

# **Still Alice Study Guide**

## **Still Alice by Lisa Genova**

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# Plot Summary

Alice Howland is a 50-year-old professor of psychology at Harvard University. She is in good shape physically and feels that her life is mostly on track. When she begins forgetting things, she puts it down to a combination of age, her hectic schedule, and menopause. She makes an appointment to visit her doctor who sends her to a neurologist for further testing. Alice is devastated when she's diagnosed with Alzheimer's.

She doesn't tell her family for awhile but finally realizes that she has to tell her husband, John. John, a professor and researcher at Harvard, devotes himself to finding a medicine that will halt the progression of the disease. He throws himself completely into that while Alice continues to try to cope with her failing memory. She manages to hold herself together until the end of the semester and she and John spend their time off at their summer home.

There, Alice's disease progresses. She returns to the university in the fall to discover some of her students have complained about her performance the previous semester. Alice tells her department chairman of her diagnosis and agrees that it's not wise for her to continue teaching. She feels a huge sense of loss because teaching has consumed her time and energy for many years. She struggles to accept that she is no longer a teacher, researcher, or mentor.

Alice tries to hold on to her new life but can feel pieces of her memory slipping away. She soon has trouble remembering her younger daughter, Lydia. She can accept that she has a daughter named Lydia but has trouble associating that information with the young woman who is her daughter. There are other struggles as well, and John insists that she no longer go running alone. He sometimes makes time to run with her but doesn't enjoy it and Alice is soon forced to give up that activity.

Alice resents giving up the running because she believes regular exercise may be a key to keeping her memories intact longer. Then John announces that he's been offered a prestigious position in New York. Alice doesn't want to move but she's also hurt that John isn't going to take a sabbatical year to spend time together. She knows that this will likely be the end of their lives together because she will soon fail to even recognize John. John doesn't feel that he can miss the opportunity and he seems intent on taking the job. Alice's three children also want her to remain in Boston so they can help take care of her. John says he'll hire someone but the children insist that isn't what's best for Alice.

Time passes and Alice's life becomes a series of struggles as she tries to remember how to function in her day-to-day life. Months later, Alice remains in Boston with her two daughters, Anna and Lydia, nearby. She spends most week days with a caregiver. Alice has come to realize the woman can help her function even when Alice isn't certain about what to do. She and the caregiver spend time in a local park, as they often do, then return home where Lydia and Anna are waiting with Anna's twins. Though Alice can no

longer remember their names, she recognizes a bond with this family and enjoys spending time with her grandchildren.



# September 2003

## Summary

The story opens with a paragraph prior to the first chapter. In this paragraph, the narrator states that neurons in Alice's brain were being killed off more than a year before the first outward signs that she has Alzheimer's. In September 2003, Alice Howland is in her bedroom listening to her husband, John, rush around the house in search of his keys. She goes downstairs and finds them for him. This is a normal part of their routine. She recently lost her BlackBerry charger and bought a new one, only to find the old one by her bed. She puts these situations down to their age and busy schedules. Alice is a professor of psychology at Harvard University. John is a professor in the biology department.

Alice arrives at the room where she's supposed to give a presentation at Stanford University and talks with John, a former Harvard classmate. When it's time for her talk, she is introduced as a "pioneer" in the study of the "mechanisms of language. Alice begins to talk, going easily over what she plans to say, but then can't remember a specific word she needs. She's flustered because she knows the presentation well, and eventually finds a vague word to use instead, moving on. She doesn't remember the word until hours later, on a plane.

Alice goes to Los Angeles where her youngest daughter, Lydia, lives. Lydia has not attended college and Alice argues with her about it constantly. Lydia is pursuing an acting career. Lydia is surprised when Alice arrives. Lydia says Alice told her the flight was to arrive at eight but Alice insists she said five.

They go out to dinner and Alice questions Lydia about her life, including her roommates, Doug and Malcolm. Alice says Lydia should go to college so she'll have more options. Lydia argues that Alice is trying to make decisions for her. Lydia says she's taking acting classes. Alice says that's "not the same" as attending college. Lydia announces that John is paying for the classes, indicating he supports her decision. They turn the conversation to safer topics. When they're outside the restaurant, a waiter calls out to them. He gives Alice her BlackBerry. Alice can't remember taking it out of her purse.

When Alice arrives home, she's upset that John isn't there. She goes for a run through the familiar neighborhood near their house and the Harvard campus. The rhythm of her shoes on the pavement helps her relax. She's at Harvard Square when a woman grabs her arm, asking if she's "thought about heaven today." It's common to see people preaching in the square but Alice is startled that she's singled out. She turns away and suddenly doesn't remember where she is or how to get home. She panics but after a few minutes, everything snaps back into place and she continues home.

She finds John is there. Alice confronts him about paying for Lydia's acting class. John says they offered support for Anna and Tom while they attended college, and he sees



no difference. He says he has to get back to work. Alice is upset that he wasn't home when she got there but now accepts that he came home and she was out on a run.

After John leaves, Alice thinks about all the things that have been wrong lately, including the memory loss and disorientation at Harvard Square. She has missed some periods and puts it all down to menopause. She makes herself a note to have a checkup with her doctor. John arrives home after midnight. Alice promises herself that she'll apologize for being so moody. They go to sleep together.

## Analysis

The reader gets the first look at the relationship between Alice and John in the opening scene of the book. Alice is about to leave on a trip and says she'll be back Saturday. She says they haven't spent much time together recently and asks that he be home when she returns. He says he has an important lab to attend but promises to try. Then they kiss good-bye. Alice says she could "romanticize the kiss" but she knows it's really his way of apologizing because he knows he won't be home. She can see the current situation evolved gradually. Alice and John are both highly successful and they lead busy lives. Their relationship has suffered, as is typical in this situation, but it seems that Alice is the only one who wants to bring them back to a closer, more intimate level.

Another example of their relationship is seen when Alice arrives home. John isn't home and Alice is angry that he doesn't make the effort to be home to spend some time with her. She then goes for a run and finds he's waiting when she gets home. He's been there for awhile and it's now time for him to return to the lab. She has to admit that they would have had at least a little time together if she hadn't left. Their lack of communication seems to be contributing to their problems. Some readers may assume that John is having an affair, which explains all the time he's spending away from home. This is apparently not the case though he later decides to move to New York though Alice's health is failing significantly by that time.

Alice doesn't confide her health issues with John, which is another indication that they are not very close and that Alice doesn't feel she can or should talk to him about it. Being lost at Harvard Square upset her and it seems reasonable to expect her to talk to John about it, but he's leaving just as she arrives home and she doesn't bring it up later.

The reader cannot assume that Alice and John have had an unhappy marriage. They have apparently been close in the past. A few years before the opening of this book, they took sabbaticals from teaching and spent a year researching and writing a book together. Each of them looks back at that year as a positive point in their lives and it seems they have been happiest when their work intersected.

The relationship between Alice and Lydia is important to the story. Lydia is the youngest of three children. Alice remembers that Lydia was a good student and was never in trouble. Alice and John were busy and traveled a lot while Lydia was young. Alice now admits that she and John largely ignored Lydia as a child. She blames herself for not



paying more attention. Both John and Alice have doctorate degrees and have devoted their lives to education and research, indicating they put a great deal of importance on education. She believes that Lydia is refusing to consider college as a way of rebelling against her parents. Lydia, however, wants a career in acting. Later, Alice says Lydia should have something to fall back on but Lydia believes that would be an indication that she isn't certain she'll make it as an actress.

There are several instances of Alice's failing memory in this chapter, especially during her time with Lydia. She apparently tells Lydia the wrong time for her arrival but insists that she didn't. When they are at dinner, Alice asks how Lydia met her roommates, Doug and Malcolm. Lydia says she met them while working at Starbucks. Alice goes off on a short rant about Lydia working at Starbucks, then asks how she met Doug and Malcolm. Lydia becomes angry, saying Alice "never listens." Much later, Lydia will be the first of the children to cite instances of Alice's memory loss, indicating that she begins to pay attention much earlier than Anna and Tom.

## Discussion Question 1

Describe the relationship between Alice and John.

## Discussion Question 2

Describe the relationship between Alice and Lydia.

## Discussion Question 3

How does Alice explain away her forgetfulness? Is it a reasonable explanation?

## Vocabulary

escalating, frantic, lapsed, blissfully, imperceptible, commute, savored, obscene, cursory, integrity, cognitive, zealous, coveted, reverberated



# October 2003, November 2003, and December 2003

## Summary

In October 2003, Alice is working with a graduate student, Dan, who is getting married. Alice can generally recall reference details for almost any published study but struggles to come up with a specific citation. Later, she looks over her to-do list for the day and sees the name "Eric." She can't recall what she meant. The head of the psychology department is Eric Wellman but she can't remember anything she was supposed to talk to him about. She decides it's time to see the doctor.

Several family members are gathering for Alice's birthday dinner, including Alice's daughter Anna and son Tom. Anna and her husband, Charlie, are trying to have a child. When Alice sees Anna having a martini, she knows she must not be pregnant yet. Tom is a medical student headed for a career as a cardiothoracic surgeon. Anna asks about Lydia and it's obvious that Anna is pleased that Lydia hasn't gone to college because it makes Anna look like the successful daughter. Alice notes that Anna worked to get good grades but it came easy to Lydia, and realizes that's one more reason she paid more attention to Anna than to Lydia. Alice watches with something like jealousy as Tom and John launch into a discussion about John's research. Both have backgrounds in biology which means they speak the same language. Alice remembers a time when John talked to her about his work.

Alice goes to the restroom. She sees her reflection in the mirror and knows she looks older than she feels. In the bathroom stall, she sees that there's blood on her panties, indicating her period has returned after months of absence. She begins to cry and Anna knocks on the door, asking if she's alright.

In November 2003, Alice goes for an appointment with Dr. Tamara Moyer. Alice begins describing her symptoms and Dr. Moyer doesn't seem concerned until Alice mentions becoming disoriented at Harvard Square. She begins to ask questions about aspects of Alice's life, including her sleeping patterns. Dr. Moyer says menopausal women usually have memory problems because they aren't sleeping well. Alice agrees to have an MRI and a follow up appointment.

