

# **Tenth of December: Stories Study Guide**

## **Tenth of December: Stories by George Saunders**

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# Victory Lap

## Victory Lap Summary

In the story "Victory Lap," it is three days before Alison Pope's fifteenth birthday. She stands at the top of the stairs in her house as if she is entering for a grand party. She imagines the people whom she might meet. She remembers that she has to get her tights out of the dryer and realizes she is still standing at the top of the stairs. She wills her mother to hurry so they will not be late for her recital. She thinks about how she loves her dance teacher and the other girls in her class.

As she considers how much she loves her life and all those around her, she imagines herself finding a baby deer in the woods. When a hunter comes with the body of the baby deer's mother, Alison protects the baby from seeing its mother dead. She orders the hunter to lay the dead doe out in a field with a choir singing. Her train of thought switches and she thinks about her past boyfriends, then suddenly decides that a snack is in order. As she wonders if she considers herself to be special, she notices Kyle Boot running home. She remembers that the two used to be close friends. Now she think he looks like a geek, a skeleton with a mullet.

She imagines herself handing food out to the poor. In her imagination, the people are in awe of her. She is an innocent who believes people are good and life is fun. She is thinking about how her teacher had groaned when she shared this point of view, but believes that even the teacher knew there was something fun about life or else she wouldn't continue to do her job as faithfully as she did it. There is a knock on the door. Alison answers it and there is a man there whom she has never seen.

Kyle Boot has just returned home from his track practice. He has a work notice on the kitchen island telling him to place a new geode in the backyard. He remembers too late that he forgot to take off his shoes before walking in the house. Kyle considers picking up the dirt by hand but knows he'll be caught so he grabs the vacuum. He wonders how he would cover if his parents were to come home right now. In his hurry to take care of his first mistake, Kyle makes other mistakes, like being in the living room barefoot, that he hurries to correct as well.

He notices a van pull up at St. Mikhail's and he adds information about the van to a log that he has been keeping to track the vehicles going in and out of the church parking lot. Kyle watches the man, because he has been told he is not allowed to go outside while there are strangers outside. He watches the man knock on Alison's door. He notices the man seems to be trying to convince Alison to leave the house; he is pulling on her arm. Kyle steps outside onto his deck and realizes the man has a knife. He watches as the man pulls Alison across the yard. He considers ignoring what is going on across the yard. He thinks that his parents would be pleased with his obedience.



The meter reader man is surprised at what a trooper Alison is. He'd decided to take her when he saw her standing outside her house after a baptism at church. He is hoping Alison will have a baby with him to continue his lineage. He plans to put her in his van, bind her up, then recite to her a speech telling her how wonderful he will be and that she shouldn't be scared. When he gets to the van, he realizes the sliding door is still locked. He berates himself and thinks what Melvin would say about the circumstance. Alison has turned around and the man reminds himself what he must do. If sex with Alison is good, he'll keep her. If not, he'll kill her. He decides he should hit her in order to put an end to her willfulness.

Kyle thinks over what his parents' commendations might be when they learn he hadn't gotten involved in Alison's troubles. When he hears the girl get hit, he thinks of the times they spent together when they were young. He thinks that he wishes he hadn't seen what was happening. He thinks of going inside and pretending he hadn't seen anything. He thinks about waiting until they are gone and then calling 911 but he realizes then that people would know he had seen what was happening and had done nothing.

The next thing Kyle knows, he is running across his yard. He throws the geode at the man's head. He picks it back up and throws it at the windshield. In his mind, he hears the voices of his parents telling him that he is getting out of control.

The man pretending to be the meter reader wonders what is happening. He sees Kyle picking up a rock, and Alison running away from him across the yard. He realizes he has been done in by a kid. His thoughts alternate between ones that are both heroic and pitiful. He hears sirens and thinks how he will fight the cops. He tries to stand up but can't. He sees Kyle standing over him again, yelling.

Alison watches from inside the house where she has called the police. She is surprised Kyle is still outside. Suddenly, she realizes that Kyle is holding the rock over the man's head. She whispers for him not to do it. For months she has nightmares that Kyle actually hit the man with the rock again. When she wakes up, her parents remind her each time that she had gone outside and shouted at Kyle not to hit the man again. They remind her what a good job that they both had done.

## Victory Lap Analysis

In the story "Victory Lap," young Kyle Boot is faced with a moral dilemma. He has been taught all of his life by his meticulously strict parents not to interfere in other people's business. When he sees his next door neighbor being abducted, Kyle struggles with his conscience. He weighs what might happen if he acts against what might happen if he chooses to interfere in Alison's abduction. In the end, he does what is right by rescuing Alison, a rescue that is successful.

One of the ideas that is stressed in the story is the difference between the two children. Allison is petted, perhaps spoiled by her parents. She believes that all the world is good and that all who meet her will love and adore her. Kyle is loved by his parents, but they



are very strict with him. Almost too strict. Kyle loves Allison. He believes she is the most beautiful girl that he has ever met. The two had been friends and had grown up with one another. Allison, however, has grown to be disdainful of Kyle. In her opinion, he is a loser.

The story is told from the third person point of view by Kyle, Allison and the meter reader. These points of view change in the story so that some parts of the story are told by Allison, some by Kyle and some by the meter reader. Each character's part of the story is told in his unique voice. Allison has the carefree, dream-filled voice of a teenaged girl while Kyle is characterized as having a frenzied desire to keep up with his parents' requirements for him.



# Sticks

## Sticks Summary

The story "Sticks" tells the life cycle of a man who always used a set of metal bars as a way to try to communicate his feelings and emotions with his community and family. Although the metal cross is decorated for holidays, it is the only joy that the father allows in the family. He is stingy and mean in other areas. His children grow up and see the same meanness in themselves. They begin to notice their father is decorating the pole in odd ways. When their mother dies, he decorates it as an homage to her. He provides children for the pole by adding sticks around the yard. He attaches these sticks to the main pole with string and tapes letters of apology to them. The dad finally adds a painted sign that reads "love" on the pole and another that asks the question "forgive?" When he dies, the couple that buys the house throws the pole away.

## Sticks Analysis

In this super short story, the dad uses a pole in his yard for conveying his apologies to his children to whom he has been mean all of their lives. The pole seems to be the only way the man knows to communicate his emotions. The most emotion stirring image is the idea of the large cross, surrounded by small crosses, which seem to represent his children. He has connected the crosses with string, representing their bond to one another. On these strings, he has posted apologies and explanations for the way he has treated his children all of their lives. He finally uses the pole as a way to ask forgiveness from his children. After he dies and a new family moves into the house, the pole is pulled up and thrown away — a symbolic action that the man had no meaning beyond the end of his life. Even his children did not claim the one artifact that was probably most symbolic of him.



# Puppy

## Puppy Summary

Marie tries to impress upon her children how beautiful the sun on a cornfield is, but they are too busy with their own thoughts to pay any attention. She thinks about her family when she was growing up, her father was dour and her mother ashamed. Marie encourages laughter in her own house, even when the children are laughing about something cruel they have done. Now, they are going to get a puppy to add to the menagerie of animals Marie has bought for them on the credit card. Marie's mother claims that she is spoiling the children but Marie believes they are only well-loved. She also believes that her children will actually take care of the puppy, though they haven't taken care of the other animals that she has gotten them.

Callie watches her son, Bo, play in the back yard. She believes that she has fixed the problem perfectly. Callie compares her fix of the problem to the fence that surrounded her house as a child. She realizes that when he is older he will need freedom, but now she just wants him to not get killed by running into the interstate. She wonders if the lady who called about the puppy will take it. She hopes that she will so that Jimmy will not have to kill it as he did the kittens.

