother's abandonment, another theme of the novel, and has trouble dealing with the idea that her mother will never return. When Thomas Clinton shows up, Sissy clings to him because he has information about her mother that no one else at St. Elizabeth's has ever imagined, let alone known. Son, on the other hand, has some knowledge of Rose's past and is terrified when Thomas shows up. Son knows that Thomas is Sissy's biological father and the last thing he wants now is to lose his daughter. The reader has no way of knowing, however, if Thomas will put the facts together and decide to take Sissy away, therefore the next and final chapter of the novel holds secrets the reader is anxious to learn.



## Part 4, Cecilia: Chapter 6

### Part 4, Cecilia: Chapter 6 Summary

Sissy insists that Thomas Clinton stay in her mother's house for the night and join them for dinner. As Lorraine shows Thomas to the house, Son takes Sissy aside and asks her not to tell Thomas how old she is. Son insists that it would hurt Thomas' feelings to learn that Son and Rose married so quickly after she left him. Sissy suspects that her parents had to get married because her mother was pregnant and that this is what Son is trying to hide. Over dinner, Thomas is polite and answers all questions Sissy asks about her mother. It is a polite dinner, something Sissy thinks her mother would have been surprised by but proud of. Afterward, Son takes a bottle of whiskey and offers Thomas a drink. The men drink out on the back porch while Sissy and Lorraine do the dishes. Afterward, Sissy asks Son what they talked about for so long and he says fishing.

The following morning, Sissy rushes to her mother's house to talk to Thomas. It is early, but Thomas is already awake. Thomas shows Sissy some pictures of Rose that he often carries with him to show to people as he travels. Sissy sees her mother in her wedding pictures, her high school picture, and so many others and hardly recognizes her. Thomas allows her to keep one and then offers to send her duplicates of the others. Thomas also leaves his phone number and the phone number of Joe, Helen's husband. As Sissy watches Thomas leave she begins to feel depressed, having grown tired of saying goodbye to people. Then Sissy decides she no longer wants to know where everyone goes and if they are coming back. In fact, Sissy decides to focus on the future, on Lorraine whom she has suddenly become convinced will keep her baby and become the cook at St. Elizabeth's.

### Part 4, Cecilia: Chapter 6 Analysis

Sissy gets to know Thomas, clinging to him because of his connection to Rose. It never occurs to Sissy that Thomas is her biological father because she has never doubts Son or his devotion to her. This is in deep contrast to Sissy's feelings for her mother, proving how different the two parents are for Sissy. Thomas never seems to realize his relationship to Sissy either, or if he does, he keeps it between himself and Son. Son talks to Thomas for a long time and the reader finds themselves doubting that all they talked about was fishing since Son hates the water and has probably not fished since he was a young man. Sissy believes this story, however, making her something of an unreliable narrator here, but also making her a trusting, typical teenager.

Sissy talks to Thomas once more and takes a picture of her mother. Thomas and Sissy promise to keep in touch, suggesting this will not be the last time Sissy hears from Thomas nor will it be the last opportunity for either of them to come to terms with their relationship. As Thomas leaves, Sissy feels abandoned again, a theme of the novel. However, Sissy shows her maturity when she decides she no longer wants to think



about the ones who leave. Instead, Sissy focuses on the future, showing the reader that life goes on, with or without the ones we love.



# Characters

## Martha Rose Sloan Clinton Abbott

Rose's father dies when she is three, leaving her alone with her beautiful mother, Helen. Rose admires her mother, loves to watch her help people at her makeup counter in the department store where she works, even if she does not always like the advice her mother gives her at home. Helen is Catholic, therefore Rose is raised in the church and spends a great deal of time during her adolescents waiting for God to give her a sign that will tell her if she should be a nun or a wife. When Rose meets Thomas Clinton, she decides his devotion to her before she even knows his name is a sign. Rose marries Thomas and quickly settles down to married life. However, Rose feels a tightness in her chest each night as she lies beside her husband in bed, a tightness that only goes away when she drives in her car. Therefore, Rose drives for hours and hours, sometimes going so far that she has to drive all night to get back home.