Alice's office is in William James Hall. It's in a distant region of the campus and looks more like a parking garage than a psychology department. In her office, she looks over her to do list, including that she's supposed to be at the airport later that day for another trip. She goes over emails and discovers the mysterious "Eric" on a previous to do list was a colleague requesting some slides for a presentation. She emails them to him and prepares for her next class. When she arrives at the lecture hall, she discovers she can't remember what she's supposed to teach, even though she just prepared for the class.





She has to ask what's next on the syllabus and knows that students will just put it down to an overloaded teacher.

She arrives home that evening and John greets her with surprise. He says he thought she was supposed to be in Chicago. Alice has forgotten her trip. She returns to Dr. Moyer for her followup and agrees to see a neurologist.

In December 2003, Alice and John go to the annual Christmas party hosted by Eric Wellman and his wife, Marjorie. Alice mingles, talking with other colleagues and friends. She says they are all like a big family, complete with devotion and problems typical of any family. She briefly encounters some of the wives and listens in on part of their conversation. She admits that she's not really part of that group because she is a professor who spends more time with their husbands.

Dan arrives with his new wife, Beth. He introduces Beth to Alice and John. Alice mingles a little more and has some wine. She eventually wanders back to Beth and introduces herself. It's obvious Alice doesn't recognize Beth and doesn't remember their introduction from a few minutes earlier. There's an awkward pause in the conversation. John says it's getting late and suggests they go home. Alice plans to ask about the awkward pause but once they're outside, she forgets.

She goes to see the neurologist, Dr. Davis. He's very young and opens their session by asking her to fill him in on her problems. He says that she can't attend any more appointments alone. He says a family member will have to come with her. Because of her memory loss, she may not be giving him an accurate picture of what's going on in her life. He asks about Alice's family history. She says her father died at seventy-one and was an alcoholic. He gives her a series of memory tests, asking for the date, her current location, some of the local streets, the time of day, and the date. He shows her a series of pictures and has her name them, has her draw a clock with the hands at twenty-minutes until four, and write a sentence about the weather.

Dr. Davis then tells her to memorize an imaginary person's name and address. The name is John Black but she can't repeat the address. He says he wants to do additional testing before offering a diagnosis. Alice is certain he already knows what's wrong with her.

At home, Alice looks through photos, relishing the fact that she can recite names and ages of every subject. She thinks about the doctor's appointment and hates that she can't remember the address for John Black. She knows that "an average brain" might forget an address but knows that she would normally have been able to remember. Throughout the day, Alice continues playing memory games.

The children are home for Christmas and Alice finds she's drawn in as Lydia talks about her hopes for an acting career. Alice and Lydia are in the kitchen later when Alice finds she can't remember a series of three words of her memory game. She's irritable with Lydia. She finally remembers and begins setting the ingredients out for white chocolate bread pudding but can't remember how many eggs she needs. She doesn't know where



the recipe is and has made the dish by memory for many years. She's so frustrated that she begins breaking eggs in the sink. Alice says the eggs were “past their expiration date” and that she wouldn't be making pudding this year. Lydia offers to go buy more eggs. As she's leaving, she asks Alice how many eggs she'll need.

## Analysis

Alice has a successful career but says it was more difficult to attain because she has three children. She watched as John's career took off more quickly without the need to be the primary caregiver for the children and she seems to resent that, at least to some degree. Shortly before Alice's diagnosis, Anna and Charlie are trying to have a child. Anna's career is in its early stages and Alice wishes Anna would put off having kids, giving her more time to pursue her career without that distraction. This is an important look into Alice's priorities. She loves her family and is devoted to them, but seems to be more devoted to her career than to her family. While most women would relish the possibility of becoming a grandmother, Alice doesn't seem to be caught up in that.

The relationship between Alice and the other professors is seen in the December 2003 chapter that focuses on the party at Eric Wellman's house. This is part of the “family” theme seen throughout the story. Alice interacts with her colleagues as friends and she says they are like family. Just as is the case with any family, there are sometimes rough patches with problems and arguments. Alice seems to indicate that there's a high level of devotion here. However, she doesn't seem to expect any loyalty after her diagnosis. She doesn't confide in any of her colleagues, including Eric Wellman, and fully expects to be ostracized once they know she has Alzheimer's.

The December 2003 chapter ends with Lydia asking Alice how many eggs are needed for the bread pudding. Alice has just had a meltdown when she realizes she's forgotten the recipe that she's made for many years from memory. She breaks all the eggs in the house and announces she won't be making any pudding. Lydia offers to make the dish, which is apparently an important part of the family's traditional holiday. But Lydia doesn't know how to make it either and has to ask Alice how many eggs she should buy. The chapter ends with that question and it's left to the reader to decide how Alice answers and how the situation is resolved. This scene includes a look into Alice's intelligence and the role that plays in helping her cope with the memory loss. She breaks all the eggs and makes quite a mess. When Lydia enters the room, Alice might have been at a loss for how to explain the situation but she says the eggs were past their expiration date. That serves as an explanation and it means that Lydia doesn't question Alice's action.

## Discussion Question 1

What is Alice's attitude about family, and what are her conflicts regarding the role of a mother seeking to further her career?



## Discussion Question 2

Give two examples of the importance of family from this chapter.

## Discussion Question 3

Describe what happens at Eric Wellman's party that indicates Alice is having serious memory problems.

## Vocabulary

sustainable, elusive, furrowing, contiguous, phenomenon, transience, arduous, cumulative, tangible, accolades, alarmist, palpitations, deprivation



# January 2004 and February 2004

## Summary

Alice's follow up appointment with the neurologist is January 19. She doesn't want to go but there isn't another opening for four weeks, so she goes. She arrives alone and Dr. Davis asks if she remembers talking about having someone come with her. She says she does and agrees that she'll have someone with her for the next appointment. Dr. Davis cites her recent increase in memory loss and a decline in her ability to function on a daily basis. He says she has "probable Alzheimer's disease." Alice grabs onto the word probable but Dr. Davis says that's a common term because there's no definitive test to be certain. He says he was ninety-five percent certain of the diagnosis based on the information from their first visit. Tests that didn't reveal any other diseases makes him certain.

He suggests some drugs that helps Alzheimer's patients continue to function for a longer period of time along with some vitamins. He says she's going to have to tell someone and she agrees that she'll tell her husband. He also gives her a questionnaire that someone in her family is supposed to fill out. She reads the "humiliating" list of questions and knows that her life is going to change dramatically. She is about to do some research on Alzheimer's when John arrives.

John and Alice go to the cemetery where her mother, sister, and father are buried. As they stand there, Alice thinks about her father. He was an alcoholic and grew belligerent in his final few years. Alice looks at his behavior now and realizes that he might have had Alzheimer's and that she put it down to the alcoholism.

Later, Alice tells John about her appointment and the diagnosis. He argues, saying there's nothing wrong other than her hectic schedule and the normal signs of aging. She insists that her memory problems are more than what's normal and is amazed at how the number of examples she has to convince John the diagnosis is accurate. Suddenly, John recalls the awkward situation when Alice couldn't remember Dan's wife after just meeting her. He says he wants to look into the disease and meet with Dr. Davis.

In February 2004, Alice has a to do list that includes taking her medications. She and John go for an appointment with a genetics counselor. John insists that Alice have the test for mutant genes that indicate Alzheimer's. The counselor points out that having the gene confirms Alzheimer's but that people without the gene can also have Alzheimer's. Alice knows that John is searching for a way to prove she doesn't have Alzheimer's. She agrees to have the test. Alice answers more questions about her family and this time includes what she suspects about her father. John interrupts, saying Alice's father was a drunk and nothing more. Alice doesn't argue but she doesn't agree.

Later, John says he believes Alice is overloaded, stressed, and depressed, and that they can deal with each of the problems. But when they return for a follow up, they learn



Alice has the mutant gene that indicates Alzheimer's, eliminating any doubt of the diagnosis. John cries all the way home.

## Analysis

January 19 has bad memories for Alice. When she was a college student, her parents had visited her. Her father was driving on the way home and he wrecked, killing Alice's mother and her sister. He had insisted he was okay to drive though he'd been drinking. The details, including how drunk he was, are not revealed. Alice talks about her father's alcoholism and it's obvious he was at fault for the accident that caused the deaths of her mother and sister. Alice now looks at her father's final years and realizes that he likely had Alzheimer's. She is angry at him over this and says that his DNA is now going to kill her. She directs a silent question to him, asking how it feels to "murder your entire family."

Alice is a successful professor and researcher, specializing in linguistics. She is highly respected in her field and believes in her work. She believes communication is very important and knows that she'll lose the ability to communicate well and to read because of the Alzheimer's. This devastates Alice almost as much as the thought that she'll someday fail to remember her own family.

Within a few hours of the neurologist's appointment, Alice is trying to figure out a way to maintain control of herself and her situation. This is a recurring theme in the book. She still hasn't told John at this point but she's thinking about it. She fully believes she would "rather die than lose her mind." She also says that John loves her because of her intelligence and that she'd "rather die than tell him." All this combines to plant the idea of committing suicide as a means of maintaining control.

After the mutant gene is discovered confirming the diagnosis, Alice asks what this means for her children. The counselor says they shouldn't be showing signs of Alzheimer's because they are all still in their twenties, but that they could each be screened for the gene to see if they are carriers.

Alice looks back on her father's final years and becomes convinced that he might have had Alzheimer's. She counts off the signs that she'd overlooked, putting it all down to alcohol. Her father sometimes didn't recognize her during those final years. He had a "disgusting lack of hygiene" and was prone to rants that made little sense.

John's insistence on further testing is understandable. He is a scientific researcher working on cancer research. It's not difficult for him to make the leap to this disease and he understands the more complex scientific research and options that a layperson wouldn't grasp. It's also important to remember that he and Alice have been married for many years. Despite the fact that they have grown apart, there are indications that he deeply loves Alice. He wants to find a way out of the situation and will soon become very involved in her treatment process.



## **Discussion Question 1**

What is John's reaction to the diagnosis?