As soon as Abbie sees the puppy, she says that she wants it. Marie is disgusted by the dirty, unkempt house. When she looks out the window and sees Bo on his restraint, tied to a tree. Josh stands beside her and she lets him look as well. Marie now believes the woman is cruel and ignorant. She tells her that they will not take the dog even though Abbie cries. Callie offers to give it to them for free, but Marie is insistent that they will not be able to care for it. In reality, she refuses to contribute to their lifestyle. Marie considers calling child welfare on the mother.

Callie takes the puppy out and abandons it in a cornfield. She plans to tell her husband the people bought it so that he won't have to feel guilty about its death. She thinks about how she loves her husband, even though he isn't perfect. She also loves Bo, who isn't perfect as well. She hopes that he will mellow as he gets older. She remembers how unhappy he had been being stuck in the house the day before. She believes she has made him happy by putting together the restraint for him. She sees it as a sign of love.

## Puppy Analysis

This story describes the collision of two different ways of life. Marie has been abused in her childhood and believes that she is doing her children a favor by going out of her way not to punish them. She encourages laughter, even when it is at something the children have done that could have hurt someone. The children are also given everything they want even though they show no responsibility or desire to take care of the many pets



she has bought for them on the credit card. Marie believes that her husband is a good man just because he does not discourage any of her attempts to spoil the children.

Callie and her husband are not rich, like Marie is. They deal with a son who has some sort of emotional or mental issue. Because they do not have much money, Callie's husband has already had to kill a litter of kittens that they could not feed. Callie wants to be able to give this puppy away so that her husband will not have to kill it as well. She still remembers how guilty he felt when he had to take care of the kittens. They also have a son who has either an emotional or mental disability that makes him difficult to control. On the day that Marie and her family are to see the puppy, Callie has her son in the yard, secured to a tree by a restraint.

When Marie sees the boy restrained in the back yard, she automatically believes that he is being abused. She does not question why the boy is being treated the way he is, she assumes the worst. Callie, on the other hand, believes that the restraint is no different from the fence that surrounded her yard when she was a child. It is allowing her son to be outside where he wants to be and keeping him from running away into the street and getting hurt. Marie believes that she is "teaching Callie a lesson" by not taking the puppy, doesn't realize that she is making things worse for a family that is already struggling.

The question raised by the story is this: Which mother really knew the proper way to love? The mother who spoiled her children and tried to ensure they had a perfect, pain free childhood with everything they ever wanted, or the mother who does her best with what little she has to keep her son happy and safe, and at the same time shows concern about her husband and his feelings?





# Escape from Spiderhead

## Escape from Spiderhead Summary

In the first section, a man named Abnesti is experimenting on Jeff with both sensory boosting and language boosting drugs. In the next section, Abnesti gives Jeff and Heather doses of a drug that enhances their feelings of physical attraction toward one another. They make love three times. The drug is reversed and the feelings that had developed between the two wane. In section three, after Jeff's lunch, the same procedure is repeated with a girl named Rachel.

In the fourth section, Abnesti calls Jeff into the control room. He tells Jeff that he must choose one of the girls, Heather or Rachel, to receive a dose of Darkenfloxx, a drug that makes the recipient feel as if life is not worth living. Because Jeff insists the decision would be random, Abnesti tells Jeff he doesn't have to give either woman the drug. Abnesti talks about the love-enhancing drug as if it could cure all of the evils in the world.

In the fifth section, Jeff sits in a room with a man named Rogan. They sit there for ten minutes, then are told they can leave. On a hunch, Jeff walks into the Spiderhead. Heather is sitting there with Abnesti. He questions Heather and learns that she has also slept with Rogan and that Abnesti had also given her the opportunity to choose to give Darkenfloxx to one of them. Just as Jeff believes will occur, he is called after a break to the same room with Rogan. Again they are allowed to leave. He learns that Rachel and Rogan have also been through the same experiment as he and Rachel. He wonders what sort of point Abnesti is trying to prove.

In the sixth section, Jeff finds himself in a room with Keith. Even before they are allowed to leave, Jeff questions Keith about his activities that day with Rachel and Heather. This happens twice with Keith, just as it had with Rogan.

In the seventh section, Abnesti tells Jeff that the Protocol Committee is demanding that Jeff choose one of the girls to be given Darkenfloxx. He says the new test is to give the girl the Darkenfloxx and record Jeff's reaction. When Jeff will not give permission to give the drug, Abnesti suggests that Jeff might think differently if he knew Heather's background. He then threatens to take away Jeff's Friday Skype call to his mother. It is after Abnesti offers Jeff five extra phone minutes with his mother that he assents. When Heather is given the drug, Jeff begins describing the way that Heather is delicate, also that she is the beloved of someone. In the last few minutes of the trial, Heather begins banging her head against the wall. The scientists hurry into the room as soon as the time is over, but Heather has killed herself.

In the eighth section, Jeff is called back to the Spiderhead later that day. Abnesti apologizes for what he had to see, and claims that he did not enjoy what happened and



that he is not a monster. He says that it is time for the next part of the trial. Rachel comes into the workroom.

In section nine, Jeff refuses to kill Rachel. They show him Rachel's file, that she is a triple murderer. He still will not agree. The scientists leave the room to get a waiver to use the obedience drug on Jeff. Abnesti leaves his remote control where Jeff can find it. While the men are out of the room, in section ten, Jeff gives himself the Darkenfloxx and kills himself.

## Escape from Spiderhead Analysis

A variety of moral issues is dealt with in this story. The most important is the question of whether it is right to meddle with the emotions of people, even when these people are convicted criminals. Jeff is made to love two different women using an experimental drug. He is then asked to give one of these women a dose of a drug that Jeff knows will make the recipient feel badly. He is told the intent is to determine if there is any residual effect of the drug. The experimenter who tells Jeff about the drug seems to think it will be a groundbreaking drug in peace efforts as well as emotional control for those who love too strongly or not at all. Although Jeff does not show any lingering emotions for the girls, he does appear to feel very manipulated by Abnesti by the conclusion of the novel. This feeling of being manipulated is almost as harmful as wandering emotions. Jeff proves this at the end of the story by killing himself because he feels he is being forced to do something that he does not want to do.

Although Jeff is a convicted criminal, he is tired of the mistake that he made as a young man being held over his head. A night of drinking, doubled with being frustrated by another kid who would not leave him alone led Jeff to kill the kid in a fight. He has been working intensively with a counselor whom he believes has helped him overcome his anger and violence. When he sees Heather killed by the Darkenfloxx, Jeff is even more revolted when Abnesti asks him to order that the same medication be given to Rachel. It seems that this experiment may be deeper than just a determination of whether or not Jeff has any residual feelings of love for Rachel, but instead a test to see if he is willing to hurt another, even when pushed by those "in charge." The reader is left wondering if the experimenters were intending to push Jeff to kill himself or if his death came as a surprise.



# Exhortation

## Exhortation Summary

In this memo to his staff, Todd Birnie informs his employees that they have an agreement that they will do a job and will do it well. He encourages them to have a positive attitude in order to do their best work. He takes time to include in his memo an example of positivity describing himself and some others moving a dead whale during his last vacation. He indicates that they shouldn't become discouraged and grumble about the path they decided to take one year ago.

Birnie reminds his workers of a good week that a worker named Andy had several months prior. Although his work production has fallen since, Birnie indicates that he believes Andy must still be proud of that month. Since that month, however, Birnie indicates that Andy has become withdrawn and disconsolate. As a reward for his month of high performance, Birnie is no longer closely monitoring Andy's numbers though he indicates that Andy's work has fallen off in a troubling way.

