

Such a Pretty Girl Study Guide

Such a Pretty Girl by Laura Wiess

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Plot Summary

The novel *Such a Pretty Girl* by Laura Wiser tells the story of Meredith Shale, a teenaged girl who faces a demon in her life and emerges victorious. In addition to the theme of facing one's fears, the story also follows Meredith's journey through a religious awakening where she goes from belief only in superstition and chance to the opinion that sometimes, miracles do happen.

Meredith's story begins on the day that her father is released from jail six years early on probation. Her father, Charles, had been in jail because he raped Meredith and also molested several boys. Meredith fears that now that he is out of jail, her father will come after her again. Her fears are made worse because her mother, Sharon, refuses to see Meredith's rape for what it was. She will not protect her daughter from her husband but instead insists that he live as close to them as possible.

Meredith does have a few friends who support her in her belief that her father will attack her again. Mrs. Paula Mues and her teenaged son, Andy, know first-hand of Charles' sickness as he molested Andy while having a year-long affair with Mrs. Mues. Nigel Balthazar is a retired police officer who arrested Charles after his first attack on Meredith. He supplies Meredith with nanny cams so they can build a case against her father. Leah Louisa Delkalp, Meredith's maternal grandmother, seeks guardianship of Meredith to get her out of reach of her pedophile father.

It is only his fourth day out of jail when Charles tries to rape Meredith again. With the nanny cams running, Meredith records the action, including her striking her father across the back with a three-foot tall oaken stature of the Virgin Mary. The statue had been given to Meredith by Andy while he was out-of-town visiting a victim soul in hopes of curing his paralysis. In what Meredith comes to believe is a miracle, the victim soul dies on the same day that she strikes her father in her efforts to ward off a second rape, paralyzing him. It is also on this day that Andy regains his ability to walk.



Chapters One and Two

Chapters One and Two Summary

The novel *Such a Pretty Girl* by Laura Wiser tells the story of Meredith Shale, a teenaged girl who faces a demon in her life and emerges victorious. In addition to the theme of facing one's fears, the story also follows Meredith's journey through a religious awakening where she goes from belief only in superstition and chance to the opinion that sometimes, miracles do happen.

In Chapter One, Meredith sits near the dumpsters in her condo's complex and thinks about how her time has run out six years early. She smokes, only slightly worried an adult will come and take her cigarette away. The adults had bonded together and tried to keep her mother from renting a second condo in the complex for her father, but her mother's lawyer threatened to sue and the issue was settled.

As her mother had gotten ready to go get her father, she had talked to Meredith about how her father had wanted her there when he first came home—how he wants them back together as a family. Meredith's mother leaves after telling her there are three steaks thawing on the kitchen counter.

Although everyone in town knows that Meredith's father is on the sexual offender registry, Meredith's mother chooses to ignore the treatment she receives from the townspeople. For the past three years, Sharon Shale has also ignored Meredith, her own daughter. Meredith hopes that one day her mother will realize they are better off without her father and will protect Meredith. She never does though.

In Chapter Two, Meredith's mother calls for her to come say "hello" to her father when they pull up at the condo. In her anger, Meredith gets up. When she hears her father's voice, it brings back her love for him, as well as the despair that he has made her feel. Her mother asks Meredith to give her father a hug but he asks her not to push Meredith when Meredith refuses. Meredith is surprised how quickly he cuts through when he calls her by her old nickname.

When her mother mentions the steaks defrosting, Meredith comes to life and tells her that she threw the steaks away because they smelled bad. Sharon is upset by Meredith's actions and her husband tries to comfort her but Meredith notices he doesn't lean toward her. She knows her father likes youth. Her mother is no longer young enough. He asks instead if they can order a Tony's pizza. Meredith knows that Tony will not deliver to them although he delivers to the rest of the complex. This is a discrimination for which Meredith admires Tony. Andy, in the condo located catty-corner from Meredith's, lifts his bottle of alcohol in a sign of luck to Meredith.



Chapters One and Two Analysis

The conflict in this novel is introduced early. Meredith's father, who has sexually abused her in some way, has been let out of jail six years early. Although the residents there had tried to rally against it, Meredith's mother has rented a condo in the same complex as the one where she and Meredith live. While the majority of the community is unhappy that Meredith's father has been released from jail and is moving back to their area, they have found there is little they can do about it. Meredith feels the community shuns her and her mother, and tries to avoid them because of the crimes her father has committed. The man who owns Tony's pizza refuses to deliver to their condo even though he delivers to the other condos in the area. This is an act of discrimination for which Meredith respects him.

Although Meredith had planned to stand firm against her father, memories of the love she felt for him as a child and memories of what he did to her come back. She feels weak and caught off guard. She manages to stay strong as she tells her mother and father that she had thrown away the steaks planned for her father's welcome home celebration. She makes the excuse that they smelled bad, but that does not appear to be the case.

Meredith notes that she had hoped one day that her mother would stand up and protect her from her father. She wishes that her mother had gotten a divorce, since there had been plenty of time while he was in jail. Meredith's mother, however, seems oblivious to any pain that her husband has caused her daughter. She indicates to Meredith that she thinks the girl should be able to forgive her father so they can get on with their lives.

One issue that becomes significant quickly in this novel is how well Meredith is acquainted with the things that her father both likes and dislikes. For his return, she has let herself get dirty with stubbly legs. She knows that he will be offended by her lack of hygiene. Meredith also knows that no matter how hard her mother tries to be the woman that her father loves, she is no longer young enough to suit his tastes. Although she is thin, stylish and wears a youthful mini dress, she is now too old to attract him as Meredith does.

It is also in the second chapter that writer Laura Wiser begins a technique that will be used off and on throughout the novel. Throughout the next few days with her father, Meredith will have flashbacks of times she spent with her father before he started abusing her, times when she worshiped him, and also times after the molestation had started. These flashbacks are denoted in italicized type. They give the reader background information needed to understand the relationship between Meredith and her father. Other flashbacks include Meredith's mother and Andy.



Chapters Three and Four

Chapters Three and Four Summary

In Chapter Three, Meredith slips into the house just as her mother learns on the phone that Tony's will not deliver to them. Meredith tells them she had a pizza delivered the day before and wonders aloud why they would stop delivering now. Meredith mechanically takes her vitamins from the cabinet. She takes four pills, then four sips of juice. Four is a strong number, a safe number for her. This number has seemed safe to her ever since the first night in the hospital.

Her father decides to cook, an action that brings to Meredith's mind a memory from their old house. Meredith is upset because she has not gotten a hit in softball and believes that because of this her father will not like her the way he does the boys. Her mother's voice breaks through Meredith's memory telling her that her father is going to barbeque chicken. Meredith announces she's going out and then rinses her glass at the sink so that water splatters. Her mother leans against the cabinet to turn the water off and gets the water on her silk dress. Her mother cries and runs from the room. Meredith moves to leave because she and her father aren't supposed to be together alone. Her father tries to talk to her. He tells her that it hurt that she never came to see him while he was in jail, but that he still loves her. When he calls Meredith by her old nickname "Chirp," Meredith informs him that Chirp is dead and that he has to deal with her, because she is who is left.

In Chapter Four, Meredith escapes from her condo to the blind side of the building. She feels bad things are happening. She believes it is a bad sign that her father did not follow her mother into her bedroom when she left the kitchen.

She runs to Andy's condo. The porch light burned out more than a year ago when Andy and his mother moved into the complex. Andy had arrived at the apartment on a stretcher, a new high school graduate. His mother is a religious fanatic. Andy tells Meredith that he saw what happened. Meredith asks to take a shower and Andy allows it. After she showers, Meredith counts the tiles on the bathroom wall, disturbed that the numbers are not in even sets of four.

When she returns to the kitchen, Andy warms up leftover pizza for her. She asks Andy what he thinks. He rolls to her in his wheelchair and tells her that he believes her father is not reformed or repentant. Even as he watched from his apartment, he sensed the eagerness in Meredith's father. He also noticed that Meredith's father hardly looked at Sharon but was instead intent on Meredith. Meredith indicates to Andy that her mother is no help and tries to act as if nothing has happened.

They walk in the dark out of the kitchen. The house is dark because Friday is the Mues' day for fasting and purification. They first go to the bathroom where they wash their hands. Meredith indicates that neither of them are afraid of the dark because both of



their nightmares started in broad daylight. When Meredith was three, her father had moved in with Andy's mother. This was the beginning of Andy's nightmare.