## **Discussion Question 2**

How did Alice's mother and sister die?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Why does Alice look back and think her father might have had Alzheimer's?

## **Vocabulary**

spatial, domains, variability, atrophy, manifest, ethereal, formulate, arboretum, belligerent, nonsensical, integrity



# March 2004, April 2004, May 2004

## Summary

In March 2004, John becomes upset each time he sees Alice taking her pills. He walks Alice to work each day. John thinks it's because Alice is afraid of getting lost but Alice says it's really because she loves having that little bit of time each day to reconnect.

On some mornings they stop at Jerri's. It's a coffee shop located on their way to Alice's classroom. One morning John orders his usual coffee. Alice asks for coffee as well. John says Alice always has tea and that she hates coffee, but she insists. She hates it but drinks some of it, just to spite John. She pours it out as soon as she reaches her office.

Lydia calls and Alice has trouble following the conversation. She finds she's having that problem on the telephone when she can't follow the visual clues she depends on in person. She worries about the reactions of her children to the news, especially since they might have inherited the gene.

That afternoon, Alice goes for a run. She becomes lost and spends some time in a church. When she arrives home, John is furious because he's been worried about her. Alice says it's time for them to make a plan but John says he isn't certain he can.

In April 2004, Alice admits that she and John are very smart but can't come up with a plan they believe might work for their long-term situation. She says there is too much missing information. They gather the children together for Easter to tell them about Alice's diagnosis. Anna launches into a discussion of their attempts to become pregnant. Alice listens, knowing that she might be passing the Alzheimer's gene along to her child. Alice silently wonders what she would have done if she'd known about the Alzheimer's. She doesn't know if she would have had all three children or have prevented the possibility of passing along the gene.

When Alice makes the announcement, Tom asks if they've done the gene testing. John confirms that they have. Anna asks what this means for her and her children. Tom says there's a fifty percent chance of each of them having it, and of passing it on to their children. He predicts there will be a cure by the time their children need it. Anna says that means her child will be fine but "I'll be a mindless zombie." John snaps at her to stop.

Lydia asks what's being done for Alice and she tells them about the medications. Lydia says she's known for awhile that something was wrong with Alice and recounts several clues. Anna says she has to be tested but Lydia says she doesn't want to know.

Alice arrives at her office and wonders why it's so quiet. It takes her some time to realize she's wearing her nightgown and that it's just after four in the morning.



Tom tests negative for the gene but Anna tests positive. She says the doctors will go forward with the in vitro but will test embryos and only implant those without the gene.

In May 2004, Alice goes to visit the Mount Auburn Manor Nursing Center. She asks to see the Alzheimer's wing and gets a tour. When asked, Alice says she's looking for a place for a parent. She learns the cost is about a hundred thousand dollars a year. She leaves knowing this isn't where she belongs.

Alice wears a butterfly pendant left to her by her mother. She remembers being sad when, at about age six, she learned that butterflies die after only a few days. Alice's mother had comforted her, saying that their lives were short but beautiful. Alice has held onto that idea. Alice knows she doesn't want to keep living past the point when she becomes a burden to her family. She buys herself an ice cream and goes for a walk.

Alice constantly wears a blue bag given to her by Lydia. Her BlackBerry is in the bag and she is seldom without them. She programs a series of five questions on her BlackBerry along with an alarm for the questions to pop up on her device each morning. She includes instructions to go to the file named "Butterfly" on her computer if she has trouble answering any of the questions.

Alice then rushes to class, afraid she'd be late. Class hasn't started and she takes a seat among the students. They all wait the required twenty minutes. Alice stands, announces she has "better things to do," and leaves the lecture hall.

## Analysis

As the story opens, John is searching for his keys and Alice has to help him find them. By March 2004, he is no longer asking her for help though he is still apparently losing things sometimes. Alice believes John is embarrassed to ask her for help, considering she's the one with Alzheimer's. This interaction between them continues to be a driving theme in the story.

Anna's reaction to the diagnosis is very typical of Anna. She immediately asks what impact this has on her and her plans for a baby. She is self-centered and it doesn't seem to even occur to her to be concerned first for Alice. She makes a comment about becoming a "mindless zombie" without thinking that Alice is already afraid. Anna has just confirmed that she expects Alice to become a "mindless zombie." John snaps at her to stop talking and she does. This interaction is an important part of the relationships between these family members.

Lydia says she isn't surprised at the diagnosis. She had not put a name to it, but she has witnessed problems. She says Alice often repeats herself, asks questions that she asked just a few minutes earlier, and sometimes doesn't seem to comprehend what's going on around her, especially during telephone conversations. Lydia says she's been seeing these signs for about a year. Alice thinks back and realizes she didn't see the signs that far back but she doesn't doubt that Lydia's right. John is "humiliated." His reaction is understood by looking more closely at the relationships. John and Alice have





been married for many years. He is with her almost every day. If someone had noticed Alice's problems before Alice, it should have been John. Instead, it's Lydia who first realizes something is wrong. This is an important look into the characters of John and Lydia and into the theme of family relationships.

Alice wonders if she would have made different decisions if she had known about the Alzheimer's gene and if genetic testing for the embryos had been available before her children were born. She doesn't come to any conclusions but she does consider the ramifications. She says if the testing had been available and if she had chosen to go through that process, Anna would never have been born.

Alice remembers her mother talking to her about the lives of butterflies. Her mother says that Alice shouldn't be sad. She says, "just because their lives were short, didn't mean they were tragic." Alice's life is going to be cut short as well. Even though Alice will likely live for many more years, she will soon lose the ability to express herself or connect with her family. She will lose all the things that make her into the person she is now. There is a comparison to be made between the short lives of butterflies and Alice's life.

Alice wishes she had cancer instead of Alzheimer's. She says there's a chance to win over cancer with the right treatments and she has no chance to win over the Alzheimer's. She says people rally around a cancer patient but she expects to be "cast out" when her diagnosis becomes common knowledge. This is an important look at her relationships with family, a common theme in the book. She compares her colleagues to family members but she accepts that they'll all turn their backs on her when they learn she has Alzheimer's. She doesn't really say why she expects this, but it seems that their common commitment to work and education are what makes them family rather than any other feeling.

Alice comes up with the "butterfly test" as a means of trying to control her future. This is a theme seen throughout the story as she struggles with her uncertain future. She wants to commit suicide but she doesn't want to die prematurely. She wants to continue to enjoy life as long as she can but she wants to die before she becomes a financial and emotional burden to her family. She is eating an ice cream as she evaluates her options and she knows that there will come a time when she doesn't realize how much she enjoys the ice cream. She wants to die before that time but she's afraid she'll put it off too long and that she'll miss the opportunity.

She programs the five questions on her BlackBerry with instructions to go to her computer and read a specific file if she has trouble answering any of the questions. There are some problems with the plan, including her failure to realize that there will soon come a point where she can't really read and comprehend written words. She also runs the risk that something will happen to the BlackBerry or that she will answer the questions incorrectly without realizing her answers aren't correct.

The scene in which Alice enters the lecture hall, takes a seat among students, and then leaves after twenty minutes is not explained until much later. Alice has completely



forgotten she is the teacher. Later, she will read student evaluations and one student mentions the bizarre behavior.

## Discussion Question 1

What is the “butterfly test” and what is Alice's reason for setting it up? What are some of the things that could go wrong with Alice's plan?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Alice say she'd rather have cancer? What reaction does Alice expect from her colleagues?

## Discussion Question 3

How do the reactions of Tom, Lydia, and Anna differ when they learn of Alice's diagnosis? What does each reaction tell readers about that character?

## Vocabulary

widgets, coherent, validity, lucidity, profound, humiliation, precipitated, sequestering, infinitesimal, hideous, stoic, unimpeded



# June 2004 and July 2004

## Summary

Alice goes to see Dr. Moyer and asks for sleeping pills. She says she's having trouble sleeping and argues when Dr. Moyer suggests something very mild. Dr. Moyer wants to meet with Alice and John together before agreeing to the prescription, but Alice argues. Alice worries that she might forget her reason for the sleeping pills if she waits any longer. Dr. Moyer gives in.

Alice goes for an appointment at the Memory Disorders Unit of the Massachusetts General Hospital. She works with a specialist named Sarah but can't remember Sarah's last name. She is embarrassed when she can't remember the details of a short story she read just a few minutes earlier, and knows that she would have had methods of retrieving those details – including her BlackBerry – if Sarah wasn't watching.

She goes next to her appointment with Dr. Davis and finds John is waiting for her. He has filled out the questionnaire and Alice reveals more about the progression of her disease, including the night she went to the office without realizing it was the middle of the night. Dr. Davis suggests Alice get a medical alert bracelet with her home address, in case she gets lost. Alice argues, saying she has John's information programmed into her phone, but John agrees with the idea. Dr. Davis says Alice shouldn't go running alone anymore and John agrees to run with her.

John says Alice has “become glued” to her BlackBerry and that it's somewhat difficult to watch her check it every few minutes. Dr. Davis gives Alice the name John Black and his address, then goes through a series of memory tests before asking Alice to repeat it back to him. She can't remember and it frustrates her.

Dr. Davis begins talking about medical trials. John doesn't want to go into one of those and suggests an alternative. Alice agrees to participate in a clinical trial.

In July 2004, Alice and John are at their Chatham Cape house. She finds she is at a loss because there is less structure to her life here. One day, Alice goes to the beach and realizes that she feels alive and happy at this moment. John joins her and they swim naked together. Alice has been reading as much as she can but she's having more difficulty comprehending and recalling what's happening.

John and Alice plan to go for a run. Alice says she has to go to the bathroom first and goes inside. She opens the door she believes is the downstairs bathroom but finds it's a closet. She's frantic and can't remember where the bathroom is. She urinates on herself just as John walks in. She cries, begging him not to look at her and saying she can't remember where she is. He calms her and takes her to change her clothes.

John prepares to leave for an Alzheimer's conference. Lydia stays with Alice while John's away. Lydia asks if John is attending the conference in search of a cure and Alice



agrees. Lydia asks if he's going to find one and Alice says no. One day, Alice asks where her sister, Anne, is. Lydia is caught off guard and gently says that Anne and Alice's mother were killed in a car wreck. Alice is frantic and begins to cry. John arrives and Alice notices that he isn't upset at the news that Anne is dead. She decides he's keeping things from her and that she can't trust him.