Birnie goes on to write that no matter how they view it, no one will walk out of Room 6 feeling okay, not even the workers. He also indicates that he has been informed at the Sectional Meeting that their production numbers are not to go down. At the conclusion of his memo, Birnie reminds the workers that if they do not do their work as expected, they may find someone else doing the job they were hired to do. He reminds the employees that if they are having trouble, they can come to his office for a talk, which will go no farther than his office.

## Exhortation Analysis

Exhortation is written in the form of a memo to the employees of a company. While the intent of the memo seems to be an attempt to motivate employees to improve output, it seems to be working against itself since it mentions a worker with a high output one month who is now having hard times. The wording in the memo also seems to threaten employees more than encourage them to do their best. It is sensed there has been some change in the company that might be the cause of the workers' distress but this change is never described or dwelt upon. It can also be insinuated from the memo that workers are being asked to do work that might be considered immoral or even gross. This can be deduced because the text indicates Birnie believes Andy's numbers have fallen off because he is second-guessing the work he put in during the month of October. If the work were not in some way immoral or damaging to another, why would Andy second-guess his work?

In his memo, Birnie uses the image of cleaning a shelf to encourage his employees. First, he tells them that it is easier to clean a shelf if they have a positive attitude about the cleaning and don't grumble about it before hand. He returns to this image to remind



his workers that if they don't clean their shelves with positive energy as they are asked, they may find someone else cleaning the shelves instead of them. In fact, he states that they may find themselves as a shelf that is being cleaned. This indicates some form of mind erasure or other brain experimentation may be taking place in the workspace known as Room 6.

# Al Roosten

## Al Roosten Summary

Al Roosten is a businessman participating in a charity auction to fight drug use and abuse. As he waits his turn to go on stage, he compares himself to Larry Donfrey. He wonders if the voters will believe that Larry is better looking than him. He decides that since he doesn't like guys romantically, he isn't the proper person to make the decision if Larry is cuter than him or not.

During Larry's turn on the runway, Al hears whoops and cheers. He wonders if he will get whoops and cheers. When he steps out, Al feels as if the people want to laugh. He hears one pity whoop, which he acknowledges with a half wave. The crowd realizes how terrified he is and the remainder of the crowd cheers. Al doesn't realize the cheers are mercy cheers and flexes for the crowd, believing they are really into him.

In the cardboard "jail" with Donfrey, Roosten is surprised when Donfrey tells him not to worry about his performance and that he did fine. Roosten suddenly goes back on all the good things he had just thought about Donfrey. He now remembers only the bad things that Donfrey and his family have done to him. He compares Donfrey's kids to his own trollish nephews. He believes it had been his sister's divorce that made his nephews so bad.

Before Donfrey realizes it, the cardboard jail is full. The emcee tells the crowd it is time for the silent auction to begin. The person with the highest bid for each celebrity will be taken to lunch by that celebrity.

Roosten chooses to sneak out. In the changing area, he kicks Donfrey's wallet under some risers. Having done that, he decides to kick the keys as well. Suddenly Donfrey comes into the changing area talking on his cell phone about running late to pick up his daughter for an appointment to get her deformed foot fixed. Roosten is sad about the kid. He remembers his mother telling him that he had moral courage and that he would do what was right regardless of the cost.

Roosten suddenly realizes that Donfrey's child might not be able to get the surgery she needs because he kicked Donfrey's keys. He stops the car and thinks how he can help find the keys without anyone realizing he was responsible for them being lost. He would help them look, then say that he assumed that they'd already looked under the risers. When they would find the keys under the risers, Roosten thinks how Donfrey would befriend him and invite him to his house for dinner. He imagines how he would eventually tell the family the truth, getting even more respect from them when he describes how he had seen the light, then turned around to help.

Believing instead that Donfrey will see through his lies, Roosten decides not to go back after all. He concentrates on the fact that Donfrey had been making fun of him and



deserved what he got. He decides to think about ways to make his shop more attractive. Once he makes his store viable, Roosten decides that he will run for office. Once he is back at the shop, however, there are no lines of people. A muddy tarp has blow up from the junkyard. He suddenly decides that it is the hobos who are ruining his business. He is angry at the hobos for ruining his business and thinks of the things that he'd like to do and say to them. When one of the hobos walks up to him and gives him a half-smile, all Roosten does is smile in return.

## Al Roosten Analysis

Al Roosten is a man who has chosen a mediocre life for himself as a result of his inability to stand up for his convictions. His unwillingness to make a public stand has colored his life even though he struggles inwardly with the things that he wishes that he could do and say. He supports his sister and her children by running an antique store. He tries to imagine himself as a pillar of the community and respected business man but in the back of his mind, he secretly admires Larry Donfrey and his beautiful wife, huge home and well behaved kids. Roosten is not married because he never asked any of his girlfriends to marry him. It is this tendency to omit important things that seems to characterize Roosten's life. His sins of omission in this story include not retrieving Donfrey's keys from under the risers when he purposely kicked them there, and then not turning back to help Donfrey find his keys when he realizes that not having his keys might make Donfrey late getting his daughter to an important doctor's appointment. Roosten believes that if he were to go back, people would know it was he who moved the keys to start with. His fear of being found guilty of a crime seems to keep him from doing anything that might make him seem altruistic. He acts similarly with his business. Although he knows that it is probably because of the many homeless people who hang around his shop that he does not get much business, he will not say anything to the bums to make them stay away from his shop. Even when the dirty old man approaches him at the conclusion of the story, Roosten does nothing but give him a weak smile.



# The Semplica Girl Diaries

## The Semplica Girl Diaries Summary

Believing he can impact future generations, the writer decides just after his 40th birthday to begin keeping a journal detailing his life. He writes that when he goes to pick up his kids from school, the bumper falls off the car. His three children hold the bumper in the backseat on the way home. In his Sept. 6 entry, the dad tells about a birthday party at the home of a rich family. His children are impressed by the buildings and grounds. The girl gets gifts like a lock of hair from a mummy and tickets to the Preakness. On the way home, Lilly comments that her birthday is coming in two weeks. At home, the family is discouraged by the plainness of their own home. The following day, Dad thinks of Eva during Fall Fling at his work. She had drawn a picture of sad SGs in her sketchbook. He decides to share with Eva some of the news reports about SGs sending money back home.

In the Sept. 9 entry Dad writes what could be considered a prayer asking God to give them enough. He also asks that the kids not have to know how far behind they actually are in their finances. On Sept. 12, Dad thinks about Lilly's coming birthday. It will be her thirteenth. He does not want her to have a bad party, like the one that he had on his thirteenth birthday. Lilly has given him birthday gift ideas. A figurine of a cheetah priced at \$350, one of a tiger priced at \$325 and one of a big sister reading to her little sister, \$280. He wonders why his daughter thinks that a figurine that costs \$300 is an acceptable birthday gift request. He remembers the cheap basketball and homemade shirt with one long sleeve that he got for his birthday.

Dad is sad since he feels Lilly is already discouraged because she has told him that she does not want to have a birthday party. He decides that one figurine would not be excessive. He decides to buy the most expensive figurine and put it on the credit card.

On Sept. 14, Dad realizes that he cannot order the cheetah on the credit card because he has only \$200 left on the Visa card. He can transfer \$200 from checking once he gets his paycheck, but is concerned that the check won't come in time. He will also have to pick \$200 worth of bills to defer. He is frustrated with his financial situation but remembers his father, who kept working even after his wife died, then was demoted. The following day Dad realizes that his plan will not work. He thinks he can give Lilly a picture of the figurine with a promise to get it later. If this is the case, he thinks he needs to get her two of the figurines.