Chapters Three and Four Analysis

In this section it is learned that Meredith has at least one ally in her battle against her father. Several years ago, Meredith's father had run away to live with Andy's mother. At that time, Andy had been only seven and had been molested by Meredith's father also. Unlike Meredith's mother, though, Andy's mother had put an end to the abuse once she found out about it.

One of the ideas that surfaces in this section of the novel is Meredith's fixation upon rituals, numbers and signs. She finds safety in some numbers, especially the number four. Numbers that are not easily divisible by four, such as the odd tiles in Andy's bathroom, make her nervous. Meredith's mother makes fun of her daughter's ritual of taking her vitamins and not talking as she is doing so. These rituals, however, make Meredith feel safe, as if she can survive her father being back in her life. Meredith also indicates that she feels as if things are going badly after her first interaction with her father. She indicates this is not from any signs or omens, but instead from gut knowledge. Although Meredith puts great importance on signs that something bad might happen, she also recognizes the clear-cut signs of danger.

Light and darkness are two opposites that are used frequently in this novel. Andy's house is dark because it is the night that he and his mother practice purification. For Mrs. Mues, each Friday is a night of fasting and renewing her relationship with God. Meredith wonders how Andy's mother can spend one seventh of her life in the dark, yet have the ability to see clearly while her own mother, who lives in the light, cannot see what is happening in front of her. Another reference to light and dark occurs when Andy and his mother first come to live in the condo complex. On the night that Andy is brought in on his stretcher, the light bulb in the porch light blows out. Mrs. Mues takes this as a sign from God and refuses to change the bulb.



Chapters Five and Six

Chapters Five and Six Summary

In Chapter Five, Meredith explains the way that Andy's room smells like roses although there is no source for the scent. The Muses believe the scent is a gift from God. A three-foot oaken Madonna that Mrs. Mues believes will one day cure her son stands next to his nightstand. Mrs. Mues believes that her son's cure will come through a victim soul, a pious individual chosen to endure the pain and suffering of others. Mrs. Mues also believes that the condo coming open for rent right after Andy's accident as well as their immediate bond to one another were both acts of divine intervention.

Meredith describes the day when she and Andy first met one another. She had been outside burning the letters her father had sent her from jail, a ritual that she does each year on the anniversary date. The transport ambulance carrying Andy pulls up as she is conducting this ritual. Meredith puts out the fire, intending to go away but she is stopped when she sees Andy. The woman from the Cadillac has taken Meredith by the arm, afraid she is going to pass out. Although she still intends to go, Meredith is invited into the Mues' condo. Meredith is there when the porch light bulb pops. She is left alone with Andy while his mother signs EMS papers. Andy asks what she was burning and she tells him they were letters from someone she hopes to never see again. Something raw and intense passes between the two.

Meredith returns to the present. She watches as Andy wheels to his media cabinet and tells her he's finally found a song for which he has searched for years. Although Meredith doesn't like the song, she lets Andy enjoy it, knowing it was one of his father's favorites. Andy describes a dream to her where she is sitting on a wall in a garden, reading a dictionary. In his dream, he walks out to meet her. Since the dream had not been initiated by a memory, Andy wonders if it was a vision of the future.

He then tells Meredith that his mother plans to make a pilgrimage to a victim soul in Iowa with the belief that this man will be able to take away her son's illness. He tells Meredith he will be going with her. They will be leaving in two days. This knowledge upsets Meredith because she knows she will be left alone. Andy tells her that he has been on the waiting list for the man for a year. If he misses his appointment, he'll have to wait another year. They will be gone until Wednesday but Andy tells Meredith to come to his condo if things get bad.

In Chapter Six, Meredith leaves Andy's apartment at 11:30 p.m. Her parents are sitting on the front porch, her father waiting impatiently for Meredith to return home. Meredith's mother reminds him that she was twelve when they got together, but Charles says that he will get Meredith's situation under control. Meredith works her way around the building so her father will not know from which direction she came.



Meredith goes back in time when she remembers the first time that she heard her parents making love in their room. She had gone to their room thinking something was wrong. Her father sees her and motions for her to wait while they finish. Meredith is scared and runs back to her room. Her father waits and tells her next time she hears the noises she needs to come to watch but not to tell her mother. One night her mother sees her and takes her back to bed.

As Meredith stands looking at her father's condo, Nigel Balthazar, a retired cop who lives in the complex, speaks to her. He asks about Andy, then about her father. He mentions that her father has not registered as a sexual offender yet. Nigel asks if she is okay and warns her that it might get bad. Meredith tells him that she is no longer helpless.

Chapters Five and Six Analysis

In this section of the novel, an idea of the beginning of Meredith's abuse is given. As a small child, she had been scared by the sound of her parents making love. Instead of protecting his daughter, Charles is turned on by the idea of his daughter watching him have sex. He tells her she must come to their bedroom every night that she hears those noises to be sure that her mother is safe.

Meredith's boyfriend, Andy, is also introduced in this section of the novel. He is paralyzed as a result of an accident the night of his high school graduation. Now he lives with his mother, drinks and keeps an eye on Meredith. He tells Meredith that his mother has made an appointment for him to see a victim soul. These people are said to be able to cure others by taking their suffering on themselves. Andy's mother hopes that this man will be able to cure Andy. Meredith is upset because this trip coincides with her father coming home from jail and she does not want to be alone without Andy.

One significant scene in these chapters is the dream that Andy describes to Meredith. In it he walks across a garden to a spot where Meredith is sitting. He wonders at the time if the dream might be a vision of things to come. The reader should remember this dream since it will be important in later chapters.

Another important relationship that is introduced in this section is Meredith's friendship with Nigel Balthazar, a retired police officer who lives in her apartment complex. Nigel and Meredith both love and keep an eye on Andy. Nigel, meanwhile, keeps a close eye on Meredith. He tells her that he does not like the circumstances under which her father has come home and warns her that things could get bad.



Chapters Seven and Eight

Chapters Seven and Eight Summary

In Chapter Seven, Meredith leaves Nigel and thinks of her plan to be everything her father hates, in this way running him away. Her parents are still waiting on the porch. Meredith thinks of Andy waiting, hiding and praying. When her father tells her she can't go out without telling them where she's going. Meredith suggests the town was safe until he got out of jail. She goes to her room and locks the door. She hears the front door slam and looks out the window to see her father walking toward his condo. Meredith's mother does not come to her as Meredith had hoped.

In Chapter Eight, the house is quiet when Meredith wakes up but she soon realizes she is alone with her father. She tries to leave the kitchen but he stops her. She reminds him that he is not supposed to be alone with her without another adult present. He grabs her and hugs her, telling her that the state is not going to tell him what he can and can't do with his daughter. He orders her to go and get dressed, then slaps her on the butt as a way to get her going. Meredith pretends to be obedient, goes to the bathroom and turns on the shower, but then escapes out her bedroom window.

As Meredith waits for Andy or his mother to open their door, she hears her father as he discovers that she is missing. Mrs. Mues opens the door just as Meredith's father comes out. When Mrs. Mues realizes what is happening, she directs Meredith into Andy's room. Meredith's father knocks on the door while the two women are on their way down the hall.

Chapters Seven and Eight Analysis

One of the significant aspects that is brought up in this section of the book is Meredith's decision to take an active stance against her father. Instead of hiding or running away, as she believes Andy is doing, Meredith has a plan to get her father out of her life for good. She believes that if she can be unpleasant and disgusting enough, she can drive her father away.

Also in this section, Meredith realizes that her attempts at being unpleasant will not be enough to drive her father away. She also realizes when her mother leaves her alone with her father on what is only the first full day he is home from jail, that she can not depend on her mother to protect her in any way. Meredith had a half-hearted hope that her mother would come to comfort her after her run in with her father the night before, but her mother does not come. Her mother's apparent lack of interest in her daughter hurts Meredith deeply. Meanwhile, Andy's mother appears to be a safe person to whom Meredith can run. When Meredith comes to her, she takes the action needed to protect the girl from her father.



Another important aspect of this section is the relationship between Meredith and her mother. Meredith desperately wants her mother to love her and protect her but all that her mother can think about is having her husband back, even if that husband did hurt Meredith deeply. She shows how little she regards Meredith's safety when she leaves her daughter alone with her pedophile father on his second day out of jail. Meanwhile, Meredith gets a clear idea that her father intends to have his way with her as they "talk" in the kitchen while Meredith's mother is gone. He tells her that he will do what he wants with his daughter regardless of what the law says that he can and cannot do.