Rose learns she is pregnant and decides she must leave. Rose feels as though this is all a mistake and it would all be better if she just disappears. Rose loves her mother deeply and feels that her punishment for hurting Thomas in this way is the loss of her mother. Rose goes to a home for unwed mothers, unsure what her plan is, except to have her baby and give it away. However, Rose changes her mind and decides she wants to keep her baby, so she marries a man she does not love in order to keep the child and to remain at the home. Rose takes over the kitchen of the home, obsessing over the cooking like she once obsessed over driving. Rose abandons her husband and her child even though she is still physically present, living in a separate residence and allowing the mothers in the home to act as mother to her child.

Rose is a selfish woman who does not feel content in her own body, let alone in the friendships and relationships she has built. Rose always has that feeling of tightness in her chest, that need to move on. Rose fights it because she believes St. Elizabeth's is where God wants her to be. However, when Rose gets a letter from Thomas, who has found her, she decides she cannot sit around and wait for Thomas to come and force her past into the open. Rose leaves her friends, her husband, and her child in an effort to protect herself.

## Wilson 'Son' Abbott

Son is from Tennessee. Son grows up in a small town where everyone knows everyone else. From the time he is a small child, Son is in love with a girl named Cecilia. Cecilia, like Rose, is flighty and often breaks up with Son, only to come back to him sometime later. When the Japanese attack Pearl Harbor, Son quickly enlists in the marines. Cecilia is excited by this and agrees to marry him. However, when Son is shot and forced out of the marines before he finishes boot camp, Cecilia is disappointed and begins distancing herself from Son. In the end Cecilia drowns, leaving Son with mixed



emotions. Son begins traveling, moving from place to place making money with small jobs here and there. Eventually Son comes to Habit and gets a job working at St. Elizabeth's. Son only intends to stay for a few days, but he ends up staying for more than thirty years.

Son falls in love with Rose the moment he sees her. Rose is distant and rarely talks to him, but still Son imagines spending time alone with her. One night, when Rose wanders out into the snow in nothing but a nightgown, Son convinces her to marry him so that she can keep her baby. Rose accepts this offer. When Rose sees a tattoo on Son's shoulder with Cecilia's name, she decides to name her baby this. Son is horrified and tries to talk her out of her, reluctant to be constantly reminded of this dark time in his life. Rose refuses to relent, however, and goes through with her plan. Son never calls his daughter Cecilia, however, insisting on calling her Sissy. Son loves Sissy more than life and is terrified that Rose will eventually take her away from him. When Rose leaves, Son is saddened, but it is something he has expected most of their married life. However, when Sissy's biological father shows up, Son is terrified. Luckily, Sissy never figures out the truth and Thomas leaves without making any mention of the possibility to her.

## **Cecilia 'Sissy' Abbott**

Sissy is Rose's daughter, the child with whom she is pregnant when she leaves California. Sissy grows up at St. Elizabeth's, therefore she becomes used to people leaving from a very early age. Sissy's relationship with her father is ideal, but becomes tense when Sissy realizes that he is getting older and she is the only one around who cares to take care of him. Sissy's relationship with her mother is a difficult one. From the time Sissy is a small child she begs for her mother's attention, but rarely gets it. Sissy turns to the unwed mothers living at the hotel for the compassion and devotion she should have gotten from her mother. As Sissy grows older, the girls are more like friends than mothers, therefore she only has Sister Evangeline to fill the hole her mother's distance creates. When Rose leaves, Sissy is angry and hurt, but Thomas's appearance helps to fill some of those holes. In a short time Sissy comes to accept what has happened and to move on with her life, looking happily to the future.

## **Thomas Clinton**

Thomas Clinton is Rose's first husband. Thomas is a shy man who has trouble talking with women. In fact, before getting up the courage to ask Rose out the first time, Thomas follows her for months. Thomas followed as Rose went to work or to church and would watch her from a distance, never able to imagine convincing her to go out with him. When Rose hears this, she believes Thomas is her sign from God, that God wants her to marry Thomas and be a good wife to him. However, Rose begins to feel a tightness in her chest when she leaves her mother's home, when she sees her mother getting on with her life without Rose. Rose leaves Thomas. Thomas never remarries. When Rose's mother dies, Thomas is given some postcards Rose has sent over the



years with postmarks from Habit. Thomas goes there to tell her of the death of her mother, but his coming scares Rose away. Thomas meets Sissy, unaware that she is his daughter. If he suspects, the reader never learns for sure. Thomas leaves some pictures for Sissy and his number before driving back to where he came from.