In his Sept. 20 entry, Dad wins \$10,000 with a scratch off lottery ticket. They think about partially paying off credit cards, but then decide to do something really special for Lilly's birthday. They decide to get Greenway Landscaping to redesign their yard with rose bushes, cedar trails, pond, hot tub and four SGs. They decide to have the work done in one day, while Lilly is at school.





On Sept. 21, the yard is prepared. Dad picks Lilly up from school. She is sad because no one has said "Happy Birthday" to her yet. She thinks that she has to go to the doctor for a shot but this is actually just a reason to keep Lilly away from the house while Pam, Eva and Thomas work to decorate the house. When Lilly gets home, the yard is finished and her friends are there. She gets three figurines from her parents. At the end of the party Eva becomes upset and will only tell her parents that "I don't like it. It's not nice." The family tries to explain to her that the girls are being SGs so they can help support their families.

The following day, Dad posts pictures of his new yard in his cubicle. A fellow employee who has never talked to him before asks to come by and see the yard. He is pleased to come home and see his yard. He is also pleased when Lilly's rich friend demands a pond because she likes theirs so much. Dad believes they have handled their good fortune well. He decides to put an effort forward to feel happiness in all facets of his life.

On Sept. 23, Dad writes that Eva is continuing to be a pain. He compares his life to a game of Whac-A-Mole with teenagers instead of moles. Eva has drawn a picture of the SGs crying and complaining about their fates. Dad takes Eva for a drive through neighborhoods to point out how many homes have SG arrangements. He describes to Eva how the girls' are hooked up when she states that she wonders how the girls are even still alive. He believes he has broken through to Eva when he explains to her how delicate Lilly is at her age and how the family has tried to make the yard more attractive in order to bolster her self-confidence. That night, he tells Pam about his troubles with Eva. Pam tells him that in a month, Eva will have forgotten all about it.

In his Sept. 30 entry, Dad records that one of his colleagues has died. That night at dinner, Dad and his family hold hands and pray before dinner. On Oct. 1 Dad realizes how thin the line between life and death really is as he attends his colleague's funeral. At home, he makes a resolution with his family to make each moment count. In his Oct. 2 entry Dad writes that the family has been hit by surprise when they wake up one morning to discover the SGs are missing. The cops believe the girls have been taken by activists. A representative from Greenway comes and tells them that if the girls aren't located in three weeks, the family will have to pay for them in full, a total of \$8,600. It turns out this information is in the agreement, which the family did not read. Pam is angry and says they will not pay. She says the people should just plan to take their house. Eva bursts into tears and apologizes. Dad realizes Eva let the SGs go.

After the family calms down from the initial shock, Pam asks her husband if she should call her father. Because Pam's father, Farmer Rich, does not like Pam's husband, he says no. He tries to shuffle bills to pay for the missing Semplica Girls but cannot come up with enough money.

On Oct. 6, Farmer Rich pays the family a visit. He is not happy and lectures the couple for wasting money on the SGs. He tells them they will be learning a valuable lesson if he allows them to get themselves out of the situation into which they have gotten themselves. Dad suggests that they tell the Greenway people what Eva did and hope they will have mercy on the young girl. Pam has already thought about this and has





looked up on the Internet that releasing SGs is a felony. They decide to protect Eva by not telling the truth. Pam suggests, however, that the dad's book could be used as evidence against them. She suggests that he get rid of it somehow. The dad hopes that it will all fade away and he will not have to get rid of his journal.

In his Oct. 8 entry, the dad indicates that the ordeal is not fading away as he had hoped that it would. When he arrives home from work, there is a detective at his house. The detective, Jerry, does not like the SGs or Greenway. He promises to find the activists who took the girls. He says the abduction is not typical and that he will have plenty of time to dedicate to finding whoever is responsible.

As a result of the stress of the investigation, Pam and the dad are short with the kids. He recalls how they gave up their lives to ensure their kids a great childhood. He sees a poster on Lilly's desk that she is working on for school. She has interviewed all of their SGs and used their real names and information about their lives as her material. The dad wonders where the SGs are and why they left the yard at all. Jerry leaves and the dad sees the empty SG rack. He makes a note to have Greenway come and take it away.

## The Semplica Girl Diaries Analysis

In this story the dad touches on a scary parallel between his family and the families of those in lesser countries. Apparently, through some sort of arrangement, girls have been hired from other countries to serve as yard decorations for the wealthy. The girls agree to this arrangement because they believe they will be helping their families to achieve a better way of life. They intend the money they earn to help their families build nicer homes, buy food, go to school, and other things. The girls often come from families that are so poor they have no hope. Because of their bad choices, the family that is central to the story of the Semplica Girls is not much different from the families who send their girls to serve as yard decorations. The difference is that the family in the story has brought their own misfortune on themselves by spending their money on frivolous things that will make them seem well off.

In his desire to make his own children feel as if their family is not as poor as they actually are, the dad forgets that these SGs are people, just like his own children. This is not something that he children forget, however. Eva has been upset by the girls ever since they were added to the family's yard. She believes that she is doing right by letting the girls go free. Lilly, as well, has seen the girls as people and not just decorations. She has taken the time to get to know the girls and has made them the focus of a school project. At the conclusion of the story, even the dad realizes that the girls are people and have families at home that love them. He wonders where they are and why they ran away in the first place.

Another idea central to this story is the dad's intentions to keep his children from feeling as if there is any trouble in the world. He wants their childhood to be as pain-free as possible for them. For this reason, when he wins the lottery, he and his wife decide to

spend the money buying novelties for his daughter's birthday instead of paying bills, as he should have done. The daughter has a good birthday, but the resulting fiasco from the missing SGs nearly tears the family apart.



# Home

## Home Summary

Mikey returns home from war to find his mother has a new boyfriend. She is also trying to give up cussing. The new boyfriend, Harris, doesn't work. Harris tells Mikey that his mother is sick, that she has a lump. Later, when Mikey asks his mother about the lump, she says that Harris is lying. She claims he's told several people lies about her supposedly failing health.

Mikey asks where Renee and Ryan are living but his mother tells him that it is not a good idea for him to go visit. She thinks that Ryan has been hitting Renee. Mikey looks up their address in the phone book and goes for a visit anyway. The house is large and in a good part of town. He squats in the yard and listens to Renee and Ryan talking to Ryan's parents about a man named Lon who flew a planeload of Russian babies to America so they could fix their harelips.

Renee walks outside with the baby. She is surprised when she sees Mikey. She goes to the door and gives the baby to Ryan. When she comes back, she first asks Mikey "did you do it." He doesn't answer and she tells him to come back on Thursday so they can all talk. Mikey asks about Ryan hitting her and Renee tells him that their mother is deranged. She says their mother is sick, but not with a lump, with a bad heart. She tells him that Ryan does not hit her. Mikey, however, will not answer her question when she asks if he did "it" or not. She tells him to go see his own wife and babies.

When Mikey returns home, he finds his mother being evicted from her home because she has not paid rent in four months. A man is removing their belongings from the house. When he is told that Mikey served in the military, he tells him that he appreciates his service, but goes on moving stuff out of the house. Mikey drops the man to the ground and then takes the television he just moved back inside.

Later that day the sheriff comes with movers to evict the family. Mikey watches the eviction from a neighbor's deer stand. He decides to make Harris and his mother go inside the house where he will threaten to burn the house down in an attempt to make them act their ages. As soon as he carries out his plan, he feels bad, stomps out the fire, then goes to visit Joy and the babies.