Chapters Nine and Ten

Chapters Nine and Ten Summary

In Chapter Nine, Meredith tells Mrs. Mues that she didn't tell her father about them and that she doesn't think he saw her come into their apartment. Mrs. Mues tells Meredith not to worry, that she will take care of him. Meredith thinks of the way that not even her mother has realized that Mrs. Mues is the slim attractive woman with whom her husband cheated on her. Now that Mrs. Mues realizes that same man molested her son, she has dedicated her life to bringing Charles Shale down.

Mrs. Mues takes with her the largest ceramic Jesus figure off her wall as she goes to confront Meredith's father. Meanwhile, Meredith heads into Andy's room where she collides with his wheelchair. When Andy first hears Charles' voice, he says out loud that he used to call him "Buddy." The memory makes him vomit. Meredith's father had lived with them for almost a year when Andy began having trouble in school and mood swings.

Meredith's mind jerks back to the future when she hears Mrs. Mues tell her father that she has seen Meredith, sees her each morning on her way to school. Mrs. Mues asks if he is saved and if she can pray with him. As she expected, Charles walks away from the offer. Mrs. Mues directs the children into the kitchen where she fixes coffee and they talk about what has happened to Meredith overnight. Mrs. Mues wonders why sexual offenders continue to be released from prison. Her words bring back Meredith's memory of her mother's excitement when she learned her husband was going to be released. When Meredith reminds her mother that her father is a child molester, her mother becomes angry at her. She describes his actions as a mistake. Although Meredith tries to impress upon her mother how terrible her rape was, her mother tries to brush it off as an incident that needs to be forgiven and forgotten. At the end of their conversation, Meredith realizes that if forced to make a choice, her mother will choose her father.

Back in the present, Meredith also realizes Mrs. Mues will choose Andy over her. She wonders if Mrs. Mues really cares for her or if she just pretends to so she can get inside information about Charles. As Meredith fights with the mixed messages she is receiving from her upbringing and her observations, she quickly leaves the Mues' apartment. She suddenly believes that Andy loves her and spends time with her only because there is no one else around. She remembers how she tried to ask him once, but decided against it. Andy comments that he hasn't given her the keys yet, but Meredith tells him she will come back.

In Chapter Ten, as Meredith runs from the apartment, she sees a Mobile Mechanic truck on its way to check on Mrs. Mues' car in preparation for their trip to Iowa. She wonders why she ran away from them. Meredith realizes she is scared because she has been wrong about too many things in the past twenty-four hours. Meredith's mind darts back and forth between memories of her father and memories of Andy and the present as



she struggles to determine what is real and what is not. As Meredith realizes that her father has seen both her and Andy with their pants off and has been allowed out to molest others, she becomes angry. She decides that she will be the one to stop her father from molesting another child. She heads out of the complex to her grandmother's house.

Chapters Nine and Ten Analysis

Meredith's lack of trust in the adults around her is very clear in this section of the novel. Although she has always seen Mrs. Mues as a source of support and love, she now wonders if the lady has befriended her only because Meredith is a way to get inside information on Charles. Because Meredith has so recently been reminded of the way that her father abused her trust in him she begins to show signs of doubting the trustworthiness of others.

Also in this section, it is learned that Meredith's father molested at least five other children in addition to Meredith and Andy. When Andy's mother learned of the abuse that her son had suffered at the hands of her boyfriend, she dedicated her life to trying to keep Charles from abusing again as well as helping to deliver some sort of punishment to him for the way he treated her son. Although she does not want to face the man who abused her trust, she does so to help Meredith. Because she has gained weight and approaches Charles with the air of a religious fanatic, Charles is put off by her. He does not realize she is the same woman for whom he left his wife to have an affair ten years earlier.



Chapters Eleven and Twelve

Chapters Eleven and Twelve Summary

In Chapter Eleven, Meredith finally reaches her grandmother's house after taking back roads and avoiding her mother's car. Once at her grandmother's house, her grandmother meets her with real concern. Her mother, however, is angry because she left Meredith alone for ten minutes and she ran away. Meredith indicates that her father put moves on her and her mother turns white. After her grandmother ascertains that Meredith has not been raped again, she sends Meredith to the shower and her mother to fix lunch.

After Meredith has her shower, she smokes a cigarette and thinks about Andy. He was paralyzed during an accident graduation night when he was hanging out the window of an SUV. The driver of the SUV cut a corner too sharply slamming Andy into the metal post of a stop sign, then onto the concrete. She wonders if Andy is in no pain from his paralysis why Mrs. Mues wants him cured. She thinks also about the way that adults have labeled Andy as being accident-prone when in reality his "accidents" seem to be things he has done to himself. She realizes that Mrs. Mues doesn't want Andy cured, but wanting to live.

As Meredith sits down to eat in Chapter Twelve, her mother insists they hurry so she can take her daughter and go back to her husband. Meredith is unhappy because her father is forcing her out of her own home. If she were to choose to live with her grandmother, she'd be free from her father, but away from her friends Nigel and Andy. If she stays at home, though, she will always be fearful and running. Meredith realizes that if her father offends again, he will be sent back to prison. Although she doesn't like the idea of sacrificing herself, she realizes that if she doesn't, her father will molest another innocent child.

Meredith's mother tells them there is nothing that Charles can do that will drive her away. She adds that the two of them are trying to have another baby. Both Meredith and her grandmother are incredulous. She even tells them that she will work while Charles will stay home with the baby. When Meredith's grandmother asks her to be considerate of Meredith, Sharon only asks Meredith if she knows how babies are made. When Meredith replies that the same man who taught her mother taught her, Sharon slaps her. Leah Louisa orders Meredith's mother to get out of the house. It is at this point that Sharon reminds her mother about her father's affair. Sharon leaves giving Meredith instructions that supper is at six. Leah Louisa explains to Meredith that the situation was different then. Although she can't keep Sharon from throwing her life away, she won't let her ruin Meredith's life as well.

Leah Louisa begins making arrangements to block Meredith's father from having contact with her. She tells Meredith to go upstairs and choose a room. Meredith does



so, but after her grandmother leaves for an appointment, sneaks out of the house and heads back to the condo complex to say goodbye to Andy in person.

Chapters Eleven and Twelve Analysis

It is in these chapters that Meredith runs to the only place of safety that she has besides Andy's condo, her grandmother's house. Her mother has arrived there ahead of her and is angry because she ran away. It is obvious that she still is completely blinded by her husband and is unable to see what his return is doing to Meredith. Meredith mentions her mother leaving her alone with her father so that her grandmother will know what is going on. Meredith also tells the two women that her father tried to put moves on her. She wisely doesn't try to say that he attempted to rape her since she knows they will find out that she is lying.

Meredith is disturbed when her mother brings up a time in the past when Meredith's grandfather cheated on her grandmother. This surprises Meredith because she had always thought of her grandmother, who is the mayor of the town where they live, as being strong. Meredith interprets the fact that her grandmother stayed with her grandfather even though he cheated on her as a sign of weakness.

Although Leah Louisa starts working on getting primary guardianship of her granddaughter, Meredith realizes that she can't run away from her problem that easily. She knows that she will be hiding while her father will be free to molest and hurt more children. Although she doesn't like the idea, she knows the only way that she can be truly free is to see that her father is put back behind bars.



Chapters Thirteen and Fourteen

Chapters Thirteen and Fourteen Summary

In Chapter Thirteen, when Meredith goes back to the complex, Nigel calls her to his porch. Nigel tells her that he doesn't like that her father has already started harassing her. He puts a cardboard box containing what appears to be a smoke detector and a teddy bear in her lap. Nigel explains that both items are nanny cams. He plans to start building a case for when something happens. Nigel insists that her father will start molesting again and that the children in town aren't safe until he is back in jail. Nigel adds that he had spoken to Meredith's father earlier that day. He says he had seen Charles as he was looking for Meredith earlier. Charles had run up to him smiling and asking if he'd seen Meredith until he recognized Nigel. At this point he had stopped so quickly he fell down. Nigel had called Charles by a nickname that he hates, "Chuckie," and had asked if he has been to register yet. Nigel says Charles headed back to their condo and he thought about calling the police in to check on things when he saw Meredith sneak out of Andy's apartment. Nigel tells Meredith he thinks it's a good idea that her father know she has friends looking after her.