## Helen Sloan

Helen is Rose's mother. Helen is a very beautiful woman who is widowed at a young age. Helen devotes her life to her only child, Rose, and refuses to remarry until Rose leaves the home, married to a husband of her own. It is perhaps Helen's decision to wait until Rose leaves to remarry that begins Rose's struggle with her own situation. Rose is convinced she does not love her husband and that she is stuck in a relationship that will overshadow the rest of her life. Rose is deeply unhappy, perhaps because she does not have her mother to devote every moment to her. Helen, however, is the one person that Rose loves more than herself and she feels that losing her mother is her punishment for walking away from her marriage vows.

## Sister Evangeline

Sister Evangeline is in charge of the kitchen at St. Elizabeth's. When Sister Evangeline is a younger woman and St. Elizabeth's begins taking in unwed mothers, she is the mother superior. However, as the home grows and she becomes older, Sister Evangeline is replaced by Mother Corinne. Sister Evangeline is a bad cook. Rose comes into her kitchen as a helper when she first comes to St. Elizabeth and finds a kind of peace in the kitchen that she has only found while sitting behind the wheel of her car. Rose takes over everything, cooking three meals a day every day, giving Sister Evangeline the rest she needs. Sister Evangeline is in her seventies when Rose first comes.

Sister Evangeline has a gift in which she claims to be able to speak to the unborn babies. Sister uses this gift to speak to Rose's unborn baby, whom she claims will be a girl and will be the reason her mother decides to stay at St. Elizabeth's and become the full time cook. Rose does not believe her, but later she marries Son and stays. Sister Evangeline becomes an important person in Sissy's life, her grandmother, aunt, and cousin all mixed up in one. When Rose leaves, Sister Evangeline is devastated, but she takes comfort in having Sissy remain.

## Mother Corinne

Mother Corinne is the nun in charge at St. Elizabeth's. Mother Corinne does not like Rose from their first meeting, but refuses to kick her out of the kitchen because she knows that Rose is the best cook they could ever have and Rose does it for free. No one seems to like Mother Corinne, but they all put up with her because she is essentially harmless. Son has come to realize that Mother Corinne simply likes to spar, therefore he never backs down when he argues with her, forcing her to see things from



his side as well as from hers. Mother Corinne also does not like the girls who come to the home and claim the father of their babies is dead, therefore Rose and the others try to warn new girls whenever they can.

## June Clatterbuck

June Clatterbuck is three when the spring bubbles up above the ground. June becomes ill and her father gives her some of the water in the hopes that it will save her life. When it does, word gets out that the spring has life saving properties. People begin coming from all over the country, including a rich horse breeder whose young wife has crippling arthritis. When the arthritis is cured, the man builds a hotel that he wants to name for June there on her father's land. Instead he names it for his wife, Louisa.

When Son comes to St. Elizabeth's, June is the last Clatterbuck left alive. Son and June become fast friends and when Rose comes, she and June also become friends. June helps to raise Sissy when she comes along, caring for her everyday while her mother works in the kitchen and her father on the grounds. Upon June's death from a stroke, Son finds out that she left him all the land and the family house. Son quickly moves into the house, but Rose refuses to make the transition with him.

## Angie

Angie is Rose's roommate when she first comes to St. Elizabeth's. Angie is younger than Rose, a young woman who is seduced on multiple occasions by a kind boss. When Angie becomes pregnant, she has a boyfriend she anticipates marrying some day, therefore she is determined to have the baby and give it away quickly. This changes as Angie's pregnancy advances. Although Angie is still intent on giving the baby away, she makes clothes for it and dreams of what its life is going to be like with its adoptive parents. Sister Evangeline tells her it is going to be a baby, but she also tells Rose that the baby will die at birth. When this comes true, Rose feels guilty for not having said anything to anyone. Angie will eventually marry her boyfriend and have another baby, but she will never forget the one she lost.

## Beatrice

Beatrice is another girl who lives at St. Elizabeth's when Rose is there. Beatrice is a big girl who is convinced she is having twins even though the doctor keeps assuring her that there is only one, large baby inside of her. Beatrice knows she must give her babies up, but she wants to be able to hold them for a while. Beatrice decides she will labor at the hotel so that there will be no option but to have them there, therefore giving her the hour's ride to Owensboro to hold them. Rose watches Beatrice labor all day long and finally breaks down, letting Sister Evangeline know what is happening in time to allow her to deliver the babies. It is this situation that inspires Rose to keep her own child and leads to her marriage to Son.