Joy's house is even nicer than Renee's. He goes to a store selling MiiVOXmax and MiiVOXmin. The store clerks seem like kids to him. He tells them he's been away for a long time. When they ask where he's been, he tells them he's been in the war. They talk about the war for a short time, then Mikey leaves. He is on the sidewalk before he realizes he is still holding the MiiVOXmax tag.

Back at Joy's house, Evan answers the door. Evan says its too late and suggests he come back the next day after work. When he returns to his mother's house, his mother



and Harris are sitting on the floor, trying to find someplace to go. The sheriff returns and asks if Mikey is the one who threw down Mr. Klees. He suggests he stop throwing people down. When he learns that Mikey also tried to burn the house down, he suggests he not do that anymore either. Mikey's mother tells the sheriff that Mikey has not been himself.

When the sheriff apologizes for their situation, his mother tells him about Mikey being a war hero. The next morning, Harris asks about Mikey's court-martial. Mikey's mother reminds him that Mikey was cleared of charges. As they are talking the sheriff comes back. He padlocks the door to the house so they can't go back outside. They drive to Renee's house.

In the next section Mikey is both angry with and sad for his mother. He wishes he could tell her what he did at Al-Raz and get her forgiveness for his actions. At Renee's house, Renee refuses to let them stay there. Mikey becomes angry when Renee will not let him hold the baby. Mikey is angry and tells them how badly his feelings have been hurt. He walks back to the store where he returns the tag he accidentally took. He learns the two men now working in the store had been in the war as well with one in basically the same place as Mikey.

One of the boys says that he messed up at Al-Raz —that one of his buddies got a piece of shrapnel in his groin and he had waited too long to call it in. He says that Melvin is okay now. He seems to be waiting for Mikey to say what he did wrong but Mikey doesn't do so.

Mikey calls Renee and apologizes for the pitcher. He tells her he is going home and hangs up. He walks toward Gleason. As he walks he remembers the time he cleaned a pond and realized the stuff he was cleaning out of it was full of tadpoles that were being killed. Instead of stopping, he continued working, feeling as if this made the killing normal. He recalls he felt the same way at Al-Raz. When he reaches Joy's house, the whole family is there. He had apparently been thinking of killing his ex-wife and children, but now his plan includes the whole family. It is only the sight of his mother needing help to stand from the porch swing that softens him. He decides it is the family's responsibility to help him return from a war into which they sent him.

## Home Analysis

Mikey is struggling with readjusting to his world since he returned from war. Since he has been gone, much has changed. His sister is married and has a baby. His mother is dating a good for nothing boyfriend who will not work. His wife has remarried a friend of his from school who is now raising his children. Although Mikey received an award for saving a man during his service in the war, his family seems wary of him. At one point Harris asks Mikey about the court-martial. It is indicated that Mikey was cleared of whatever charges were brought against him, but his family still wonders if he was responsible for the actions. To himself, Mikey thinks of the awful things that happened during the war, what all of the men were called upon to do in the war and cringes. He



thinks that people have become selfish. He sees his former wife with three cars when there are only two driving adults in the family. He does not want his children growing up in this atmosphere.

Meanwhile, Mikey seems to be struggling more and more with a lack of ability to control a violent side of himself. When Renee will not let him hold the baby, he imagines himself hurting the baby even though that is not what he wants to do. He also gets very close to going through with a plan to burn down the house his mother had been renting, with them inside. He thinks that this will be a way to wake his mother and her boyfriend up and make them act their ages. Mikey has also half-formed a plan to kill his former wife, her husband and children when his family confronts him at their house. He decides to give them a chance to see if they can help to straighten out the mess that has become of him since his experiences in the war.



# My Chivalric Disaster

## My Chivalric Disaster Summary

In this story, Ted witnesses Martha, a fellow employee, getting raped by their boss. The next morning, both Ted and Martha are given bribes to keep them from telling what happened. Martha also begs Ted not to tell her husband, Nate, what happened because she believes the knowledge will kill him. Ted is moved up from his job in janitorial to one as a pacing guard. The first night on the job, Ted messes up his lines.

Later, when Don Murray comes to the set, he suggests that he and Ted go fishing together. When Martha appears as well, Ted can no longer keep quiet about the attack. He tells what he knows and gets fired. Martha is angry and sad because she knows what people will say about her. Ted's family is disappointed and upset because he had been the only money earner in the house.

## My Chivalric Disaster Analysis

The title of this story, along with its plot, is an oxymoron. Anything chivalrous, which indicates a desire to do what is morally correct, should not end in a disaster, but that is exactly what happens for Ted. When he tries to bring attention to the actions of his corrupt boss, it is instead Ted who is punished. He loses his job, a disaster since he had been the only one working in his family of disabled members. Martha is angry with Ted because she is afraid of what people will say about her. She also believes that her husband will not be able to deal with the knowledge that his wife has been raped. It seems that it would have been better for Ted to have not spoken out about what happened since he and Martha had gotten raises and promotions as a bribe to keep them both quiet.

The most interesting aspect of the novel is the setting and the language used in the story. Ted and Martha both work at some sort of amusement park centered around the medieval lifestyle. The language used in the novel, even when Ted is thinking to himself, is that of more chivalrous times, tying the title, plot and setting together.



# Tenth of December

## Tenth of December Summary

In the story "Tenth of December," a young boy has decided to walk to a pond near his home on a cold winter day and look at a beaver dam. He takes his pellet gun to guard against the Nethers that he expects to encounter on his outing. He imagines today that the Nethers have kidnapped Suzanne Bledsoe, the new girl in his homeroom. It is ten degrees outside according to the thermometer. He thinks of the way that he is never really able to save anyone, as he dreams of saving Suzanne. Robin finds a coat that has been discarded on a bench next to the pond. He sees a man walking up Lexow Hill. He is not wearing a coat. Robin believes that taking the man his coat will be like saving him.

Meanwhile, Don Eber is out of breath and tired after just part of a route that he used to be able to run six times without effort. He thinks of how young he is and all the things that he will never get to do. Even as he thinks, the words don't come out properly. Don is frustrated with himself. He remembers his own step-father's illness, how he became angry and cruel when he got sick. He decides to save his own children from having to watch him waste away. It is at this point that Don had taken off his coat and left it on the bench.

Robin thinks about the amount of time it will take him to catch up to the man and give him his coat. He decides it would be quicker to cut across the pond. He reaches the greyish part of the pond where there is a stream in the winter. When he hits it with the butt of his gun, he believes that it is as solid as the rest of the pond. He considers turning back just briefly before the ice gives way and he falls through.

Don is nauseated. He throws up into the snow, then falls, a tree catching him. He plans to climb to the boulder where he will sit cross legged. He wonders if he will be able to make it any farther than the tree. Suddenly, he notices the kid walking across the pond toward him. He wills the kid to mind his own business, but then realizes the kid has fallen in the pond. He forces himself to the pond to help the kid out.

Robin struggles in the pond. He pulls himself closer and closer to the edge of the pond until he is finally able to get out. He lies still on the edge, hearing only himself crying.

Don sees his coat lying on the ice in the pond. He finally realizes the kid has pulled himself out and is lying on the bank. He knows that as cold as it is, the boy will be in trouble if he doesn't get moving. Don tells the boy he needs to get up but the boy just looks at him. Don walks out on the ice and gets his coat. He puts it on the boy then pulls off his boots and wet pants, dressing the boy in his dry ones.

Don pops the boy on the shoulders and gets him moving. Soon, the boy is running. He runs away from Don. As Don stands in his underwear watching the boy run, he realizes



that he never really knew what it was like to be cold or tired before. He sits down next to an overturned boat.