## Analysis

John has thought through the treatment options and done a great deal of research. He doesn't want Alice to participate in a clinical trial because those trials include a "control group." Those patients get a placebo drug that provides no benefit at all and the people who are truly taking the drug are compared to those taking the placebo. John fears Alice will be taking a placebo and that she'll lose valuable time. He suggests an alternative but Alice would have to alter her current medications in order to go that route. She insists that she wants to be part of a clinical trial. When John argues, she says she is still able to "draw my own conclusions" even though she can't remember things.

Alice is depending greatly on the BlackBerry by this time. She's programming many details of her day into the device so that she can recall specific information when she needs it again. John says Alice is looking at the device every few minutes in the mornings before work and that it's getting on his nerves. He seems to be becoming more frustrated and it's probably at least partly because he isn't able to help Alice overcome this.

Later, John prepares for an Alzheimer's conference. He goes over the details with Alice several times, including what day he's leaving, when he'll return, and that Lydia will be staying with her while he's gone. She asks the same questions again and he eventually says she would "feel better" if she put the details in her BlackBerry. It's evident at this point that John realizes Alice's dependence on the BlackBerry is a crucial part of getting through the day.

Alice spends a lot of her summer reading but admits that it's becoming a "heartbreaking chore." She has a large list of books she wants to read and she knows she isn't going to be able to get through the list. She also finds she can't follow story lines and has trouble remembering details that make the stories make sense.

## Discussion Question 1

Why do you believe John is attending the Alzheimer's conference?

## Discussion Question 2

Describe the situation in which Alice urinates on herself. What is her reaction? What is John's reaction?



## Discussion Question 3

Describe the scene in which Alice asks about her sister, Anne.

## Vocabulary

declarative, conspicuously, transitioning, renditions, postmodern, verify, consume, phosphorescence, traversing, etched, ambled, colossal, cadence



# August 2004 and September 2004

## Summary

In August 2004, Alice deals with the knowledge that her mother and sister have been dead for years. She's frustrated that she keeps having to remember that they're dead.

Lydia asks Alice to talk about how she feels and the effects of the Alzheimer's. Alice describes the feeling of being left out when she can't follow conversations quickly enough to participate and of trying to find a specific word that eludes her. She compares it to trying to pick up a glass of water but the hand won't obey the command to pick it up. She says she's aware of her struggle and that she sometimes forgets that she was even looking for a word by the time she remembers it.

One day, Alice loses her current book, "Moby Dick." She thinks she might have left it at the beach and hopes that's the case, because that's the kind of thing she would have done even before Alzheimer's. John goes to town and returns with several movies of the books Alice had wanted to read, suggesting she might be able to pay attention through the movies. John suggests she microwave some popcorn while he puts a movie in. She finds "Moby Dick" in the microwave.

One day, Alice reads Lydia's diary. When Lydia finds out, she's angry but then leaves the diary out for Alice to finish reading. Lydia begins providing plays for Alice to read and Alice discovers she can follow them better because they are shorter and easier to follow. Alice and Lydia reconnect as they spend time discussing the plays.

Anna announces that she's five weeks pregnant with twins. Lydia is in a play and the family attends. When it's over, Alice greets Lydia and asks her several questions. It soon becomes clear that she doesn't recognize Lydia. Anna tells her that Lydia is her daughter.

There is a paragraph after the end of this chapter, but before the beginning of the next chapter, about the state of the neurons in Alice's brain at this point. It indicates that neurons begin to die off as they become useless.

In September 2004, Alice returns to Harvard and is called for a meeting with the department chairman, Eric Wellman. Eric asks if there's anything wrong and gives Alice the stack of student evaluations from the previous semester. There are disturbing comments, indicating that Alice showed up for a class but then didn't teach and left after sitting there for twenty minutes. Another comment says it seems Alice doesn't know what she's talking about and another says the same lecture was repeated.

Alice, feeling she has to tell the truth, says she has Alzheimer's. She says she'd planned to teach one more year and then take a sabbatical. She says she hadn't realized how much her performance had suffered. Eric says students who attend Harvard are paying large tuition fees and deserve the best teachers. Eric offers to give her a year's medical



leave leading up to her sabbatical. Alice agrees to stop teaching but asks to finish the dissertation process with Dan and to attend department meetings. Eric agrees.

Alice sends a notice to her colleagues and hands over her classes. Some express sympathy but for the most part, no one talks to her outside the seminars. During one meeting, a student presents a paper and Alice points out a flaw. Eric expands on Alice's point and the student takes notes. A few minutes later, Alice points out the same flaw and is upset when no one seems to agree with her assessment.

## Analysis

Alice finds that she is less able to participate in conversations and unable to read lengthy, complex books. She forgets a lot and sometimes becomes disoriented, even in familiar settings. However, she learns that she can read emotions that others seem to completely overlook. When Anna announces that she's pregnant, Alice can see that Charlie is completely terrified. She doesn't know what's caused the terror but knows that she she's reading the signs correctly.

Lydia is in a play and the entire family is planning to attend. Alice asks Lydia for the time, intending to enter the information in her BlackBerry. For Alice, entering details in the BlackBerry is a comfort and it helps her move past that piece of information to the next thing. Lydia seems to understand this but Anna and Tom don't. Before Lydia can answer with the time, Tom says Alice shouldn't worry about it. Anna says Alice shouldn't be relying so much on the BlackBerry. Lydia says Anna and Tom don't understand, but they both continue to argue. Anna says Alice should be forced to remember things and that she might otherwise "get lazy."

Anna asks Alice for the time of the play and urges her to try to remember. Alice says she would know the answer if Anna would let her enter it in the BlackBerry. Alice then turns to Lydia and asks what time the play is. Lydia answers and Alice immediately turns and relays the information to Anna. This is an important look into the family dynamics. Lydia was the first to notice something is wrong with Alice and the first to realize how best to help Alice function on a daily basis. Tom and Anna want Alice to be okay and they don't know any practical ways to help. The suggestion that Alice should try to remember is ridiculous and shows a lack of understanding. All this is part of the family dynamic that drives a great deal of the action in the book.

Eric calls Lydia to his office expecting to hear that she has some sort of personal problem that led to the student complaints about her teaching the previous semester. He is ready with all sorts of advice for any confession he hears, including that she's having trouble with her marriage. He's stunned when he learns that she has Alzheimer's.

Alice and John are talking one day as he's rushing out to his next commitment at the college. She says she wishes they had spent more time together throughout their lives. John insists that he led a happy life and that he wouldn't change anything about it. Alice



realizes that he's in a hurry to get back to school and she manages to hold back her tears until he is gone. She says that she wishes she had been "his passion." She is indicating that John is career driven and that he has always focused on his work more than on his marriage. Alice seems to believe this is different from her own thoughts earlier when she'd wished Anna would wait to have a baby so she could focus more on her own career. She also admits that she'd worked hard to launch her own career and it's not clear whether Alice would have put the same effort into their marriage at the expense of her career. It's left to the reader to decide whether Alice is a reliable perspective or if she is putting her own spin on her memories.

## Discussion Question 1

Describe the situation in which Lydia, Tom, and Anna argue over Alice's use of the BlackBerry. Who do you believe is right?

## Discussion Question 2

Why do you believe Alice is able to read signs better as her ability to follow conversations decreases?

## Discussion Question 3

What causes Alice to step down from her teaching duties immediately rather than waiting another year?

## Vocabulary

spontaneity, viscous, immediacy, impetuous, luxuriated, stamina, caveat, expectant, nuanced, mesmerizing, emphatic, matriculation, evoked, pragmatic





# October 2004, November 2004, and December 2004

## Summary

One day in October 2004, Alice is in her office at Harvard but finds she's having trouble filling the hours. She decides to run home knowing that the exercise will do her good. She arrives at the house and decides to make some tea. When she gets to the kitchen, she discovers the cups aren't where they are supposed to be. She goes through cabinets and finds that many other things are out of order as well. She begins piling dishes on the cabinets when she hears the door open. She expects it to be John but it's her neighbor, Lauren. She invites Lauren to sit down for a cup of tea. Lauren gently says, "Alice, this isn't your kitchen." Alice looks around and realizes that she isn't in her own home. Lauren is looking a little scared and Alice announces that she has Alzheimer's.

In her own kitchen, Alice falls into the habit of checking her refrigerator to be sure she's in her own house. There's a huge sign from John, directing her not to run without him and giving his cell number. Alice calls John and asks if they are going for a run. John says he's in a meeting and that he'll call her later. He is evasive on whether they'll go for a run. Alice becomes insistent, saying she really needs to run. John says he isn't sure what time he's going to be finished. He says Alice needs to get a treadmill and that makes her angry.

Alice tries to find something meaningful to do and can only imagine the long, useless days stretched out in front of her. One day she screams in frustration when she can't figure out how to get her sports bra on. John rushes in and tells her she's trying to put on a pair of underwear. She laughs which makes John angry.

Alice struggles to recognize Lydia as her daughter. She has memories of Anna and Tom but not of Lydia. Along with Anna, Alice reassures her that the exhaustion and sickness of pregnancy are not signs of Alzheimer's and that they'll pass. Anna feels better after their talk.

Lydia presents Alice with three DVDs as a birthday gift. One is of John recounting events about their lives together. Another is of the three children talking about memories of their lives with Alice. The third is for Alice's own memories.

In November 2004, Alice can no longer keep track of the events of a movie. She tries to mimic the reactions of her family so they won't know how lost she is. One day she wakes and believes she's late for class. She rushes to the front door but finds there's a giant hole in the hallway. She can't figure out what's going on and thinks John might have hired contractors to do some repairs. Before she can leave by the back door, Anna calls, reminding Alice that John is in New York and that she'll be arriving later to spend



the night with Alice. Later that morning, the mail arrives and Alice is amazed to see it suspended on the hole in the hallway.