## Objects/Places

### Tattoo

Son has a tattoo on his shoulder with the name of his first love, Cecilia, written in it. When Rose insists on calling her daughter Cecilia, Son has the tattoo altered to reflect his daughter's birth date, making it appear as though the tattoo was always meant for her.

### Pictures

Thomas Clinton gives Sissy pictures of her mother from before she came to Kentucky, giving Sissy a piece of her mother that she was never allowed before.

### Detective Magazines

Beatrice enjoys detective magazines and she saves one particularly juicy sounding story for the day she goes into labor with her twin boys.

### Dining Room

The unwed mothers all eat in the dining room at meal times. The girls who are closest to delivering their babies are allowed the best table in the room, the table originally used by the couple who built the hotel.

### 1965 Dodge Dart

Rose takes her husband's 1965 Dodge Dart when she leaves California for Kentucky. Rose keeps the car all the years she remains at St. Elizabeth's and it is in this car that she leaves her family behind to disappear once more.

### Quarry

Son's Cecilia, his first love, dies while swimming in the local quarry. Son feels he might have saved her had he attempted to rescue her sooner, but he did not because he knew she was about to leave him again.

### Groundskeeper's House

Son lives in the groundskeeper's house on the property behind St. Elizabeth's and works as a handyman for the nuns.



## **Clatterbuck Farm and House**

The Clatterbuck family owns the land where the spring appears and therefore the land on which St. Elizabeth's stands. June Clatterbuck continues to live in the family home, a few yards from St. Elizabeth's, until her death. At that point, Son inherits the land and the house. Son and Sissy move into the house shortly after June's death, but Rose chooses to remain in the groundskeeper's house.

## **St. Elizabeth's Kitchen**

Rose takes over the kitchen at St. Elizabeth's during her time there as an unwed mother. When Cecilia is born, Rose chooses to remain in the kitchen, returning to her duties three days after the birth and staying until she receives a letter informing her of Thomas' impending visit.

## **Hotel Louisa/St. Elizabeth's**

The Hotel Louisa is built near a spring on the Clatterbuck farm that appears to heal people who suffer from all different types of illnesses. When the spring dries up, the hotel closes and the building is donated to the Catholic Church. The church turns it into a home for unwed mothers and renames it St. Elizabeth's, after the woman in the Bible who longs for a child and is finally blessed with one late in life.

## **Habit, Kentucky**

Habit is the small town in which St. Elizabeth's is located.

## **Owensboro, Kentucky**

Owensboro is the larger town near Habit where all the girls go to have their babies.

## **Marina del Rey, California**

Marina del Rey is where Rose and her husband Thomas move after he graduates from college and gets his first teaching job.

## **Ashland City, Tennessee**

Son is born and raised in Ashland City and this is where he meets and falls in love with Cecilia.



# Themes

## Running Away

Rose has never felt comfortable staying in one place. Rose's childhood is upset by the death of her father, leaving her alone with a mother who does the best she can, raising a child on her own. As Rose grows up, she sees her mother derive peace from her religion, so Rose tries to do the same. Rose thinks God will give her a sign when it is time to make choices about her future, about the life she is supposed to live. When Rose meets Thomas Clinton, she thinks he is her sign. Rose believes she is supposed to get married and raise a family. However, the moment Rose is married, she realizes she does not love her husband. Soon a pain develops in her chest, a need to escape. After Thomas teaches her to drive, Rose drives everywhere, hoping that the constant movement will remove that pain from her chest. Unfortunately, it only grows. When Rose learns she is pregnant, she has to get away before Thomas, or her mother, find out.

Rose could not explain, even to herself, this need to move on. Rose thinks about going back dozens of times, but each time she realizes that it will only be harder to leave the next time. Rose continues to leave the past behind her, trying to forget the man who loved her and the mother who sacrificed for her. It is the loss of her mother that haunts Rose throughout her years away, a pain she feels is her burden for her decision to leave. As the birth of her child comes near, Rose begins to realize that she does not want to lose another thing that is hers. Rose marries Son Abbott, just to keep the child that is growing inside of her. However, soon after the child's birth, Rose fails to adjust to motherhood and finds it easier to allow all the others around her, the mothers aching to be mothers, to raise her daughter for her. Once again, Rose has run away.