Robin realizes he is wearing someone else's clothes. He sits down on a stump to rest. He can't feel his legs and believes this is a sign that he isn't going to lose them. He decides to lie down. He thinks about his mom and a conversation that he overheard as she talked to a friend about him being a magnificent little dude. He decides he needs to get up and get going. It is not until he makes it home and realizes that he is going to live that Robin remembers the old guy at the pond. Robin feels badly because he ran off and left the guy, but is too tired to go back. He decides that his mother will know what to do.

Back at the pond, Don briefly believes his kids are young and have come with him to feed the ducks. Then he remembers his kids are grown. He thinks about them, and remembers that he didn't not even leave a note explaining why he was doing as he was because he didn't want his death to seem intentional. He is hallucinating that he is seeing his piano teacher walking around the pond, calling "hello." The woman piles clothes on him, gets him up and moving.

Back at her house, Don is thinking about how he has suddenly been given his life back. The woman touches his scar and he remembers the brown spot in his head. This time he realizes that he really does want to go through it all. Robin comes to Don and apologizes to him for running off in the woods. Don assures him that he acted as he should have. He remembers a time when Allen had praised him for good work on a school assignment even though he was sick. He thinks how hard that must have been for him and decides that he does want to be like Allen.

Molly comes in. She is flustered and embarrassed because she realizes that she has been too busy nursing Don to see how scared he was. Overriding everything else that Don sees in Molly face is her concern for him.

## Tenth of December Analysis

There are several different issues at work in this story of salvation and second chances. First, Don Eber is sick. He remembers his step-father getting angry and hateful when he was sick in a similar way. Don does not want to turn into the person that he feels that his step-father had become. He believes he will be doing his family a favor by ending his life. Next, Robin is a picked on kid who appears to have no friends. He seems to have a low opinion of himself. Robin, however, has good intentions. When he finds Don's coat and realizes that Don has left it behind, his only thought is catching up to the man and returning it to him. In order to catch up to him, Robin realizes he needs to walk across the pond. It is at this point that Robin's plan goes bad as he falls through the ice.

Here, the story takes a hopeful turn as Don realizes that he cannot allow the child, who fell in the pond trying to bring him his coat, die. He wills himself to help the boy, dresses him in his dry clothes and gets him moving back toward his house. Don, however, is too





weak to follow and watches as the boy runs toward his home. Don finally seems to realize the finality of what he has put into motion. He realizes how these will be the last memories that his family will have of him. He didn't even leave a note because he did not want the insurance to think that he had killed himself intentionally.

When the boy gets home, he suddenly remembers the man who helped him and sends his mother back to help the man. She gets him to her house, almost half carrying him in places. As he is able to help the boy understand that he did the right thing by sending his mom back out, Don realizes how final his death would have been. He remembers memories of Allen trying to be patient and loving, even when dealing with the pain and frustration of his disease. He also realizes that no matter how bad he gets and what his family members have to put up with from him, that he would do the same for them. Don has realized that being Allen would actually not be that bad, but that he had no right to take himself away from his family, even if he felt that was best for them.

This story is written from the points of view of both Don and Robin. This allows the reader to understand the thoughts and motivations of each character. It is understood why Don is doing what he is doing, he doesn't want to be a burden on his family as he feels his step-father was, and why Robin does as he does. He cuts across the pond because he believes this route will help him to catch up with the man, whom he believes forgot his coat, faster. This third person point of view also alternates between Don and Robin's points of view, with each part of the story being told from that character's viewpoint.



# Characters

## Alison Pope appears in Victory Lap

Alison Pope is the damsel in distress character in the story "Victory Lap." She is a fifteen year old who dreams of finding her prince charming in a world filled with ordinary men. To her, the world is filled with love and goodness and beautiful people who will never be anything but kind to her. This view of the world is shattered when a man pretending to be a meter reader tries to abduct her from her home.

Alison's salvation comes from an unexpected source. She remembers the way that she and Kyle Boot had been friends when they were younger. She now considers him to be a wimp and a geek. Her opinion of Kyle does not fit her ideal of her expected prince charming. After he saves her from her attackers, she has recurring nightmares where Kyle actually kills her abductor with the rock instead of just injuring him.

## Kyle Boot appears in Victory Lap

Kyle Boot is the hero in the story "Victory Lap." He is Alison Pope's next-door neighbor. He watches as a man pretending to be a meter reader tries to abduct Alison. Although he has been taught by his parents not to interfere in other people's business, Kyle fights past this deeply imbedded belief to save Alison. He is caught in a moral dilemma as he tries to decide if he should help Alison or if he should follow the instructions that have been drilled into him all of his life.

Kyle tries to follow his parents' intricate instructions on a day to day basis. His parents are very strict with him. He is afraid that if he doesn't follow their wishes, they will make him quit the track team, a sport that he enjoys. Alison describes Kyle as a skeleton with a mullet. She believes that he is a wimp and a geek.

## Meter Reader appears in Victory Lap

The man who intends to kidnap Alison dresses as a meter reader so that he can knock on her door without people becoming suspicious. He had planned out the abduction in advance, after he had seen Alison in her yard. He is a parishioner of the Russian Church across the road from Alison's house. Although he had the kidnapping planned out, he doesn't plan on Kyle and his geode. He is angry with himself and believes himself to be a failure when he realizes that it is a child who has foiled his plans.

## Dad appears in Sticks

Dad is the focus of the story "Sticks." He is a miserly man whose one "concession to glee" is to dress up a metal cross on holidays. In all other ways, he is stingy and unkind



to his children. Toward the end of his life, the dad tries to use the pole as a way to apologize to his children for the way that he has acted and treated them for all of their lives. After his death, the pole is thrown away.

## **Marie appears in Puppy**

Marie is the mom of Josh and Abbie in the story "Puppy." She was abused in her childhood and is doing everything possible to see to it that her children do not suffer the way she did. She encourages laughter, even when the children are laughing at things they have done that could have hurt or damaged something. She buys expensive and unnecessary pets on the credit card. When she enters Callie's house and sees Bo in the backyard in a restraint, meant to keep him from getting hurt by running into traffic, she immediately assumes the boy is being abused. Because of this, Marie refuses to buy the puppy the family is trying to sell, not only for the money, but also because they cannot afford it. Callie knows the puppy will have to be killed if they cannot sell it or give it away. Marie's behavior is hypocritical as she judges a situation that she knows nothing about, then adds to the already difficult situation by refusing to take the puppy, even though her children want the dog.

## **Callie appears in Puppy**

Callie is Bo's mother. She is pleased with herself because she has found a way for Bo to be outside, which is where he wants to be, without taking the chance that he will run away, cross the interstate highway near their house and get killed. She believes the restraint that she has put her son in is the same as the fence that surrounded her house when she was a child. She hopes to be able to give their puppy away so that her husband will not have to kill it as he did the kittens. She is distraught because Marie and her family don't take the puppy. She takes it into a cornfield and abandons it so that her husband will not have to do it. She covers her actions by taking a twenty-dollar bill out of her savings and pretending the people bought the puppy.

## **Josh appears in Puppy**

Josh is Marie's son. He sees the boy in the restraint in the backyard and helps his mother discourage Abbie from getting the puppy. Although his mother sees Josh's antics as goodhearted fun, Josh is disrespectful to his mother, goosing her while she is brushing her teeth and hitting her so that he knocks off her glasses when she tries to help him with a game.

## **Abbie appears in Puppy**

Abbie is Marie's daughter. She is the reason that the family is going to look for a puppy. Josh had made a comment about something their dog had done when he was a puppy. Because she could not remember this time, Abbie cried, encouraging her mother to get



her a puppy of her own. When the family leaves Callie's house without the puppy, Abbie cries.