She tells Nigel that Andy is leaving to go to Iowa. She is jealous that he is able to go. Meredith feels like if she takes the opportunity to run away from her problem, she will never be able to look back and think about the danger she has left for other children in the complex. She also knows she will never feel comfortable, not even at her grandmother's. Nigel shares with Meredith that Andy's doctor had said that he should be able to walk again, but he never did. Even though Andy knows this, it doesn't seem to matter to him. Nigel tells Meredith her parents had left a short while ago and she should install the nanny cams while she has a chance.

In Chapter Fourteen, Meredith sets up the teddy bear camera in her room. She then removes the smoke detector from the kitchen and replaces it with the camera. As she repeats her groups of four, she thinks about how she has to hold onto herself in order to keep herself from being a target for anyone who would hurt her. Meredith calls her grandmother and leaves a message on her answering machine in case she missed the written note she'd left. Then, Meredith goes to Andy's.

Chapters Thirteen and Fourteen Analysis

In this section Meredith learns that she has one friend and accomplice to her plan in Nigel. Nigel arranges for them to meet outside so it can be seen that he and Meredith are friends. He also gives Meredith two nanny cams so that they can start building a case against her father. Nigel commends Meredith for not running away from her troubles, the way Andy is. It is from Nigel that Meredith learns that Andy's injuries should not have left him paralyzed. It is assumed that it is some means of protection for Andy to keep from having to face his real problems.

As Meredith is installing the smoke detector nanny cam, she thinks about the research that she has done about the effects of molestation on children. She realizes that girls like her usually wind up allowing themselves to be used over and over because they feel useless and unloved. Meredith is determined to hold onto what is left of herself.



Chapters Fifteen and Sixteen

Chapters Fifteen and Sixteen Summary

In Chapter Fifteen, at Andy's house, the Mobile Mechanic tries to flirt with Meredith. Andy watches and calls Meredith into the house. Meredith asks Andy what will happen when he is able to walk again. She is afraid that he will walk away from her but doesn't tell him this. Meredith tells him that she just wants everything to stay the same. He tells her that when he comes back, he'll walk over to her house and they can start over again. As Meredith runs out of the house, she runs straight into the path of her father carrying bags of trash out of the house. Although she doesn't want to, Meredith remembers a time when her father helped her, and feels compelled to help him with the trash.

He asks Meredith to go inside with him and indicates that he wants to spend some time with her. She hears the Calvinetti twins fighting and wonders why they are dumb enough to allow themselves to be seen by her father. Meredith realizes that she has to make herself a sacrifice and heads for the house, calling for her father to follow her.

In Chapter Sixteen, Meredith enters the house and her mother calls from the living room. Meredith goes to her first and finds her dressed in her father's softball jersey and cap. Her mother is shocked to see Meredith. Although the two had plans, Charles tells her they will instead spend their time talking with Meredith. They argue and Meredith runs for her room and locks the door. She won't open the door for her father but he unlocks it with a skeleton key that he has prepared for this purpose. Meredith paints her toenails and tries to ignore her father. He assumes she is upset because of the new baby and tries to explain to her that the new baby won't come between them. He briefly touches Meredith's breast before Sharon calls him. He obeys. Meredith turns off the camera and climbs out her window.

Chapters Fifteen and Sixteen Analysis

In this section of chapters, Meredith identifies the biggest challenge to her desire to send her father back to jail. It is not the memories of the abuse that she finds crippling, but the memories of the happiness that she shared with both her mother and her father that make her want to give up her crusade against them. She has memories of admiring and respecting both of them and believing that they admired and respected her as well. Their actions since the abuse has become public have shown Meredith that these memories are not as accurate as she believed them to be. Meredith still misses the happiness that she once had with her parents.

It is also in this section that Meredith realizes that her intentions to drive her father away are not working as she had hoped they would. Although she doesn't want to do so,

Meredith comes to the realization that she must set herself up as a sacrifice in order to keep her father from abusing her again, or abusing other children.



Chapters Seventeen and Eighteen

Chapters Seventeen and Eighteen Summary

In Chapter Seventeen, Meredith escapes her room and remembers the time she went to the hospital. Her mother yells at her for telling the people in the hospital what her father did to her. Police or security officers are brought in to take her mother out.

Back in the present, Meredith runs to Andy's condo. Nigel is there. She tells him she knows that he is the one who had arrested her father. She wants to know what happened that day. When Andy asks what is wrong with her, she tells him that her parents are trying to have another baby.

In Chapter Eighteen, Meredith tells Nigel and the Muses that her father touched her chest. When Mrs. Mues suggests this action would have violated Charles' probation, Nigel tells the story of the day that Meredith went to the hospital. He says that Charles had told the story that Meredith's period had started. By the time they get him to the car, Charles is crying and saying he is sick.

At this point, Andy leaves the room, unable to hear the story. Mrs. Mues apologizes but Meredith says that if Andy cannot stand the truth, he is no different from her mother. Andy yells angrily and Meredith runs to Andy's room and kicks him repeatedly. Andy tells her that he wishes he was in Iowa because he cannot do anything to help Meredith or all the other kids who might fall prey to her father. Andy talks of how he trusted Charles but his trust was misplaced, now Andy realizes he is powerless again since Charles has gotten out of prison.

Mrs. Mues comes and motions Meredith to come out of the room. She tells Meredith about a time that she had watched Andy climb a tree, then let go. She had thought at the time that Andy was upset because Charles had been in the process of leaving them. She had not realized that Andy was being abused. When Andy had finally told her about the abuse, he had begged her not to have Charles arrested. She had warned Charles not to hurt another kid, but then she found out about Meredith.

Nigel goes on with his story about Meredith's case. Despite all the evidence they had against Charles, he only stayed in jail three years. He points out that very little will happen for a simple instance of groping. Mrs. Mues asks if Charles has to attack Meredith again for him to get put back in jail. Andy calls Meredith from his room. His face is red from crying. He has a key ring in one hand, his bottle in the other and the wooden Madonna statue in his lap. Meredith is at first afraid Andy will not come back. Andy tells her he is coming back but is giving her the Madonna to keep. She notices four things in the room that she sees as dark omens.

Andy does tell Meredith that he can't live near her father. He has to move. He asks Meredith to come with him but she tells him that she can't walk away and allow her



father to hurt another child. Besides, she tells Andy that if she were to run away with him, he'd possibly go to jail if they were found.

Chapters Seventeen and Eighteen Analysis

Many details of Meredith's attack are given in these two chapters of the novel. Some of these details come from Meredith's own memories of the rape while others are told to her by Nigel, the cop who arrested her father after the rape.

Meredith's idea of the number four being a safe number comes from the number of ceiling tiles that she could count in the curtained area in which she had been kept at the hospital. She remembers telling two ladies there what happened. She doesn't want her father to get in trouble, just wants him to stop. Her mother yells at her and has to be escorted from the room. Meredith probably has associated the number four with safety because this is the only time that she felt protected from her parents and their twisted way of thinking through her whole life.

Mrs. Mues wonders if they would be able to use the footage of Charles' morning molestation of Meredith as a way to get him put back in jail but Nigel argues that since he got out of jail so quickly with the case they had against the man, one touching episode will not count for much.

Andy is unable to listen to Meredith's story and Meredith becomes angry with him for being so unwilling to face reality. Mrs. Mues describes her son's many accidents after Charles abused him. She believes that he did not want to live any more at that point. Meredith realizes that Mrs. Mues is not only wanting Andy's paralysis cured, but also his will to live restored to him.

Until her discussion with Nigel, Meredith had always believed that her mother had sold their house so that Meredith would not have to face the bad memories there. This would be what a normal, loving mother would have done. Instead, Meredith learns that the sale had not been for her benefit at all but instead to pay for a good lawyer for her father. This new knowledge makes Meredith feel completely betrayed by her mother.



Chapters Nineteen and Twenty

Chapters Nineteen and Twenty Summary

In Chapter Nineteen, when Meredith walks back into the kitchen, Nigel and Mrs. Mues are quiet. She hugs them goodbye and wishes Mrs. Mues luck, but doesn't really believe that she will ever see her again. She walks across the complex to her own condo and is surprised when the door opens as she stands waiting. Her mother tells her they are going out to eat. Meredith tries to resist but her mother demands that she go.