Rose wants to leave again. Rose fights the need to run again and again, feeling it is her duty to God to remain where she is, cooking for the nuns and the unwed mothers. However, Rose aches to leave. When Son and Sissy move into the Clatterbuck's house, Rose cannot make herself go with them. Rose remains in the groundskeeper's house she shared with Son for more than ten years, unable to stay, but unable to leave. It is not until Rose learns that Thomas has found her, that he is coming for her, that Rose finally runs again. Rose cannot face her past, cannot face the pain she has caused and she cannot put her family first. Rose runs because she is a leaver, because it is what she does.

## Abandonment

Son is a good man who loves with every part of his huge body. Son loves Cecilia, loves her so much that he has her name tattooed on his arm. Son wants a life, a family, with Cecilia despite her inconsistency, her inability to commit to him with the faith and trust he commits to her. Cecilia wants excitement, she wants happiness, therefore she never





settles with Son even when she agrees to marry him. Cecilia wants to be a war bride, not to settle down to an average life in an average town with an average man. The day she dies, Son knows it is over between them, has felt it for months. Son knows Cecilia stays in the water so long because she does not want to be near him. It is this behavior, this loss of love, that makes him watch as she begins to drown.

Son marries Rose because he loves her and he wants to fix everything that seems wrong in her life. Rose marries him to keep her baby. It is not a typical marriage, but it works for Son for a while. Rose is there, Rose needs him once, Rose is his wife. Son feels as though he is lucky to have her for what little time she allows him. When Rose moves into the groundskeeper's house away from him and Sissy, he accepts it because she is still near, she is still his wife. It is not until Rose leaves Kentucky that Son begins to mourn her, abandoned once more for reasons he cannot fully understand. Son is a good husband, a caring husband. Son loves Rose more than life, but a part of him always knows she will leave someday.

Sissy grows up at a home for unwed mothers, so she learns early in life that people come and go from your life, no matter how much you love them. Sissy has also come to accept that her mother is not someone who can share herself with others. Sissy tries over and over again to get her mother's attention, to learn something of her past, to earn her love. Rose never gives of herself to anyone, however, and Sissy soon learns it is a losing battle. However, Sissy is never prepared for her mother to leave. When Rose is gone, not leaving a note or any sign specifically for her only child, Sissy is devastated. Sissy is tired of everyone leaving her the way they do. However, Sissy has her wonderful father, her good friends, and slowly she is able to come to terms with the abandonment of her mother.

## Religion

Religion is a theme of this novel because the house that Rose goes to to have her baby is run by Catholic nuns. Rose is raised Catholic, therefore she understands the religion and has already accepted its canons. However, many of the other girls who come to St. Elizabeth's are not Catholic, some not even religious. Somehow all these girls find themselves embracing the religion, however, as their bodies change to become something unrecognizable and they find themselves facing a future they dread.

Religion is also a theme of the novel because the battle between religions touches on the plot of the novel from time to time. When St. Elizabeth's first opened its doors in Habit, Kentucky, it was not welcome. The people of Habit are mostly Baptist and they are hostile toward the nuns whom they fail to understand. This causes a rift between the townspeople and the nuns that keep them hidden in the old hotel, reluctant to go into town for fear of the reactions of the townspeople. As time goes on and religious hostility begins to fade, the nuns continue to keep to themselves, making St. Elizabeth's something of an enigma in this small, rural community.



Finally, religion is a theme of this novel because it is something Sissy can share with those around her. Sissy does not have a good relationship with her mother, therefore she turns to Sister Evangeline for the guidance and unconditional love she does not get from her mother. As part of this relationship, Sissy and Sister Evangeline often talk about saints, the many saints who have been elevated to this high status by the church for acts of sacrifice or kindness they commit before and after their deaths. Sissy soon learns about many of the saints, from St. Thomas to St. Theresa, listening to their stories while watching her mother cook in the kitchen of St. Elizabeth's. It is a theme of Sissy's life, this talk of religion, making it a theme of the novel.

# Style

## Point of View

The point of view of this novel is first person. Each section of the novel is written from the point of view of a different character, but only that character narrates his or her own section. The first person point of view allows the reader to see an intimate side of each of these characters that is not available when another character is the narrator, therefore the writer is able to bring the reader close to each main character while still utilizing the highly intimate first person point of view.