Anna arrives and walks in through the front door. She walks directly over the hole in the hallway and Alice rushes over, feeling of the rug that she had believed was a hole. She realizes that it was faulty depth perception rather than a hole and she's furious with the situation. She screams at Anna and then drags the rug outside.

In December 2004, Alice struggles through the first pages of Dan's thesis but can't keep track of her thought process. Alice has contacted the medical community in search of a support group for Alzheimer's patients. There are groups for the caregivers, but none for the patients. Alice contacts three other people, Mary, Cathy, and Dan, with early-onset Alzheimer's and they each respond that they'd like to meet.

Mary, Cathy, and Dan arrive at Alice's house. They share their stories and how they were diagnosed. They ask if John is still working. Alice says he has a sabbatical the following year and that they'll be at home together for a full year.

The family is gathered when John announces that he's been offered a job as chairman of the Cancer Biology and Genetics Program at Sloan Kettering in New York. John says he plans to take the job. Anna, Lydia, and Tom argue that it's not the best thing for Alice. Alice listens and grows angry, saying they are talking as about her without including her "as if she had Alzheimer's disease." Anna says she wants Alice close to spend time with the twins. Alice knows she's been looking forward to this sabbatical year and realizes that John is apparently willing to throw it away.

Lydia says she has applied to several colleges. She says if her parents move to New York, she could attend college there, live with them and help with Alice. She says if they don't move, she could attend Brandeis or Brown, and would also live with them and help.

## Analysis

Alice's struggles are increasing and she sometimes finds the situations funny but is sometimes so angry she lashes out. She believes that regular exercise should be part of her treatment plan for the Alzheimer's but she doesn't want to run on a treadmill. She has always run and it's part of her routine, and she is now unwilling to change that routine in order to continue running regularly. She is also struggling to find something useful to fill her time. She still has her office at Harvard but, as she predicted, she isn't really welcome there. The other teachers don't know what to say and generally avoid her.

John arrives home one day and says he and Alice were to meet their friends, Bob and Sarah, for dinner. Alice refuses, saying she's "had a hard day" and just wants to be at home. John tries to insist, saying that they want to see Alice. She knows that's not true. She says that her presence is always a trial and that everyone spends the evening "juggling their nervous pity and forced smiles." John allows her to remain at home and



goes without her. It seems that John is not understanding how situations such as dinner out affects Alice now. Alice's refusal to go is an example of her efforts to deal with the disease to the best of her ability.

By December, Alice is still answering the questions on her “butterfly test” but the answers are sometimes wrong or vague. One of the questions is “where is your office?” Alice once answered with the full address, including the room number and the building. Now she just answers “Harvard.” During the early days of answering the questions, she listed Anna's birthday as September 14. When she answers it one day in December, she says “April.”

## **Discussion Question 1**

Was it unreasonable of Alice to believe she could finish the year as a teacher at Harvard?

## **Discussion Question 2**

What is the status of the “butterfly test” at this point? Has it failed completely?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Describe the relationship between Alice and John at this point.

## **Vocabulary**

succumbed, turbulent, truncated, alienated, undulated, implicit, inextricably, exuberance, saturated, vulnerable, commiserating, confabulations



# January 2005, February 2005, March 2005, and April 2005

## Summary

Alice sleeps for a couple of days. Lydia is very worried but John insists on letting her continue to sleep. Alice has vivid dreams, including one in which she steps off a cliff. She wakes to find Lydia sitting with her. Alice says she's very afraid of the day when she doesn't know Lydia. Lydia says even if that day comes, Alice will always know they love each other. Alice says she might not remember that detail. Lydia says she'll tell Alice about their love for each other, and that Alice will believe it. Alice and Lydia talk for awhile, about their excitement over the approaching birth of the twins and of Alice's fear of leaving her home. Lydia urges Alice to talk to John about that.

Alice tells John that she doesn't want to leave her home. John tries to end the conversation but Alice is adamant. She says she counted on spending the next year with him because it will be her last year with any semblance of normality. She says John is brilliant and will have other opportunities. John says he can't spend a year watching Alice's health continue to fail. Alice says she can't stop the disease and that John is losing her sooner than he had to if he takes the job.

Alice and John make their trip to the cemetery on the anniversary of her mother's and sister's deaths but the weather makes it impossible to get to the graves. Back at home, John finds Alice's BlackBerry in the freezer. It's ruined.

In February 2005, Alice visits the doctor who tells John she probably had Alzheimer's long before she was diagnosed. He says Alice is intelligent and uses that to help find answers even when she can't remember details. He asks about other things and learns that Alice has given up running altogether. She says she has trouble with coordination and fell often. Dr. Davis says he's been told Alice is giving a speech during the annual Dementia Care Conference. He says Alice is a "brave and remarkable woman," and Alice is pleased by his comment. She's surprised to find John is crying.

In March 2005, Alice gives her speech. She has a copy of the typed speech in her hands and concentrates on reading it without looking up for fear she'll lose her place. She talks about her life and how it's changed over the months since her diagnosis. She says she falls a lot, says things incorrectly, and has forgotten a lot. She says she would have to guess if someone asked what she did yesterday. She says she might even get it right because "I'm an excellent guesser." She talks about the stigma of having Alzheimer's. She says she isn't dying, but is living as best she can with Alzheimer's. She urges that doctors consider Alzheimer's as an earlier diagnosis and that caregivers empower Alzheimer's patients to live everyday to the fullest.



She ends by saying she once gave speeches all over the country but hopes this is the “most influential talk of my life.” She is surprised to find everyone standing and applauding when she looks up from her paper. John is standing with everyone else and Alice notices that he's wearing his lucky gray t-shirt and that love is shining from his eyes.

In April 2005, John wakes Alice and they go to the hospital to see Anna and the twins. They are named Allison Anne and Charles Thomas. Lydia announces she's been accepted to NYU and Brandeis. She talks to Alice, saying she doesn't know which she should choose. Alice says Lydia should do what feels right for her.

John has a talk with Anna and Lydia about the move. The girls say John can't care for Alice without their help. John says he's going to hire a caregiver, but Lydia says a hired person won't take care of Alice like her family will. John says Alice would never want to be a burden on her children but Anna says Alice is their mother. Lydia says this will be their last chance to spend time with Alice. Anna says John is acting as if Alice no longer matters.

## Analysis

The relationship between John and Alice is suffering greatly as time passes. John seems like an insensitive jerk but it may also be that he is having trouble watching as the disease progresses while he's incapable of doing anything about it. He has a habit of spinning his wedding ring on his finger and it seems he does this more in times of stress. Alice notices it almost every time they are in the doctor's offices. When Dr. Davis tells Alice she is “remarkable,” she takes it as a compliment. She's pleased that someone is talking to her without being patronizing. When she looks at John, he's on the verge of tears. It's left to the reader to decide what motivates John.

Lydia is in a difficult position as she tries to choose a school. She and Anna realize that they have a very limited window of opportunity to spend time with Alice before she's completely gone. The moments of lucidity are already becoming fewer and Alice often doesn't recognize her family members. Lydia wants to be with Alice but John won't make a commitment to leave her in Boston. Lydia finally chooses a school near her mother's house and announces that to John. He says Lydia could have spent more time with Alice if she'd chosen NYU. It seems that John is determined to move to New York and to take Alice, but he moves alone, leaving Alice behind.

By April, Alice is aware of what's going on around her but often forgets the names of her family. She refers to Anna as “the mom” and Lydia as “the actress.” The girls and John have a huge argument over his planned move and Alice hears the whole thing but doesn't really know what the argument is about until someone says “Alzheimer's.” At that point, she knows she's the topic of conversation. She has moved past the ability to pick up on emotions by now and is not really invested in the happiness of the people around her. When John leaves the room and slams the door behind him, Lydia, Anna, and both of the twins are crying. Alice is just hungry and asks what there is to eat.



## Discussion Question 1

List as many reasons as possible for John's decision to move to New York.

## Discussion Question 2

What are some of the points Alice makes during her talk to the Dementia Care Conference? What does she hope to achieve with her speech?

## Discussion Question 3

What leads to Alice's decision to stop running?

## Vocabulary

panorama, mayhem, excavation, ransacked, dissipate, frenzied, duration, oblivion, trivial, patronizing, euphoria  
panorama, mayhem, excavation, ransacked, dissipate, frenzied, tortuously, duration, oblivion, trivial, patronizing, euphoria



# May 2005, June 2005, Summer 2005, September 2005, and Epilogue

## Summary

In May 2005, John and Alice are out for ice cream. John says he'll have vanilla ice cream and Alice says she'll have the same. John says Alice would rather have chocolate and she simply agrees. As they walk, John asks questions. Alice doesn't know what month it is, when Anna's birthday is, or where her office is. When John asks if "you still want to be here," Alice is relieved that she knows the answer to this question. She says she's happy spending time with him and isn't yet finished with her ice cream, which is now melting all over her hand.

In June 2005, Alice is sitting at her computer. She no longer uses it because she becomes frustrated with trying to make sense of the keys. She finds a folder titled "butterfly" and opens it. She reads a letter to herself, outlining the butterfly test she set up and the reason for it. The letter instructs Alice to go directly to a table in her bedroom where she'll find a bottle of sleeping pills in a drawer. She's to take them all then go to sleep. Alice goes to her room but John interrupts her search with her daily medications. She takes them, feels a sense of relief, and abandons the search.

Alice and John attend commencement exercises and watch as Dan accepts his diploma. Alice doesn't remember him but he thanks her for her help through the years. As they are walking home, Alice wanders away from John and is almost hit by a car. She then goes home with "the kind stranger" that she doesn't recognize as her husband.

In Summer 2005, Alice and John spend time at their vacation home. Alice doesn't feel at ease here and repeatedly asks to go home. One day, Alice paints all the mirrors in the house, believing they are defective when she sees "an old woman" instead of the reflection she expects. Another day, Alice picks up a thick book. John tells her that they wrote that book together. In a moment of clarity, Alice says she used to be smart and she says she never meant to become this person. John says he misses her very much.

In September 2005, John learns that the drug trial Alice participated in has completed and that there were no significant benefits to the drug.