Meredith's mind switches back to a time she watched her mother getting ready. As a child she adored her mother. Her mother dabs Meredith's cheeks with blush and tells her she is beautiful. The memory makes the present Meredith feel guilty. She simply says "Okay Mom" when her mother tells her to hurry.

Meredith doesn't like the boxy, beige outfit her mother has bought for her. Her mother, however, tells her she looks nice. As they wait in the car for Meredith's father, her mother asks if Meredith is even a little glad that her father is back. On the ride to the restaurant, Meredith believes that her father is mocking her by slathering her mother with attention. She does notice that her father flips down the sun visor to study his daughter in the mirror.

They arrive at Steakhouse Sam's, a restaurant owned by a local ex-marine whose son only missed being on Charles' softball team by one month. Meredith believes her parents are delusional when they agree this restaurant is a good place to start again. Inside the restaurant, they are not greeted with pleasantness, but are instead told the restaurant is full. When Meredith's parents don't take the hint, Sam tells them if they don't leave, he will call the cops. Back in the car, Charles says he will not stay in this town any longer than he has to. After she learns he's not planning on leaving her, Meredith's mother agrees this might be a good idea since they could make a fresh start. They go to eat at the Olive Garden where no one knows them. After dinner her father presses against her in the parking lot and tells her he loves watching her walk. Meredith is afraid of what will come next.

In Chapter Twenty, there are cops in Charles' unit when they return to the condo complex. Someone has decorated his condo with eggs and has thrown a cinder block through his sliding glass door. Nigel asks Meredith if she has any idea who might have done this vandalism. Meredith's father sees them talking and tries to pull Meredith away. He is angry when Nigel offers to walk Meredith home, but Meredith takes the invitation.

Nigel warns Meredith to be careful tonight because he is concerned the mob mentality might decide to do something a little more lethal to Meredith's condo. When Meredith shuts herself into her bedroom, she devises four safeguards, a beanbag chair against the door, a pyramid of compact disc cases and nail polish on top of that, pillows and blankets to protect her from flying debris and her knife.



Chapters Nineteen and Twenty Analysis

It is in this section of the novel that Meredith's father realizes that if he wants to live a normal life, he will have to move to another city. The area pizza parlor won't deliver to him, the owner of the town's steakhouse kicks him out and his condo is vandalized. Meredith is surprised that her mother and father are so bewildered by the reactions that the townspeople have to them. Meredith believes the two are delusional. One thing that does surprise Meredith is her mother's willingness to let Charles stay in their condo with them until his is repaired. This is completely against the court's orders concerning Charles' living arrangements in regards to his daughter.



Chapters Twenty-one and Twenty-two

Chapters Twenty-one and Twenty-two Summary

In Chapter Twenty-One, Meredith is woken the next morning when her mother knocks on the door and announces that she and Charles are going to the beach. Meredith refuses to join them. She sits on the back patio reading the paper and missing Andy. A memory of a time that he gave her a bottle of patchouli oil, his first gift to her, comes to her. She looks across the complex but the Mues' Cadillac is gone.

Back in the present, Meredith realizes how much she hates her father. She remembers her father urging her to ask him to stop what he is doing to her, but she refuses because she knows it will only encourage him. She continues to wish he would die.

In Chapter Twenty-two, Meredith calls her grandmother who scolds her for leaving. Meredith realizes she is scared that Charles will hurt her before she can legally get Meredith away. Meredith tries to find things to think about as the day passes but cannot push away the fear of what might happen on the following day when her mother leaves her with her father to go to work. She realizes she has to tell all of the details this time so the cops can get all of the evidence they need. She vows to herself to put her father back in jail to save herself as well as other children.

Chapters Twenty-one and Twenty-two Analysis

Meredith is given a day of safety and peace while her parents go to the beach. Andy is gone so the day is long for Meredith. She tries to not think about her father, but finally gives up and makes plans for how she must tell all the details to the police and give them all of the evidence. She realizes that the only thing that stopped her from sharing everything with the police before was the fear that he mother would hate her. Even without all the information, Meredith's mother still appears to hate her so Meredith figures that she has nothing to lose.



Chapters Twenty-three and Twenty-four

Chapters Twenty-three and Twenty-four Summary

In Chapter Twenty-three, Meredith's parents return home at 10 p.m. Although her father presses her to talk, she tries to head for bed. He gives her an unwelcome hug. Meredith asks her mother to wake her up before she goes to work. About a half hour later, Meredith's father knocks on her door. He tries to talk to her until he hears the shower switch off, then tells her they will talk tomorrow.

In Chapter Twenty-Four, Meredith listens as her parents go through their morning routine. Her father is snappy with her mother. She asks what he and Meredith plan to do during the day. He replies "nothing." Meredith's mother comes to her room and asks Meredith not to antagonize her father during the day. She begs her mother not to leave her alone with him. She wants her mother to protect her but her mother refuses. She turns on both nanny cams.

Her father starts right away, begging her to let him love her again. She tries to walk away but he holds onto her and she drops her coffee cup to make him release his grip. She backs away. He tackles her and works to unhook her overalls straps. Meredith unconsciously whispers for her mother and the sound takes her father by surprise. He lets go for a second and she runs for her room. She begs the Virgin Mary statue to help her. Her father follows her with intent on his face. She tells her father that she hates him. He throws her on the bed and unzips his pants. She tries to get her knife, but he sees her motions and asks what she is doing. She throws the knife, then grabs the Madonna statue when he bends over to pick the knife up. When he straightens, she swings the statue.

Chapters Twenty-three and Twenty-four Analysis

Meredith's father attacks her in this section of chapters. She has the nanny cams running and is ready for him, but does not want to be raped again. She has requested help from the statue of the Virgin Mary but does not believe the lady has anything to give her. It is fitting that when Meredith strikes her father with the wooden icon, she uses the batter's stance and swing that he taught her. The blow wards off the rape. It also paralyzes her father.



Chapters Twenty-five and Twenty-six

Chapters Twenty-five and Twenty-six Summary

In Chapter Twenty-five, Meredith sits on the front steps and vomits. Nigel is running towards her, shouting into his cellphone. A squad car races up to the condo. Meredith says "Virgin most powerful" before she passes out.

In Chapter Twenty-six, Meredith's mother is arrested and charged with leaving her daughter alone with her father. She does not try to contact Meredith. She indicates that in a way Meredith has given her father to her mother as a gift. There is no one else to compete with her unless it is the baby with which she has just learned she is pregnant. Meredith suspects she will get an abortion.

Although the doctors do not believe Meredith's hit with the Madonna statue had had enough force to make her father a quadriplegic, it apparently did. He is also back under arrest. Although it has been four days, Meredith still has not lost the feeling that she is being hunted. She wonders aloud to Nigel if there had been some divine intervention with Andy leaving her the Madonna statue. First Nigel says no, then he tells Meredith that is a question that she needs to answer on her own.

As they continue to talk, Nigel's phone rings. It is Andy, wanting to talk to Meredith. Meredith can't wait to tell him that she now believes in miracles. When she asks about the trip, he tells her that they never made it to Iowa. He explains the victim soul died just before they were scheduled to see him. Meredith is not happy with the way the phone call is going, especially when she learns that Andy has been home since Tuesday. His mom interrupts him and Andy tells Meredith that he will tell her about his trip next time he sees her. He asks for her grandmother's phone number and promises to call in about a half an hour. Meredith doesn't think that he will carry out his promise.

Nigel walks her back to her grandmother's where she is staying and tells Meredith about Mrs. Mues' Cadillac breaking down. He is her ride until she gets another car. He adds that he needs to go and run some errands.

Meredith thinks about what has happened between herself and her father. She gets a book from the library and heads into Leah Louisa's garden where she sits on the stone wall and thinks about the meaning of a victim soul. As she looks up the word "pious" in the dictionary, she realizes there are several definitions. Pious can also mean that an individual is marked by sham or hypocrisy. She now realizes that her father became a victim soul to take away her suffering and hurt.

As she says the words, "Now I get it," Leah Louisa opens the patio door and says that Nigel and Mrs. Mues have brought Andy to see her. Meredith looks up to see him standing straight and tall.