## **Bo appears in Puppy**

Bo is Callie's son. He has some sort of mental or emotional problem that causes him to be difficult to control. The medicine that he has been prescribed has unfavorable side effects so he and his mother don't like for him to take it. He is unhappy being in the house, but when allowed to go outside, will run into the nearby interstate highway. He happily plays within the bounds of the restraint that his mother has fixed for him, even blows her a kiss when he sees her checking on him.

## **Abnesti appears in Escape from Spiderhead**

Abnesti is one of the main characters in the story "Escape from Spiderhead." He appears to be the man in charge of experimentation at some sort of alternative center for inmates. He is the one who gives Jeff orders and runs the experiments. Abnesti is very excited about the possibilities of a new drug with which he is experimenting. He believes that the drug will help him be able to stop wars as well as making ideal people fall in love with one another. After he has pushed Jeff to the edge by trying to force him to administer Darkenflox to Rachel, Abnesti leaves his remote control where Jeff can have access to it. It is because of Abnesti's carelessness that Jeff is able to give himself a lethal dose of Darkenflox.

## **Jeff appears in Escape from Spiderhead**

Jeff is the main character in the story "Escape from Spiderhead." He is being held in some sort of an alternative jail which also serves as a scientific testing center. During his imprisonment, Jeff is used as a subject in which he is given different experimental drugs. In one of the experiments, Abnesti tries to make him agree to give a test subject a drug that he has learned will cause suicidal behavior. He is in jail for killing a boy during a fight in his teen years. He has been through counseling and truly does not want to kill again. As his supervisors try to find a way to make Jeff agree to administer the chemical, Jeff finds Abnesti's remote control and gives himself a fatal dose of the drug. By killing himself, Jeff assures that he will never kill again. Just before he dies, Jeff is saddened only by the affect his death will have on his mother.

## **Heather appears in Escape from Spiderhead**

Heather is the girl in "Escape from Spiderhead" who bludgeons herself to death with her chair after she is given a dose of Darkenflox. Heather is one of the girls with whom Jeff fell in love during an earlier experiment.



## **Rachel appears in Escape from Spiderhead**

Rachel is another girl in "Escape from Spiderhead" with whom Jeff has fallen in love as a result of an experimental drug. During the final experiment, Abnesti tries to force Jeff to give Rachel a dose of Darkenfloxx that Jeff is afraid will cause Rachel to commit suicide just as it did to Heather. Jeff kills himself before experimenters are able to force him to kill Rachel.

## **Todd Birnie appears in Exhortation**

Todd Birnie is a divisional director in the story "Exhortation." He is the one who writes a memo to his staff enticing them to go about their duties with a positive attitude despite a negative situation. He encourages his employees to do their best because they made a joint decision to make a change in the workplace about a year ago. Birnie apparently is noticing that some workers are grumbling about their working conditions and not wanting to do the jobs they had promised to do. Birnie's intention of the memo is to be encouraging and motivating but he also threatens his workers as well. Birnie reminds his workers that they can be replaced if they are not willing to do what they were hired to do.

## **Andy appears in Exhortation**

Andy is a character in the story "Exhortation." Birnie uses Andy as an example to encourage workers to do their best. He reminds them of Andy's high performance scores during the month of October. Although it seems that Andy would have been happy with his high scores, Birnie notes in his memo that Andy has become withdrawn and disconsolate since his month of high success.

## **Al Roosten appears in Al Roosten**

Al Roosten is the title character from the story "Al Roosten." Roosten seems to be of the opinion that life has stacked the deck against him. The biggest problem in his life seems to be his tendency to be inactive when he should be taking a stand for himself. For instance, he kicks Donfrey's keys under some risers because he is angry with the man because he got a better reception at a celebrity auction than Roosten did. Roosten overhears a phone call and realizes that Donfrey is leaving the auction early because he is taking his daughter to see a surgeon about a deformed foot. Roosten is suddenly afraid that his actions might keep the girl from having her surgery, but doesn't want to go back and show Roosten where his keys are because he doesn't want others to know his childishness in kicking the keys in the first place.

Similarly, Roosten believes that his business would do better if there were not homeless people hanging around the store. As he drives back to the store, he thinks about all the things that he'd like to say to these homeless people to get them off his property. When



he arrives at his store and one of the men walks up to him, however, Roosten does none of the things he had thought of doing. He only gives the man a non-committal half smile.

## **Larry Donfrey appears in Al Roosten**

Larry Donfrey is involved in the same celebrity auction as Al Roosten. Donfrey wears a swimsuit in his walk down the runway and gets more applause than Roosten. After the auction, Donfrey tries to comfort Roosten by telling him not to worry about his failure on the runway, making Roosten feel badly about himself.

## **Dad appears in The Semplica Girl Diaries**

The Dad in the family is the narrator in the story "The Semplica Girl Diaries." He is keeping a journal with the intention of telling others what life was like during his time. He believes it will be a keepsake for his children. He begins by recording his feelings of being worthless because he and his family are struggling to pay their bills. They do not have fancy homes or popular yard decorations like other families. The dad records in his journal that he believes that his luck will change when he wins \$10,000 with a scratch off lottery ticket. He and his wife decide to use the money to renovate their yard for their daughter's thirteenth birthday.

What the dad does not count on is the way the Semplica Girls that they install in their front yard will affect their younger daughter. When she sets the girls free, the dad is angry because his way of life is threatened since he is required to pay money to cover the girls' leases. It is only after the dad begins to realize that the Semplica Girls are real people who are loved and cared for by their families that he begins to understand how cruel the SG trend really is.

## **Lilly appears in The Semplica Girl Diaries**

Lilly is the oldest daughter of Pam and the narrator of this story. Lilly's parents are concerned that she will not feel as if she fits in properly with the rest of the girls her age if they are not able to give her a good birthday party. When asked what she wants for her birthday, Lilly picks out figurines that cost nearly \$300 each. It is also Lilly who interviews the family's SGs for a school project on which she is working. She learns what their lives had been like before they came to America as well as their real names.

## **Eva appears in The Semplica Girl Diaries**

Eva is the youngest daughter in the story "The Semplica Girl Diaries." She is the one who lets the Semplica Girls go free. Since the girls were put in their yard, Eva has been upset about them being there. Even though the father has been aware of Eva's problems with the girls, he had assumed she was just being touchy. At the conclusion of



the story, when Eva tells her family that she is the one who let the girls go, the family is afraid that she will be convicted of a felony.

## **Thomas appears in The Semplica Girl Diaries**

In the story "The Semplica Girl Diaries," Thomas is the one who first notices that the girls are gone. Because he is the one who tells the family about the disappearance, the father assumes that the boy had been part of the plan to let the girls go. It is only after Eva tells her father that she alone is responsible for the missing girls that Thomas is let off the hook.

## **Pam appears in The Semplica Girl Diaries**

Pam is the mother in the story "The Semplica Girl Diaries." When her husband suggests they use the lottery money that he won to renovate their yard instead of paying bills, she doesn't argue with him. When they learn how much they might owe because their Semplica Girls have gone missing, Pam's first thought is that they will lose their house. It is Pam's idea to try to get her father to lend them some money to pay their bills.

## **Farmer Rich appears in The Semplica Girl Diaries**

Farmer Rich is the name that Pam's father has given to himself. He dislikes Pam's husband. He believes they have made stupid financial decisions and for this reason will not lend them any money to cover their debts.

## **Ma appears in Home**

Ma is Mikey and Renee's mother and Harris's girlfriend. She is working at a church in an attempt to pay her bills. She will not allow her boyfriend to question Mikey about his court martial in the war but does brag to others that he saved a man in the war. Ma tells the sheriff about Mikey's attempt to burn down the house with she and Harris inside it. It is when he sees that his mother has to have help getting up from the porch swing at Joy's house that Mikey decides to abandon his plan of killing his family.