In the epilogue, Alice is in the park with a caregiver named Carole. Alice doesn't know her name but feels comfortable with her. They listen to a woman singing and Alice hums along. Carole suggests they give the woman some money and go home. Alice follows her lead. Alice and Carole arrive home where Lydia, Anna, and the twins are waiting. Anna hands one of the children to Alice and Alice sees a room is decorated for a birthday party.



Lydia asks Alice to listen to a monologue. She says Alice shouldn't worry about trying to follow the words, but asks that Alice tell her what she feels at the end of the monologue. Alice agrees and finds herself lost in Lydia's voice. At the end, Lydia asks for Alice's reaction. Alice says she feels love. Lydia is delighted.

## Analysis

The exchange between John and Alice in May 2005 seems erratic on the surface but it is John's way of trying to evaluate Alice's condition and it might play a role in what he decides to do about the job in New York. Alice can't carry on a significant conversation with him. John asks where her office is and Alice says it's on the Harvard campus. John asks where on the campus and Alice says she doesn't go there anymore, so the exact location doesn't matter. It's clear that Alice isn't really interested in trying to answer John's questions and that she's happy just enjoying the day. She notes how his hand feels when he's holding hers and how nice it is to just enjoy her ice cream. John seems to come to a decision at this point but he doesn't reveal what that decision is. It could be that he's realizing that Alice won't miss him if he leaves and that he can move to this new job without feeling guilty about leaving her.

John asks Alice if she “wants to be here.” He probably means New York but the question takes on a different meaning considering Alice's recent suicide attempt. Alice takes the question even more literally and thinks he means with him at this moment, eating ice cream. Alice says they should focus on the things that matter and seems uninterested in the question about her office because she no longer goes there. This is an important look at how Alice's life has changed.

There is also a very stark comparison between this scene and the day Alice came up with the idea for the butterfly test. That day, she noted that she was eating her ice cream so that it didn't drip onto her hand, and that technique was a habit. She says she greatly enjoys the ice cream and that she wouldn't want to continue to live if she wasn't able to enjoy pleasures in life, such as the ice cream. On the day of Alice's walk with John, she also enjoys the ice cream and the simple pleasure of spending time with him. She isn't neat, however, and the ice cream drips on her hand. Alice, as she was before the Alzheimer's, would have been upset at her inability to control the drips of ice cream. Alice as she is now is able to prioritize and knows that it isn't really important.

The chapter containing the information about the drug trial is very short. John reads the article in the news paper. This is a dramatic statement about the failure and there is no information in this chapter about Alice or John or their reactions to the news. The fact that John doesn't react is an indication of his state of mind. He no longer hopes for a miracle cure or for a normal life with his wife.

The final scene is significant because it ties up an earlier scene between Lydia and Alice. Lydia reads her monologue and Alice says she feels love through Lydia's presentation. Long before this, Alice told Lydia she dreaded the day when she might not even recognize Lydia as her daughter. Lydia said that they would always know they





loved each other, even when Alice no longer remembered that. Alice asked what would happen if she also forgot about that love and Lydia said she would tell Alice and that Alice would believe her. With this monologue, Lydia expresses that love to Alice in a way Alice can understand.

## Discussion Question 1

What is John's reaction to the news about the drug trials in which Alice participated? What do you think he felt at getting this news?

## Discussion Question 2

Describe the scene in which John and Alice have an ice cream during their walk. How have their priorities changed over the past two years?

## Discussion Question 3

If Alice were able to truly see her life as it is in 2005, do you think she would regret that the butterfly test failed?

## Vocabulary

undecipherable, extraordinary, surreal, conspicuously, commencement, picaresque, momentum, grotesquely, pristine,



# Characters

## Dr. Alice Howland

Alice Howland is fifty years old, a professor in Harvard's psychology department, and says she has never felt better. Then she begins to forget things. She puts it down to her busy life, her age, and the fact that she's going through menopause. Her doctor refers Alice to a neurologist who diagnoses Alice with Alzheimer's. Alice is devastated and tries to argue that the diagnosis must be wrong. It's part of her nature to seek out alternative answers and it takes her some time to accept the diagnosis.

Alice is a strong, intelligent woman, and the neurologist points out that this has probably delayed the outward signs of Alzheimer's. Alice uses her intelligence to search for clues, answering questions and solving problems through reasoning even when she can't remember the answers. She continues to use that intelligence even when her ability to remember things drops dramatically.

After Alice accepts that she's going to lose all her memories along with her ability to function independently, she comes up with a plan to commit suicide. She programs her BlackBerry with a series of five questions. She sets an alarm to go off daily with the five questions and a note, indicating that she is to check out the file on her computer titled "butterflies" if there comes a time when she can't answer even one of the questions. Then the BlackBerry is damaged and Alice loses that key to controlling her future. She stumbles across the file on her computer one day and plans to commit suicide, but she is sidetracked and forgets that was her intention. This need to keep control of her life and her future is another important aspect of Alice's nature.

Alice's disease follows its natural course and, by the end of the story, she's completely dependent on her family and caregivers to get through each day. Though she can't call anyone by name, she realizes she has a connection with each of the people in her life, and she lives this chapter of her life to the best of her ability.

## Dr. John Howland

John Howland is Alice's husband. He's a professor at Harvard University and is devoted to his career and his family, though his career seems to come first. When Alice is diagnosed with Alzheimer's, John sets out to research the subject. He has many questions for the doctor, insisting on information about drug trials and alternative treatments that might slow or stop the progression of the disease. Alice's doctors answer John's questions but ultimately turn to Alice for the final decision in how to treat her disease.

John struggles to deal with Alice's condition, especially when he begins to worry each time she's out of the house. Knowing that she became lost once, he can't stand the idea of allowing her to be on her own. He insists that she stop running, an exercise that she



greatly enjoys. He agrees to run with her but isn't always available. He doesn't understand that Alice sees running as a vital exercise and that she holds onto the idea that she might be slowing the progression of the disease by running regularly. She becomes frustrated when he can't work time into his schedule for their run and he doesn't understand why it's so important to her.

John gets a job offer in New York and intends to move there with Alice. Alice had hoped that they would both take a year's sabbatical so that they could spend time together before she lost the last of her memories. John decides that he's going to take the job in New York even though it means he can't take the year off with Alice. Alice sees that year as their last chance to be together while she still has some level of cognizance but John refuses.

## Lydia Howland

Lydia is the youngest daughter of Alice and John Howland. She is in her early twenties and is living in Los Angeles as the story opens, where she is working and trying to break into acting. Lydia doesn't want to go to college and Alice fears it's because she is rebelling against the lives her parents lived. Alice tries to make Lydia see that a college degree is a good thing to fall back on but they clash whenever the subject comes up. Ironically, Alice and Lydia become close after Alice is diagnosed with Alzheimer's. Lydia decides to go to college and moves home to attend school. She spends a lot of time with Alice and catches on to the best way to deal with Alice's new needs long before her father or siblings.

## Anna

Anna is the oldest child of John and Alice Howland. She is married to Charlie and works as a lawyer. Anna is in her late twenties, has been married for about a year, and desperately wants a child as the story opens. She is intelligent and self-centered, and apparently likes to be more successful than her sister, Lydia. She has twins after Alice is already showing deep signs of Alzheimer's. She is impatient during the early stages of Alice's disease and pushes Alice to lessen her dependence on her BlackBerry.

## Charlie

Charlie is married to Anna, Alice's oldest daughter. When Alice begins losing memories of family members, she sometimes becomes confused about Charlie's position in the family.

## Tom Howland

Tom is the only son of Alice and John Howland. He is working toward his career as a surgeon. He is impatient with Alice during the early stages of the disease.

## **Dr. Eric Wellman**

Eric is the head of the psychology department. He is married to Marjorie and the couple hosts a Christmas party every year. It's at one of these parties that Alice meets Dan's wife and then forgets that they've met, introducing herself a few minutes later. Eric talks to Alice at the beginning of the fall semester of 2004, expecting to help her work through some personal issue that impacted her performance the previous semester. When Alice says she has Alzheimer's, Eric decides that she can't continue to teach.

## **Dan**

Dan is a fourth-year graduate student working with Alice. He gets married and introduces his wife to Alice during a Christmas party but Alice forgets meeting her just a few minutes later. He is the final student Alice mentors for a doctorate degree. Alice attends his graduation ceremony but doesn't remember him

## **Carole**

As the story comes to a close, Alice is in the park with a caregiver named Carole. The woman has begun spending a great deal of time with Alice and Alice has come to recognize her as someone who can help her maneuver through her day when she's confused.

## **The Doctors**

Dr. Moyer is Alice's personal physician and is the first to suspect that Alice might have something serious wrong. She refers Alice to the neurologist, Dr. Davis. Dr. Davis is young and is the first to say Alice has Alzheimer's.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Alzheimer's

This is a progressive disease that causes a myriad of memory, cognitive, and motor problems. When Alice is diagnosed, she realizes that she will eventually lose her communications skills. Communication has been the basis for her entire life's work and this devastates her.

## Harvard Square

This is a place near Alice's home and her work, and it's where she becomes lost for the first time. She knows where she is but can't remember how to get home. This disorientation makes her realize that something is seriously wrong. In some ways, Harvard Square becomes a symbol for what her life is going to become and Alice refers to it later as proof in her mind that the Alzheimer's diagnosis is correct.

## The Butterfly Test

This is a series of five questions Alice prompts herself to answer every day with instructions to go to the file titled "butterfly" on her computer if she ever has trouble answering any of the questions. The file includes instructions on how to kill herself with sleeping pills in the hope that she will avoid becoming a completely mindless woman who is a burden on her family. The test appears as an alarm each day on Alice's BlackBerry but her plan fails when the BlackBerry is destroyed. She does find the file and plans to follow through with the suicide but is distracted and forgets.

## John Black

John Black is a fictional person. Alice is asked to remember the name John Black along with an address during testing by the neurologist. She can remember the name but not the address when she's asked to recall it, which is an important sign that she does have Alzheimer's.

## The Memory Disorders Unit

This is the unit within the Massachusetts General Hospital where Alice is diagnosed and treated for Alzheimer's.