Chapters Twenty-five and Twenty-six Analysis

In these final chapters of the novel, Meredith toys with the idea that she may have witnessed a miracle. Although Nigel first tells her he doesn't believe it was a miracle, he decides it is best to let Meredith make up her own mind about the circumstances of her attack. Meanwhile, one true miracle is that at the same time that Meredith's father loses his ability to walk, Andy gains his. It appears that Meredith's father has become a victim soul and has taken the suffering of Andy on himself. What might be considered ironic is that victim souls are usually religious people willing to help others while Meredith's father is a cruel man, wanting only to hurt others.

It is also important to notice in the final chapter that this scene plays out just like Andy's dream in Chapter Five. Andy had wondered at the time if the dream had been a vision. Meredith seemed to dismiss the dream because she did not believe that paralysis could be reversed. It appears that Andy had been correct in his assumption that his dream was a vision of the future since the details in the last chapter are so similar to those in Chapter Five.



Characters

Meredith Shale

Meredith Shale is the heroine and narrator of the novel. She is a fifteen-year-old girl who was raped by her father just more than three years ago. Her father had been sentenced to serve nine years in jail but has gotten out of jail in three years on good behavior. She had thought that she would be grown and gone by the time he got out of jail. As it stands, however, Meredith's mother seems blind to all of the hurt that Charles has caused her daughter. She had sold their house at the time of Meredith's attack to pay for her husband's lawyer. Now she rents a condo for him in the same complex where she and Meredith live. Although Meredith is not supposed to be alone with her father, her mother does not abide by the court order. Only a few days after her father gets out of jail, Meredith's father tries to rape her again.

This time, however, Meredith is ready for her father. A neighbor who is the police officer who originally arrested Charles has given Meredith two nanny cams to put up in the house so that they can start building a case against Charles. Meredith tapes her father's actions. She also outsmarts her father by tossing the knife that she had been intending to use on her father across the room. When he walks away from her to see what she's thrown, Meredith uses a three-foot tall oaken statue of the Virgin Mary to hit her father from behind. Even though doctors agree she probably didn't hit her father with enough force to make him a quadriplegic, he is paralyzed.

In addition to saving herself and other children from her father's crimes, Meredith's actions have also helped to heal another of her father's victims. Meredith had made friends with Andy, who had been abused by Meredith's father as a young boy. Since that time, Andy sustained an injury that caused him to be paralyzed from the waist down. Doctors believed that Andy would be able to walk again, but so far he has not done so. It is at the same time that Meredith whacks her father with the Madonna statue, causing his paralysis, that Andy's paralysis is healed. Although Meredith had never believed in miracles up to this point, she realizes that she may have just witnessed a miracle orchestrated by God.

Andy Mues

Andy Mues is a nineteen-year-old left paralyzed by an accident the night of his high school graduation. Doctors had believed that Andy would walk again but as of the time of the novel, he has not done so. When Andy and his mother first moved into the same condo complex where Meredith and her mother live, there is an instant connection between Andy and Meredith. It turns out that Meredith's father not only molested Meredith, but also molested Andy. Charles had an affair with Andy's mother and had moved in with them for nearly a year. Charles had gained the boy's trust and then began molesting him just before he ended the relationship. The idea of being near the man



who molested him so many years ago makes Andy physically sick. Andy's mother tells Meredith that just before she learned about the abuse, she had watched as Andy had climbed a tree then let go, allowing himself to fall to the ground and break several bones. Although doctors had labeled him as accident-prone, Mrs. Mues recognizes in her son the lack of the will to live. Andy does, however, believe that God can cure his paralysis if he so desires.

During the time that they live in the condo complex together, Andy and Meredith develop a deep boyfriend-girlfriend relationship. Andy is one of the people who keeps an eye on Meredith after her father returns home from prison. He gives her the keys to his apartment so that if she needs a safe place to hide, she can go there. Andy also gives her the oaken statue of Madonna to keep at her house while he is away in Iowa. He tells her that he wants her to have the statue in case she needs it. After Meredith whacks her father with the statue and leaves him a quadriplegic, Andy is cured of his paralysis. He meets Meredith in the garden at her grandmother's house in a scene similar to a dream he'd had just before he and his mother left for Iowa.

Charles Shale

Charles Shale is the father of Meredith and husband of Sharon Shale. Charles has just been released from jail on parole. After he raped his daughter and molested at least three other boys, Charles is sentenced to serve nine years in jail. Because of good behavior he was allowed out of jail in three years. Although Sharon is excited that her husband is getting out of jail, Charles seems more excited about getting home to the daughter whom he molested than to his own wife.

Charles likes his women young. He had begun dating his wife when she was only twelve and he was sixteen. Meredith is aware that her mother is too old for his liking and hopes that she has grown too old for him also, but this is not the case. Charles also molests not only his own daughter, but also boys on his softball team. Even after he returns home from jail, Charles does not appear to have been reformed, but only more hungry because he has been denied his desires for so long.

Although Charles does not realize it, Mrs. Mues is a woman with whom he had an affair more than ten years ago. Because she has gained weight and has become a religious fanatic, Charles no longer recognizes her as the girl with whom he cheated on his wife. Because Mrs. Mues has learned that Charles also molested her own son, she has vowed to see that Charles gets his deserved punishment. For this reason, Mrs. Mues believes that it was mandated by God that she and her son should be allowed to move into a condo near that of Meredith and her father so that Mrs. Mues can not only watch over Meredith, but also be close at hand to see to Charles' punishment.

Nigel Balthazar

Nigel Balthazar is a retired police officer who lives in Meredith's condo complex. He has befriended the girl because he is the officer who arrested Meredith's father when he first



molested her. Now, Nigel makes it his duty to watch after the girl since her father has been released from jail so soon. In addition to trusting Nigel completely, Meredith also shares in common with the man a love for Andy.

When Meredith's father does come back, Nigel senses that it will only be a matter of time before he molests Meredith again. For this reason, he calls in some favors and gets two nanny cams for Meredith to put up in her complex. He does not realize how quickly Charles will attack Meredith. After this attack, Nigel is the first person whom Meredith calls. Later, it is Nigel who drives Andy and his mother to Meredith's grandmother's house to show Meredith that Andy is finally able to walk again.

Paula Mues Beecher

Paula Mues Beecher is a woman with whom Meredith's father had an affair more than 10 years before the beginning of this novel. Although she hadn't realized it at the time, Charles had been molesting her son, Andy. When Mrs. Mues does learn about the abuse, she vows to seek revenge on the man whom she trusted with her son for taking advantage of that trust.

In an effort to keep Charles from recognizing her, Mrs. Mues has gained weight and wears glasses even though she doesn't need them. She also has turned to God as her strength and is termed by many as a religious fanatic. One of her beliefs is that her son, Andy, who was paralyzed in an accident the night of his high school graduation, can be healed by a victim soul. She has arranged an appointment with her son for with one of these men but he dies before Andy can be taken to see him. She recognizes the act as a miracle when her son regains his ability to walk at the same time that Meredith whacks her father with the icon of the Virgin Mary.

Sharon Shale

Sharon Shale is Meredith Shale's mother and Charles Shale's wife. Although her husband has been convicted of raping their daughter and molesting other children, Sharon refuses to accept the idea that he is a child molester. She is pleased when he is released from jail early and seems angry with Meredith because he is not allowed to live with them. Although Meredith thinks that her mother should have gotten a divorce from her father while he had been in jail, her mother hadn't done so. Meredith has also learned that her mother sold their house so that she could pay for a good lawyer for her husband. Although members of the community don't want him there, Sharon fights the homeowner's association in the condo complex where they live to get her husband set up in a condo near their own. Although there is a court order that Charles not be left alone with Meredith, Sharon ignores this order and leaves the two alone the day after Charles is released from prison. She leaves them alone again the following Monday, the day that Charles tries to rape Meredith again. Sharon is arrested on several charges as a result of her husband's attempt to rape Meredith including leaving her daughter alone with a pedophile. At the conclusion of the novel, the reader also learns that Meredith is



pregnant by Charles. Meredith suggests that she believes that her mother will abort the baby since her father will not be able to take care of it and Sharon will not want to have to share her husband with anyone else.

Leah Louisa Delklap

Leah Louisa Delklap is Sharon Shale's mother and Meredith Shale's grandmother. Leah Louisa is angry with her daughter for letting Charles near Meredith again. When she first learns that Meredith's father has once again tried to put moves on her, she gets the ball rolling to get guardianship of Meredith. When Meredith's father tries to rape her again, Leah Louisa is granted guardianship of Meredith. Leah Louisa is also the mayor of Estertown.