The point of view of this novel can be a little jarring for the reader when the transition from one narrator to another takes place. The first half of the novel is seen from Rose's point of view. The reader grows close to Rose, reading the novel as though her words are written specifically for the reader. When the narration changes, there is a clear break, the chapter numbers begin over and it is clearly a new part of the book, but it still jarring for the reader to grow used to listening to Rose's story through the eyes of a different character. Despite this unusual format, the first person point of view allows the reader to see Rose through her own eyes, through the eyes of the man who loves her, and through the eyes of the child who desperately wants Rose's love. It is a complex novel that uses a complex point of view, which works well.

## Setting

The novel begins in California, but quickly moves to Kentucky where Rose will settle for nearly sixteen years at a home for unwed mothers. St. Elizabeth's is located in tiny Habit, Kentucky, a farming community an hour's drive from the nearest city. St. Elizabeth's was once Hotel Louisa, a luxury hotel built to monopolize a life-giving spring that once bubbled out of a farmer's dry creek bed. The hotel closed when the spring dried up and the building was donated to the Catholic Church while the land remains the property of the farmer, Clatterbuck. Rose, the main character, comes here to have her baby, but decides to stay in order to keep that child and to cook for the mothers, something she believes God ordains her to do.

The setting is the home for unwed mothers. This setting becomes a personification of the theme of abandonment because so many girls come to this place over the years, but they always leave. Rose is a leaver, someone who always leaves when the going gets tough rather than being the one who is left behind when the dust clears. The fact that she has come to a place that is not permanent, where nothing remains the same for long, presents a sense of irony to the setting. It seems that Rose can only find peace in a place where there is no permanence. Rose will eventually leave even this place, but for fifteen years she makes it her home. At the same time, Sissy is raised in this home, raised with people coming and going from her life every day until she is finally able to



accept these moments of abandonment, even when it is her mother who will never be coming back. For these reasons, this setting is ideal for the developing plot of the novel.

## Language and Meaning

The language of this novel is simple English. The novel is written in the slang and easy grammar that a person might use to speak in the sixties, seventies, and eighties, the time period in which the novel is set. The novel is written largely in internal dialogue, exposition, and some external dialogue. As the novel progresses, it appears to the reader that the narrators are setting their story to paper for some unknown reason, perhaps to help each of them better understand Rose's actions. For this reason, the language tends to be a little more formal than each of these characters might use in everyday speech, but still casual enough to include slang common to the time period in which the novel is written.

The language of this novel works well because it is simple to read and not difficult for even the least educated reader to comprehend. The novel's language reflects each of the narrators to a certain degree. When Son tells his story, he often uses short sentences that reflect his casual, Southern upbringing. At the same time, Rose's narration tends to be distant. Rose is not a person who likes to reflect on her past or her personal emotions, therefore her section of the novel seems more like a telling than a sharing. With Sissy, the narration is a mixture of the two, filled with her father's casual speech but also filled with her mother's more distant, distracted narration. The language reflects each of its narrating characters, therefore works well with this novel.

## Structure

The novel is divided into four parts, each titled with the name of the character who handles the narration for that section. Each part has its own set of numbered chapters, each chapter containing as many as fifty to sixty pages each. The novel is written in exposition and dialogue and also contains a great deal of inner monologue, especially in Son's section in which he tells the story of his life before he came to St. Elizabeth's.

The novel's main plot follows Rose Clinton as she panics upon learning she is pregnant and leaves her husband. Rose goes to a home for unwed mothers in Kentucky with the intention of giving up her child and moving on. However, Rose decides to keep her baby and stay at the home. Rose lives there for more than fifteen years, but leaves when her past catches up to her. The novel also contains multiple subplots, including the stories of two girls from the home and the story of Son's first love. All these plots come to a satisfying conclusion at some point in the novel.



## Quotes

"Two o'clock in the morning, a Thursday morning, the first bit of water broke through the ground of George Clatterbuck's back pasture in Habit, Kentucky, and not a living soul saw it." Part 1, Habit, pg. 1.

"I started out with a lie of omission, which some people might see as easier, but I think is actually more complex." Part 2, Rose: Chapter 1, pg. 11.

"I had started to doubt my body." Part 2, Rose: Chapter 2, pg. 35.

"I did not know my own body. I thought of all those years I hadn't known my mind, didn't come close to understanding what I wanted, but my body was completely my own." Part 2, Rose: Chapter 5, pg. 77.

"God came to us in the form of Father Bernard, who made the drive down from Owensboro three Sundays a month to say mass in the grand ballroom." Part 2, Rose: Chapter 5, pg. 85.