## Jerri's

Jerri's is a coffee shop near the Harvard campus where Alice and John often stop for a morning beverage. John has coffee and Alice always has tea. One morning, she insists on having coffee as well, having forgotten that she doesn't like coffee.

## The Sleeping Pill

Alice gets a prescription for sleeping pills and creates a plan to commit suicide when she begins to forget the most important things in her life. The plan falls through. The pills represent Alice's attempt to maintain control of her life even when she is losing control.

## The BlackBerry

The BlackBerry is an electronic device that Alice uses to help her remember things as her disease progresses. She sets up the Butterfly Test on her Blackberry but her plan fails when she puts the Blackberry in the freezer, destroying the device.

## Running

Running is an important part of Alice's routine prior to the diagnosis. After she's diagnosed, Alice learns that regular exercise might help slow the disease. At that point, running becomes a vital part of her day. When John becomes concerned that she'll become lost during a run, he insists she stop running alone. Running is a symbol of Alice's efforts to control her situation and John's interference becomes a symbol of her inability to do so.

## The Hallway Rug

This is a rug in the hall leading to the front door of Alice's house. When she begins to have trouble with her depth perception, she believes the rug is a huge hole in the hall floor. She won't go out the door because she believes contractors must have cut a hole in the floor but realizes that's not right when the mailman drops the mail through the door slot and it lands on the rug. Later, Anna walks into the house and across the rug. Alice is so frustrated by the situation that she drags the rug outside.



# Settings

## William James Hall

This is the building that houses Harvard's psychology department and where Alice's has an office and teaches class. The building is just off the main campus and everyone says it could be mistaken for a parking garage. While the building isn't impressive, the view from the building is.

## Alice's Home

This is the house she shares with John. It is located near the Harvard University campus where both Alice and John work. The house is familiar to Alice and her inability to find her way home sometimes is devastating to Alice. She first sees that she's having problems with depth perception when a rug in the foyer of this house looks to Alice like a giant hole in the floor.

## The Cape House

This is the house Alice and John use for vacations and time away from home. The house is less familiar to Alice and she doesn't feel at home here once the Alzheimer's has progressed. At one point, she pleads with John to take her back home. One day, Alice needs to go to the bathroom and she can't find it. She urinates on herself and it breaks her heart that she's losing her memories so quickly.

## Harvard University

This is where Alice and John work as professors. The university campus is real and it's very well respected. The fact that Alice is a professor there is a testament of her intelligence. There are only vague descriptions of the campus in the book though there are some specific places described as part of the story. These include Harvard Square and the psychology building.

## Massachusetts General Hospital

This is where Alice is diagnosed with Alzheimer's and where she regularly sees medical professionals in the Memory Disorders Unit. The hospital is not described in any detail but is important because Alice gets the diagnosis here and goes here for checkups. The Memory Disorders Unit is in this hospital.



# Themes and Motifs

## Maintaining Control

Alice is desperate to control her life after her diagnosis. She hates that she loses the ability to go places and to function on her own. She develops several ways to help get through her days, including many to-do lists. She also depends heavily on her BlackBerry to remind her of upcoming events. Dr. Davis points out that Alice, as a highly intelligent woman, finds ways to answer questions even when she doesn't remember the answer, and the BlackBerry is one example of this effort.

An important example of this theme is seen in Alice's decision to commit suicide. She visits a local nursing home's Alzheimer's unit and observes several patients with advanced Alzheimer's. She decides that she can't face living like that and decides she will commit suicide before she reaches that stage. She sets up the "Butterfly Test" as a means of reminding herself of her intention. The test asks several easy questions with instructions to look at a specific computer file if there comes a time she can't answer any of the questions. The file gives the location of a bottle of sleeping pills with instructions to take them all. The plan fails, but the fact that Alice sets it up is an example of her effort to control her life.

Other examples are seen in her interaction with John. After she becomes lost, John insists that she stops running alone. This means Alice has to wait for John to have time to join her. He sometimes doesn't have time and that upsets her. Alice makes several suggestions, including putting her address in her sock and carrying a telephone, but is told she might forget to use the phone or look for the address.

John becomes involved in her health decisions and wants her to use an alternative program to treat the Alzheimer's. Alice refuses and enrolls in an experimental drug study instead. John's decision to move to New York is yet another example of this theme. Alice refuses to consider the move and John tries to argue that Alice doesn't know what she wants. Lydia says Alice is still able to make some decisions for herself and that she should be able to make this one as well. Ultimately, John makes the move without Alice, leaving her in the care of the children and a caregiver during the week while he's away.

## The Importance of Family

Alice is devoted to her family and loves each of her children very much, though she admits that she paid more attention to Anna and Tom than to Lydia. Alice wants what's best for each of her children and she argues constantly with Lydia because of Lydia's choice not to attend college. Alice wants what's best for Lydia and believes that college is important. As the disease progresses, Alice and Lydia grow closer and Lydia moves home where she enrolls in college and spends time with her mother.





Alice and John have had a long marriage but their relationship suffers as the disease progresses and each of them try to cope. Alice looks back on their lives and says they were closer but have grown apart over the years. She says they live together but have led separate lives. John doesn't see their marriage the same way and says he has always been happy.

Another aspect of this theme is seen in Alice's thoughts as Anna is trying to become pregnant. Alice worries that having children will make it more difficult for Anna to advance her career. Alice says that happened to her and admits that she was sometimes angry that her career slowed because of the children while John's career was unhampered.

While not biologically related, Alice's relationship with her colleagues is another important example of this theme. The professors and staff in her department work closely together and Alice says their relationship is very much like being part of a family, complete with the good times and the rough patches.

## The Effects of Alzheimer's

Alice begins showing effects of Alzheimer's long before she is officially diagnosed. She forgets small things but she compares it to John's constant searching for his keys and other items. She puts her forgetfulness down to a combination of age, a hectic schedule, and menopause. The turning point for Alice came the day she is standing at Harvard Square, a place she's been hundreds of times, and can't remember how to get home. The moment passes and she becomes re-oriented, but she realizes that she's facing something more serious than merely age.

When remembering becomes more of a problem, Alice begins using clues to find answers so that it appears she hasn't forgotten. Dr. Davis points out that Alice's intelligence means some of the effects of the disease have been hidden longer than normal. She develops the habit of putting information into her BlackBerry. That bothers two of her children who push Alice to remember for herself.

Depression is another common aspect of Alzheimer's. Alice deals with depression relatively well. She is hurt when she's forced to quit teaching a year earlier than she had planned. She's also hurt to realize that Dan will be her final graduate student. The inability to hold down a job is another effect of the disease.

As Alice begins to forget things, she embarrasses the people around her. Most of the time, she's unaware of what's happened. During a Christmas party, Dan introduces Alice to his new wife, Beth. A short time later, Alice introduces herself to Beth and believes they haven't met before. After she stops teaching, Alice continues to sit in on staff meetings. During one meeting, she makes a valid point on a presentation. A few minutes later, she makes the same point and doesn't understand why no one takes note of the point or discusses it further.



Anger is another effect of Alzheimer's. Alice becomes frustrated when she can't remember or function through normal daily tasks, and this manifests in angry outbursts. She snaps at family members because she isn't able to manage her emotions.

Finally, Alzheimer's is inherited and Alice realizes that her father showed signs of Alzheimer's though she put it down to alcoholism. She also realizes that she might have passed the gene down to her own children. She is angry at her father over this and she fears that her children will be angry at her. The Alzheimer's affects at least one of her children. Anna tests positive for the gene. Tom tests negative and Lydia refuses to be tested.

## Grief

Alice and John go through all the stages of grief as they deal with the diagnosis. Alice goes through them first because she is the first to know about the diagnosis. When Dr. Davis says she has Alzheimer's, Alice grabs onto the word "probable" in his statement. She says that means she might not have Alzheimer's but Davis says that's not the case. He says he uses the word only because confirming the diagnosis is difficult, but that he's certain that Alice has Alzheimer's.

Alice hides the diagnosis from John and their children for awhile. She denies that the diagnosis is true and believes that she is coping. She thinks she's hiding the problem from her students and colleagues, but later discovers that's not the case. One day, Alice studies for her class but then forgets what she is supposed to teach on that day. Another day, Alice rushes to class but forgets that she's supposed to teach. She waits the required twenty minutes for a teacher to show up, then gets up and leaves along with other students. At the beginning of the following semester, Alice reads comments about her performance and admits that she has to step down from her position as teacher.

When John learns that Alice has been diagnosed with Alzheimer's, he also denies that it can be true. By this time, Alice has accepted the truth. She gives several examples of memory loss that are greater than those suffered by a normal person in an effort to help John accept the diagnosis. John insists on having a test for the gene associated with Alzheimer's and that test comes back positive.

John tries to bargain, a step in the process that Alice skips. He does extensive research and wants Alice to try an alternative treatment program, but Alice refuses. John doesn't really want her to participate in a drug study because there's a chance she'll get a placebo as part of that study, meaning she won't get better even if the study proves the drug works.

When John finally accepts the diagnosis, he begins insisting that Alice take specific measure to ensure her safety. He puts a big note on the refrigerator saying she isn't to run alone for fear she'll get lost. He accepts a job in New York though Alice wants him to take a sabbatical year and stay home with her. John refuses, having apparently

accepted that Alice is going to become incapable of being a true partner in marriage and insisting that he has to take this research opportunity.

## Love

Love is an important theme of the story and is seen in several relationships. Arguably the most important is the love of a mother for her daughters. Alice admits that she hasn't paid as much attention to Lydia as she should have. She cites Lydia's exemplary behavior as a student and Alice admits that it was easy to leave her on her own while she traveled and pursued her career. As Alice is facing Alzheimer's and realizes that her time is dramatically short, she also realizes how much she loves Lydia.

At one point, Alice says she dreads the day she won't recognize Lydia. Lydia reassures her, saying they'll always feel love for each other, even when they don't have words to express it. Alice says there might come a time when she can't remember that love. Lydia says she'll tell Alice about their love for each other and that Alice will believe it. Alice accepts Lydia's explanation but can't help but analyze it further for herself.