Sam

Sam is the owner of Steakhouse Sam's, the restaurant where Meredith's mother and father decide to go eat the Saturday after Meredith's father is released from prison. Sam is an ex-marine with a low boiling point whose son only missed being on Charles' boys' league team by one month. Instead of greeting them kindly, Sam tells them the restaurant is full. When Sharon pushes the issue, Sam tells her that if they don't leave, he will call the cops to have them escorted from the property.

Hazel Burt

Hazel Burt is the woman with whom Leah Louisa Delkalp's husband had an affair. Although Sharon tries to draw a parallel between her mother's situation and her own, Leah Louisa tells Meredith there is no comparison.

Norman

Norman is the family court judge whom Leah Louisa plans to contact early Monday morning in order to get legal guardianship of Meredith.



Objects/Places

The Dumpster

Meredith is sitting beside the dumpster at her condo complex when her mother brings her father home from prison. The dumpster represents the dirtiness that Meredith feels inside even though she has been "cleaned up" and is no longer being molested.

Megan's Law

Megan's Law is the law that requires sexual offenders to register their addresses with local law enforcement agencies.

New Jersey Sex Offender Internet Registry

The New Jersey Sex Offender Internet Registry is the website where Charles Shale's picture is posted.

Four

Four is Meredith's safe number. It is a strong number that represents reality, reason and logic.

Solid Gold Baseball Charm

Charles Shale wears this solid gold baseball charm, a gift from his wife, all the time. For Meredith it brings back memories of him molesting her because the charm would hit against her teeth.

Tony's Pizza

Tony's Pizza is the restaurant that refuses to deliver to the Shale residence on the night that Meredith's father is released from jail. Meredith knows that their home is the only one in the complex to which the restaurant will not deliver.

Steaks

Sharon Shale lays out three steaks to thaw before she leaves to go pick her husband up from jail but Meredith throws them in the dumpster.



Estertown

Estertown is the name of the town in which Meredith and her parents live.

Creaky, Ancient Cadillac

Paula Mues drives this creaky, ancient Cadillac even though the condo complex in which she lives has tried to ban the old automobile. She drives the vehicle as a way to ward off unwanted associations.

Cambridge Oaks

Cambridge Oaks is the name of the condo complex in which Meredith and her family live.

Sweet Musk of Damask Roses

Andy's room always smells of the sweet musk of damask roses even though Meredith can find no source for this scent.

Iowa

Iowa is the state to which Andy and his mother plan to travel to visit a victim soul in the hopes that Andy's paralysis can be cured.

Victim Souls

A victim soul is a person designated by God to "absorb and endure the pain and suffering of others."

Gilly

Gilly is Nigel's white Great Pyrenees.

Large Ceramic Jesus

Mrs. Mues takes this large ceramic Jesus with her when she goes to talk to Meredith's father.



Buddy

Buddy is the nickname that Charles had for Andy.

Chirp

Chirp is the nickname that Meredith's father had for her.

Official Mayor's Voice

When Leah Louisa uses her official mayor's voice, Meredith knows that she means business.

A Teddy Bear and a Smoke Alarm

Nigel gives a teddy bear and a smoke alarm to Meredith that are fitted up as nanny cams so that they can start building a case against Meredith's father.

Green-and-White Softball Cap and Team Jersey

When Meredith enters the house Sunday night, her mother is wearing this cap and jersey that Charles gave her when they first started dating as a surprise for him.

Skeleton Key

Meredith's father has this skeleton key made so that he can easily unlock Meredith's bedroom door the next time she tries to lock him out.

ABC Game

Meredith remembers the ABC game that her father contrived where she had to whisper dirty words into his ear starting with each letter of the alphabet.

Mobile Mechanic

The Mobile Mechanic is the car repair service that comes to Cambridge Oaks to prepare the Mues' Cadillac for their trip to Iowa.



A Giant Oak Madonna

Andy gives this giant oak statue of the Virgin Mary to Meredith before he leaves for Iowa in the belief that Meredith might need her while he is gone. Meredith hits her father in the back with this icon, an act that paralyzes him.

Steakhouse Sam's

Steakhouse Sam's is the restaurant where Meredith and her parents try to eat the night after Charles gets out of jail. The owner of the restaurant asks them to leave. When Sharon puts up a fuss, the owner threatens to have the cops escort them off the property.



Themes

Religion

Religion is a central theme in this novel as a distrustful, abused girl learns that sometimes, miracles really do happen. Meredith is first introduced to religion by Paula Mues who is a sort of religious fanatic. At first she takes advantage of Mrs. Mues' religion by using Fridays, the day that Mrs. Mues has set aside for purification and personal communion with God, as a day to spend time alone with Andy, Mrs. Mues' son and Meredith's boyfriend. Although Andy is also a strong believer in religion, he does not appear to be as fanatical as his mother and welcomes Meredith's visits.

Since Andy was paralyzed in an accident the night of his high school graduation, both he and his mother have prayed for his recovery. Mrs. Mues has made her son an appointment to see a victim soul. These victim souls are pious people who are able to take away pain and suffering from others by taking it on themselves. Meredith, however, does not believe this man will be able to help Andy.

Before he leaves for Iowa to visit the victim soul, Andy gives Meredith a huge oak statue of the Virgin Mary in case she needs it. Although Meredith refers to the statue several times before her father tries to rape her, she does not really believe that it, nor the woman it represents will be able to help her. When she hits her father in the back with this wooden icon, however, his injuries result in quadriplegia. Doctors who review the footage of the hit as recorded on the nanny cam state that they do not believe the force Meredith used was strong enough to cause this severe of an injury. Meredith wonders if it is some sort of miracle that caused her father to be injured so badly.

To make the matter even more miraculous, Andy's ability to walk is restored on the same day that Meredith's father is injured. He and his mother never made it to visit the victim soul because the victim soul died. It seems that in some way Meredith's father replaced the victim soul in Iowa and took away Andy's paralysis by becoming paralyzed himself. Meredith realizes this when she looks up the definition of the word pious and finds that it can refer to one who is deeply religious and can also refer to a person who is hypocritical or a sham. Meredith believes this second definition fits her father. It is at this point that she understands how the victim soul worked in her situation.

Facing One's Demons

Another major theme in this novel is the idea that one must face one's own personal demons. In Meredith's case, her demon is her father. Meredith is given the chance to run away from her father by Leah Louisa, who tries to get a quick order of guardianship in order to get her granddaughter away from her father. Meredith realizes, however, that she would still feel as if her father was chasing her as long as he is allowed to remain out of jail. She also knows that she will feel as if she is responsible if more children are



molested and she had not done anything to try to stop her father. For this reason, Meredith leaves the safety of her grandmother's house in order to make herself a sacrifice.

Compared with Meredith, who takes charge of bringing down the man who hurt her, the males in the story seem oddly unable to take care of their abuser. It is not until Nigel tells her the details of her father's trial that she knows that two of the boys whom her father had molested had broken down on the witness stand when asked to point out the man who had molested them. Meredith, however, who had the most to lose, had no problem identifying her father as her attacker. Andy, who was also abused by Meredith's father, becomes physically ill when he hears the sound of Charles' voice. Meredith and Nigel both believe that Andy is hiding behind his paralysis as a way to keep from having to accept how badly he has been hurt by the abuse.

Superstition

Mrs. Mues and Andy's belief in God is contrasted with Meredith's reliance upon superstition. For instance, Mrs. Mues and Andy believe that the smell of damask roses that is always prevalent in Andy's room is a gift from God, a sign of benevolent grace. Meredith, however, continues to seek the source of the fragrance, determined that she will be able to find an air freshener, or another source of the scent. Likewise, Mrs. Mues believes it was divine intervention that she was able to rent the condo in the same complex as Meredith and her family. Meredith, however, sees this was just coincidence, the result of a family who got evicted from their condo at just the right time.