"In the end, there was only one name that wouldn't be right, which is the name Rose had settled on. Cecilia." Part 3, Son: Chapter 1, pg. 127.

"I fell to the ground like a stone and there was a sound of all my breath coming out of my lungs and Billy Lovell looked at me for that second and I looked at him and we knew, that in different ways, it was all over for both of us." Part 3, Son: Chapter 2, pg. 167.

"I tried to stay in the marines after I was shot. It was almost like somewhere in the back of my mind I knew that things would be worse, even worse than the hospital and doctors, once I got home." Part 3, Son: Chapter 4, pg. 188.

"When I was a kid I used to run out as soon as I saw somebody at the sign but my mother told me to leave them alone, let them come in on their own time." Part 4, Cecilia: Chapter 1, pg. 233.

"The only thing I knew for sure was that when I got up the next morning, my mother was gone." Part 4, Cecilia: Chapter 4, pg. 298.

"That absence of a name was so much clearer, and sadder, than the talking." Part 4, Cecilia: Chapter 5, pg. 311.

"I was her sign from God." Part 4, Cecilia: Chapter 6, pg. 336.



## Topics for Discussion

Discuss Rose Clinton. Why does Rose spend much of her teen years looking for a sign from God on whether she should marry or become a nun? Which sign does Rose believe God sends her? What makes her think this event is a sign from God? When does Rose begin to doubt this sign? Why does Rose drive her car so much? Where does Rose want to go? Does she find what she wants? Why does Rose abandon her husband when she learns she is pregnant? Did Rose ever love Thomas Clinton?

Discuss Rose Abbott. Why does Rose decide to marry Son Abbott? What does Rose hope to get from this marriage? Does Rose love Son? Why does Rose insist on naming her child Cecilia? Why does Rose refuse to consider Son's feelings in this? Why does Rose return to the kitchen at St. Elizabeth's? What pleasure does Rose get from the cooking? Why does Rose cook without asking for a paycheck? Why does Rose not move into the Clatterbuck house with Son and Sissy?

Discuss Son. Who is Son? Why has Son come to St. Elizabeth's? Why did Son stay for so long? How did St. Elizabeth's help Son recover from his guilt regarding Cecilia? Why did Son feel this guilt? Why did Son not help Cecilia sooner when she was drowning? Did Son mean for Cecilia to die? Did Son hesitate for another reason? Explain. Why did Son marry Rose? Did Son love Rose? Why did Son go along with Rose's decision to name their baby after Cecilia? Did Son have a choice? Why did Son not fight Rose when she refused to live with him in the Clatterbuck house? What does this say about Son's understanding of Rose's actions?

Discuss St. Elizabeth's. What is significant about its history? Why did the author feel the need to begin the novel with the history of the building where St. Elizabeth's is located? Why did the Catholic Church turn this building first into a retirement home for nuns and then into a home for unwed mothers? What are unwed mothers? Why would they need a place to go to have their babies? Why did they not have their babies at home? Where did all these babies go?

Discuss Sissy. Why did Son not like the fact that Rose pawned her care off to June beginning when she was only three days old? Why did Rose do this? Was it more important for Rose to cook? How does her obsession with cooking compare with her need to drive? How did Sissy come to understand the purpose of St. Elizabeth's? Why is Sissy horrified to be mistaken for one of the unwed mothers? How has living at this place prepared Sissy for the day her mother would leave? How does Sissy feel about her mother? How does she feel about her mother's leaving?

Discuss Thomas Clinton. Why did Rose marry Thomas? What did Thomas do to cause this? How did Thomas finally find out where Rose was? Why did he write to her to tell her was coming? What might have happened if he had not warned Rose he was coming? What choice did Rose have when she learned of Thomas' coming visit? Why did she choose the option she did? Did Thomas know he was Sissy's father? Explain.



Why did Sissy not realize who Thomas was? How would this knowledge have changed Sissy's life?

Discuss Sister Evangeline. What gift does Sister Evangeline have? How does she use it? How did Rose benefit from it? How did it harm Rose? Why did others not want Sister Evangeline to use her gift? Was it harmful? How did Sister Evangeline affect Rose? What was their relationship? What was Sister Evangeline's relationship with Sissy? How did that compare to the relationship Rose had with each? Would Rose have stayed at St. Elizabeth's if Sister Evangeline were not there? Explain.