Alice knows that memory is a brain function. She says her intelligence tells her that's true but that she also hopes her heart will remember what her brain cannot. That may have come true for Alice. As the story comes to a close, she is listening to a monologue presented by Lydia. When Lydia finishes, Alice says the monologue was about love. She's right and it may be that this makes both Alice and Lydia feel the mother-daughter love that has always existed between them.

The love between Alice and John is another example of this theme. John seems uncaring in some instances but it's more likely that he is heartbroken over Alice's situation and his inability to do anything to help. At one point he tells her that he can't stand to remain at home, watching her struggle against the onslaught of Alzheimer's symptoms. When Alice gives her talk at the Dementia Care Conference, John is moved to tears and is wearing his lucky gray shirt, a sign of his love for her.

# Styles

## Point of View

The story is written in third person from Alice's perspective. The reader sees and knows only what Alice knows, meaning the perspective is greatly limited. This limitation means the reader sometimes has to figure out what's going on. For example, Alice realizes one day that she's going to be late for class. She rushes to get there and -\*discovers that class hasn't yet begun. She takes a seat and remains there for twenty minutes, until it's evident that the professor isn't going to show up. It seems evident that Alice is supposed to be teaching the class and has forgotten that detail, but the reader doesn't know this for certain until much later, when Alice is reading the student evaluations.

This is seen again near the end of the book when Alice can no longer remember names. She refers to Anna as “the mom” because Anna is mother to a set of twins by this point. She refers to Lydia as “the actress.” These references are clear to the reader and do not cause confusion, but they do make it clear how far Alice has gone toward completely losing her memory.

Alice is not a reliable person, meaning her perspective is skewed. For instance, she doesn't believe her teaching has suffered and she has no idea that she's no longer effective. Though she is having some memory lapses, she doesn't realize how far the disease has already spread until she reads the student reviews. The reader has to depend on Alice's perspective for information but details are generally explained through conversations. For example, Alice learns about her teaching mistakes by reading the student reviews. When Alice sees a giant hole in the floor, she later learns that her depth perception is failing which causes her to think a rug is a hole.

While the perspective is not reliable, it is also not confusing. When Alice takes a seat in a class rather than teaching it, the reader should suspect that she's forgotten she's the teacher. That detail is later confirmed. Having the reader see the events strictly from Alice's perspective provides a very dramatic look at the disease through the eyes of this victim. The perspective is appropriate for the story.

## Language and Meaning

There are some words and terms that most readers will not recognize. The majority of these are medical terms associated with Alice's diagnosis of Alzheimer's. The reader who simply skips over these will not lose the essence of the story. The author describes her research for the book and it appears that her facts are real. The medical study Alice participates in is fictional.

The story is presented in chronological order over a period of about two years as Alice struggles with the diagnosis and effects of Alzheimer's. There are references to a few events that happened prior to the first chapter of the book. These are presented as



memories or in conversations between the characters. The book is written in a straightforward style and the overall tone is one of desperation with an undercurrent of hope and love.

The family becomes closer because of Alice's illness. That reaction may seem somewhat contrived to some readers. The story is meant to convey hope in the face of a devastating diagnosis.

There are a few curse words. Though the reader doesn't know Alice prior to the onset of Alzheimer's, she doesn't seem like the kind of person who would curse. These instances are designed to help the reader understand the level of failure Alice is experiencing.

## Structure

The book is divided into 24 chapters and an epilogue. Each chapter is titled by date. The majority of the chapters covers one month in Alice's life. The titles offer no clues of what the reader can expect from that chapter, but the Alzheimer's progresses quickly and the reader can predict that Alice will show increasing memory loss.

The story begins in September 2003 when Alice begins having trouble remembering things. She is 50 years old and is a professor in the psychology department at Harvard. She is happily married to John, also a professor at Harvard. They have three grown children. In November 2003, Alice goes to see her doctor who advises that Alice go on to a neurologist. She sees that neurologist in December 2003 and is diagnosed with Alzheimer's in January 2004. She shares the news with John and they begin the heartbreaking journey of trying to make plans for an uncertain future.

In May 2004, Alice comes up with a plan to commit suicide before she becomes a total burden on her family. Over the coming months, John continues to look for a treatment that will work for Alice. In July 2004, Alice forgets that her mother and sister died years earlier and grieves for them all over again. In September 2004, Alice returns to school but discovers that her students rated her performance poorly the previous semester. She tells Eric Wellman, head of the psychology department, of her diagnosis, and her teaching career comes to an end.

In December 2004, Alice looks for support from people who truly understand what she's going through, and creates an informal support group. In February 2005, her memory has decreased significantly but she is still intelligent, meaning she can sometimes come up with answers to questions even when she doesn't really remember them. In April 2005, her daughter gives birth to twins and John wants to move to New York, though their children and Alice are against the move. By Summer 2005, Alice seldom recognizes her family. In the Epilogue, Alice has settled into a routine, spending her time with her daughters and a devoted caregiver.

The majority of the book is narrative but there is dialogue. The dialogue is appropriate and believable. Typical punctuation, capitalization, and writing are used throughout the book.

There are a few interesting aspects of the structure. For example, in the June 2004 chapter, Alice arrives at Dr. Davis's office where she finds that John and Dr. Davis are already waiting for her. A couple of sentences appear in parenthesis at the end of that paragraph. It reads, "(Interior of Doctor's Office. The woman's neurologist sits across from the woman's husband. Enter the woman.)" These appear to be stage instructions, as if the story was presented as a play. The purpose is to make the reader aware that Alice is acting out her role as if she is being directed. This is a rather dramatic notation that serves its purpose well.



## Quotes

Her recent entry into an older demographic announced itself regularly with the unwelcome intrusion of menopausal forgetting. Otherwise, she felt young, strong, and healthy.

-- Narrator (October 2003 paragraph 63)

**Importance:** Alice has not yet put a name on her Alzheimer's and believes that her memory issues at this point are just a symptom of menopause. It's significant that she feels healthy even though her brain is already beginning to deteriorate.

When I put all this information together, Alice, what it tells me is that you fit the criteria of having probable Alzheimer's disease.

-- Dr. Davis (January 2004 paragraph 12)

**Importance:** This is how Alice gets the news of her diagnosis. She grabs onto every aspect of this, including the word "probable," hoping that there's some other explanation.

I think you're exhausted and stressed, I think the hormonal changes from menopause are wreaking havoc on your physiology, and I think you're depressed. We can handle off of these, Ali, we just have to address each one.

-- John Howland (February 2004 paragraph 40)

**Importance:** John has just been told of Alice's diagnosis and he's desperately trying to find alternative explanations. He's in the denial phase at this point and it will take some time before he accepts the diagnosis.

As smart as they were, they couldn't cobble together a definitive, long-term plan. There were too many unknowns to simply solve for  $x$ , the most crucial of those being, How fast will this progress?

-- Narrator (April 2004 paragraph 1)

**Importance:** Alice and John are desperately trying to figure out how they will handle their future. Alice knows she won't be able to keep working much longer and they both feel the future is simply too unpredictable for them to make a solid plan.

And when the burden of her disease exceeded the pleasure of that ice cream, she wanted to die. But would she quite literally have the presence of mind to recognize it when those curves crossed?

-- Narrator (May 2004 paragraph 69)

**Importance:** Alice has just been to visit the Alzheimer's wing of a nursing facility and she doesn't want to be relegated to that kind of life. She is looking at suicide as an option but doesn't know if she'll be able to recognize when it's time to kill herself and she knows she can't ask her family members to help her.



There it was, her Alzheimer's, stripped and naked under the fluorescent lighting, on display for Sarah Something to scrutinize and judge.

-- Narrator (June 2004 paragraph 79)

**Importance:** Alice has just gone through a series of tests from a member of the medical staff. She can't remember the woman's last night, so refers to her as "Sarah Something." When Alice comes to a question she can't answer, she's upset and embarrassed, mainly because it's a fresh statement of the effects of Alzheimer's.

She'd probably left it at the beach. She hoped she'd left it at the beach. That was at least something she would have done before Alzheimer's.

-- Narrator (August 2004 paragraph 49)

**Importance:** Alice is looking for her copy of Moby Dick. By now, her disease has advanced to the point that she's having trouble functioning through a typical day and Alice wants to find explanations other than Alzheimer's for her moments of forgetfulness.

She would join in, faking it, trying to protect them from how lost she was. Watching movies made her keenly aware of how lost she was.

-- Narrator (November 2004 paragraph 1)

**Importance:** Alice is struggling to keep her memory loss hidden as much as possible. By now, she is not able to read a book at all. An important part of this is that she's "keenly aware" that she's forgetting things.

They talked about her, in front of her, as if she were deaf. They talked about her, in front of her, without including her, as if she had Alzheimer's disease.

-- Narrator (December 2004 paragraph 109)

**Importance:** John has just announced that he's taking a research position with a company in New York and plans to move there with Alice. Their children are arguing that Alice doesn't need to be moved into a strange place at this point, and that she needs continuity. While Alice agrees with her children, she's frustrated that they are all talking without including her in the conversation.

Soon, although I'll still know what it is like, I'll be unable to express it to you. And too soon after that, I'll no longer even know I have dementia.

-- Alice (March 2005 paragraph 7)

**Importance:** Alice is speaking at a conference about dementia and she's talking about her personal experiences with Alzheimer's.

Her ability to use language, that thing that most separates humans from animals, was leaving her, and she was feeling less and less human as it departed. She'd said a tearful good-bye to okay some time ago.

-- Narrator (June 2005 paragraph 2)





**Importance:** Alice is struggling by now and is very aware that she's losing the ability to express her thoughts or to hold onto thoughts long enough to carry on a conversation. The loss of communication is especially difficult for her because of her education and research in linguistics.

I feel love. It's about love.

-- Alice (Epilogue paragraph 43)

**Importance:** Alice has just listened to a monologue by Lydia. Lydia asks Alice to listen and try to guess what she's trying to portray without trying to figure out what the words mean. Alice is carried away by Lydia's voice and answers that the monologue is "about love." This is significant because it's also how Alice's family feels about Alice and about each other. Lydia and Anna seem to be closer and they are taking care of Alice.