Meredith also relies on signs and rituals to bring her comfort and safety. Most obvious is Meredith's obsession with numbers. Four is her safe number. When she takes her vitamins, she takes them in lots of four, each washed down with four sips of juice. The conception of four as her safe number is in the hospital where there are four tiles above her hospital bed encircled by the curtain. Meredith searches for groups and sets of four. Bathroom tiles that have odd numbers of tiles cause Meredith to be disturbed. Meredith feels comfortable in her room after her father's condo is attacked because she has four different types of protection against would be attackers. When she visits Andy to say goodbye before he travels to Iowa, Meredith notes four dark omens in their parting. This is the only case in which Meredith refers to a set of four as having a negative connotation.

Style

Point of View

This novel is written in the first person point of view of Meredith Shale. Meredith writes the story as she experiences it. The reader is allowed to know what is going on in Meredith's mind and what she is feeling, but the thoughts and emotions of other characters are not given unless it is through Meredith's observations. This point of view is appropriate because it keeps the reader focused on Meredith and what she is thinking and observing as she goes through the week following her father's release from jail.

The novel is probably about 75 percent exposition and 25 percent dialogue. Most of the story is told through Meredith's thoughts and emotions about what is going on around her and what is happening to her. Her line of thinking is very important as she goes from trying to push her father away by being distasteful to him to the point where she decides that if her father is to be stopped, it is up to her.

Setting

This story is set in the town of Estertown, the town of which Sharon's mother is the mayor. Meredith's parents have lived in this town all of their lives. Meredith and Sharon had moved to a new condo complex named Cambridge Oaks shortly after Meredith's father was sent to jail. Although Meredith had thought that they had moved to keep her away from the house where she had so many bad memories, she later learns that her mother sold the house to pay for her father's lawyer. One of the important places in this complex is the dumpster located in the parking lot near Meredith and her mother's condo. Meredith often goes to this area of the complex to think or to organize her thoughts. She seems to have a connection with the dumpster as she believes that she, like the oversized trash can, is dirty, smelly and an outcast.

Other important locations in the condo complex include Meredith and her mother's condo. It is in this condo that Meredith sets up the nanny cams to record her father's actions. The nanny cam in her bedroom records her father's attack on Meredith as well as her strike at him with the wooden Madonna icon. Mrs. Mues and Andy's condo is also an important setting in the novel since it is here that Meredith goes to escape her father. Another important setting in the condo complex is Nigel's front porch. Nigel chooses to talk with Meredith on his front porch in order to let people know that he is keeping an eye on the girl.

Other important settings include Leah Lousia's home where Meredith goes to live after her father tries to rape her again. It is in Leah Louisa's garden that Meredith learns that Andy can walk again. The same garden appears in Andy's dream, or vision, that precedes his healing from paralysis. Steakhouse Sam's, the restaurant whose owner



refuses to serve Meredith's family, as well as an Olive Garden are also settings mentioned in the book.

Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is very wise and mature for a fifteen-year-old girl. Although she is going through a very hard time in her life, Meredith describes what is going on around her in words that are biting and humorous in a dark, ironic way. Meredith draws pictures of each of the characters, not only their physical characteristics, but also their emotional characteristics. Meredith gets to the very center of what makes each person tick and the way in which they interact with one another.

One interesting use of language in this novel centers around the idea that Meredith's father was a softball coach. He taught boys in the town how to play softball. He also taught his daughter how to play softball. In one of her memories, Meredith is upset because she can't hit as well as the boys, whom she believes that her father loves better. It is darkly ironic that when Meredith's father tries to rape her a second time, and she defends herself with the Madonna icon, she uses a baseball stance to begin her blow. Through this metaphor, Meredith shows that she uses the skills that her father taught her in softball to protect herself and injure him.

Structure

The novel covers a very short period of time with the majority focusing on the activities of four days. This time span begins when Meredith's father comes home on Friday evening and ends Monday morning when the cops respond to her house after her father tries to rape her. The characters are again visited on the following Friday so that ends can be tied up with the reader learning that both Meredith's father and mother have been arrested, and that her father is now a quadriplegic. It is also on this final Friday that Andy's dream or vision plays out in real life.

While most of the story is told in a linear manner, there are also flashbacks necessary to fill the reader in on information about Meredith and her situation that have taken place in the past. These flashbacks are differentiated from the rest of the text because the words of the flashbacks are in italics.

The plot of the story is fairly simple and straightforward, but there are several different stories that converge in this novel to form a complete story. Meredith's story is the main story with Mrs. Mues' plan of revenge acting as a secondary story. Another idea that is incorporated in the story is the relationship between Meredith and Andy as they each struggle with the emotions left over from their abuses. The police officer, Nigel, also adds another aspect to the story as he seeks to see Meredith's father put back in jail.



Quotes

"They promised me nine years of safety but only gave me three."
Chapter One, pg. 5

"It's the bitchy 'now' that punctures my paralysis. Now he's here. Now she's happy. Now I'm supposed to act like nothing ever happened."
Chapter Two, pg. 11

"I have to count on that, have to believe I still have a chance to survive this."
Chapter Two, pg. 13

"Four is the number of reality, logic, and reason plus the essence of mind, body, and spirit brought to the material plane to form a square. It's a strong number, one with substance, and I've felt safe in it ever since that first night in the hospital."
Chapter Three, pg. 18

"'Chirp is dead,' I hear myself say and watch the flat words destroy his pleasure. 'You killed her, and now you have to deal with me because I'm what's left.'"
Chapter Three, pg. 23

"Everyone ignores her because at Cambridge Oaks, the only thing worse than the presence of a junk car is the possibility of someone noticing you talking to its owner."
Chapter Four, pg. 24

"And I wonder, not for the first time, how Ms. Mues can dwell in darkness fifty-two times a year and still see so clearly while my own mother, a creature of sunlight and shine, sees nothing at all."
Chapter Four, pg. 30

"One of the things Nigel and I have in common is loving Andy. The other is knowing far too much about my father, his past, and probable future."
Chapter Six, pg. 51

"I am going to drive him out of here and away from me."
Chapter Seven, pg. 53

"One of the many things my mother doesn't realize is that Ms. Paula Mues is actually Mrs. Paula Beecher, the same widow my father cheated on her with so many years ago."
Chapter Nine, pg. 66

"In my family, you can rot to hell on the inside as long as you're flawless on the outside, which is really sick, but also hard to unlearn."
Chapter Nine, pg. 77



"A victim soul is a pious individual chosen to absorb the suffering of others."
Chapter Eleven, pg. 89

"It steadies me now but it won't forever. I've done my homework, read books, websites, and message boards, lurked on lists, and even questioned a social worker too exhausted to guard her words, and I know how bad the odds are for girls like me."
Chapter Fourteen, pg. 120

"I'm like a pinball bouncing off the same people over and over again, flinging myself around in a desperate attempt to avoid disappearing into the black hole of my father's embrace..."
Chapter Seventeen, pg. 139

"So that was why we moved into the condo. Not to spare me bad memories, but to save my father from prison."
Chapter Eighteen, pg. 151

"And I wonder if she will ever forgive me for what I'm about to set into motion."
Chapter Eighteen, pg. 158

"How bizarre to think that when I stake myself out, it will be to save brats like them."
Chapter Twenty-One, pg. 177

"The doctors reviewed the nanny cam tapes and agreed that although the blunt-force trauma from the oaken icon was sure to do some damage, it should not have been enough to cause my father a C4 spinal-cord injury resulting in quadriplegia."
Chapter Twenty-Six, pg. 197

"I close my eyes and think of Andy, who prayed so hard and got so little, and of the Madonna, whose presence saved me from a fate worse than death and at the same time somehow sentenced my father to the exact same thing."
Chapter Twenty-six, pg. 204



Topics for Discussion

Consider Meredith's rituals, how do these repeated actions help her to feel safe?

Discuss the theme of religion as it relates to the novel.

Discuss the theme of superstition as it relates to the novel.

Discuss the images of light and dark, and how they relate to the story.

What is the significance of Meredith and Andy's relationship? Why do you think they are attracted to one another so strongly?

Consider Mrs. Mues' use of Jesus as a way to repel Meredith's father. What does this interaction reveal about both of these characters?

Discuss the significance of the way that Charles Shale is treated after he is released from prison. In what ways do people try to keep him from moving back to their town?

Discuss the significance of both the dumpster and Mrs. Mues' car in the novel. What do both of these items represent or symbolize?

What is the role of the Calvinettis in the novel?

Compare and contrast the way Andy's mother has reacted to learning her son was molested and the way Meredith's mother has reacted to learning her daughter was raped. How do you account for these differences?