## **Mikey appears in Home**

Mikey is the main character and narrator of the story "Home." He has returned from war and is having trouble adjusting to the ways that the world has changed since he has been away. His ex-wife has remarried a friend of Mikey's from school. This man is now raising Mikey's children. His family is suspicious of him because of the questions surrounding his court martial even though the charges were dropped.





## **Harris appears in Home**

Harris is Mikey's mother's new boyfriend. He will not work. He makes up stories about Mikey's mother. For instance, he tells Mikey that his mother has a lump. Harris tries to talk to Mikey about what his life was like in the war but Mikey's mother will not allow it.

## **Don Murray appears in My Chivalric Fiasco**

Don Murray is the boss who rapes Martha, his employee, in the story "My Chivalric Disaster." Don Murray bribes both Martha and Ted, who saw the attack, to keep quiet. When Ted does tell about the rape, Don fires Ted.

## **Martha appears in My Chivalric Fiasco**

In the story "My Chivalric Fiasco," Martha is the character who is raped by her boss, Don Murray. Martha begs Ted not to tell about the attack because she believes that the knowledge will kill her husband. Martha accepts Don Murray's bribe money to say the attack was really a voluntary fling. She is angry with Ted when he tells about the attack.

## **Ted appears in My Chivalric Fiasco**

Ted is the character in the story "My Chivalric Fiasco" who sees Martha being raped by Don Murray. Don bribes Ted not to tell about the attack by giving him a better job position. Ted also witnesses Don give Martha \$1,000 to make up for the attack. Martha begs Don not to tell her husband about what happened. In the conclusion of the story, Ted is unable to keep what he knows to himself. He tells about the rape although he gets fired and Martha's husband is upset by the attack.

## **Don Eber appears in The Tenth of December**

Fifty-three year old Don Eber is the main character of the story "The Tenth of December." Don is suffering from some sort of brain tumor that affects the way he speaks and thinks. He has decided the best thing for him to do is kill himself so that he will put his family out of the misery of having to take care of him. He compares his own situation to that of his step-father who changed dramatically because of a similar illness. After Don almost freezes to death near the pond when he is trying to save Robin, Don realizes how much he really wants to live. He realizes that it is not his right to decide to take himself away from his family.

## **Robin appears in The Tenth of December**

Robin is one of the main characters in the story "The Tenth of December." He is a young boy who is overweight and often picked on by other students in his classes. Robin





keeps himself entertained hunting imaginary characters he calls "Nethers" near his home. He is out hunting Nethers when he sees Don Eber walking up Lexow Hill without his coat. Robin has found the man's coat and decides the best thing to do is to return it to him. As Robin cuts across the frozen pond in an attempt to catch up with the man, he falls through the ice. Robin is able to pull himself out of the pond, but Don helps him get home. When Robin makes it home, he realizes that he has left the older man who saved him back at the pond. Robin sends his mother to bring Don back to their house.



## Objects/Places

### **St. Mikhail's appears in Victory Lap**

St. Mikhail's is the Russian Church across the street from Alison's house. It is while attending a service at this church that the man who pretends to be a meter reader spots Alison and decides to kidnap her.

### **Geode appears in Victory Lap**

A geode is a decorative rock that has a depression or cavity in the rock filled with crystals. Kyle uses this geode to stop the fake meter man from kidnapping Alison.

### **A Knife appears in Victory Lap**

Kyle sees that the meter reader is threatening Alison with a knife.

### **Kenny's Van appears in Victory Lap**

The fake meter reader borrows this van to abduct Alison. Kyle uses the geode to break the front windshield of the van when he saves Alison.

### **A Metal Cross appears in Sticks**

The dad in the story "Sticks" dresses up this metal cross each holiday. At the end of the story, he uses it as a way to try to apologize to his children for the miserly way that he treated them when they were growing up.

### **The Cornfield appears in Puppy**

When Marie sees the cornfield, she thinks of haunted houses, a pleasant memory that she tries to implant in her children's minds. To Callie, a cornfield will always remind her of the place that she had to leave the puppy that Marie and her family would not take.

### **Bo's Restraint appears in Puppy**

Callie has fixed up a restraint for Bo so that he cannot wander into the nearby interstate highway and get hurt. Although both Callie and Bo are pleased with the arrangement, Marie believes that the boy is being abused.



## **Darkenfloxx appears in Escape from Spiderhead**

Darkenfloxx is a medication used as a punishment or deterrent for prisoners at Spiderhead.

## **ED289/290 appears in Escape from Spiderhead**

The experimental drug ED289/290 is used to elicit immediate feelings of love between two people.

## **The Spiderhead appears in Escape from Spiderhead**

The Spiderhead is the name that is given to the office that sits in the center of several workrooms.

## **Abnesti's Remote appears in Escape from Spiderhead**

Jeff steals Abnesti's remote and uses it to give himself a lethal dose of Darkenfloxx.

## **Room 6 appears in Exhortation**

It is in Room 6 that the employees in this company do whatever immoral or distasteful work that they do.

## **SG Arrangement appears in The Semplica Girl Diaries**

An SG Arrangement is a yard decoration made of fugitives from other countries who have moved to America to make money in order to have a better life or send money home to their families.

## **Semplica Pathway appears in The Semplica Girl Diaries**

The Semplica Pathway is the way that doctors thread a microline through the brains of the Semplica Girls.

## **27 Lincoln appears in Home**

Renee and Ryan live at 27 Lincoln.



## **MiiVOXmax appears in Home**

Mikey accidentally walks out of a store carrying a MiiVOXmax tag. He returns it.

## **Al-Raz appears in Home**

Al-Raz is a place or battle where Mikey was involved in something that he isn't proud of while he was in the armed forces.

## **One Thousand Dollars appears in My Chivalric Fiasco**

One thousand dollars is the amount of money that Don Murray gives Martha to not report that he raped her.

## **Duck Thermometer appears in The Tenth of December**

It is this thermometer outside Robin's house that registers that it is only ten degrees outside.

## **Don's Coat appears in The Tenth of December**

Robin finds Don's coat on the park bench near a pond and decides he should take it to him.

## **Lexow Hill appears in The Tenth of December**

Lexow Hill is the hill that Don Eber is trying to climb up for one last time before he allows himself to die of hypothermia.



# Themes

## Moral Dilemma

One theme that resounds in almost all of these stories is a main character or characters who are faced with some sort of moral dilemma. In the story "Victory Lap," Kyle is faced with the dilemma of whether he should obey his parents and mind his own business when he sees his neighbor being abducted or if he should try to rescue her. In the story "Sticks," a father has been mean and unloving to his children all of their lives. They notice in the way that he decorates a pair of sticks in front of his house that he might be feeling regret for his actions, but is unsure how to reach out to his children in an accepted way to apologize to them.

The story "My Chivalric Disaster" centers entirely around the idea of a man stuck in a moral dilemma. Ted has witnessed his fellow employee being raped by their boss. Ted feels that he should tell about the attack but keeps quiet because the woman raped asks him not to tell. Ted also gets a promotion from his boss as an incentive to keep quiet. After being given the drug KnightLyfe, as part of his job, Ted can no longer keep his mouth shut about what he has witnessed. He tells about the attack even though he gets fired and Martha warns him that she believes her husband will kill himself as a result of the knowledge.

Another story that deals with a moral dilemma is the story "The Tenth of December." In this story, a man who is trying to kill himself to save his family from the horror of his disease has to will himself to live in order to save a boy from dying. The irony of the story is that at the end, the boy and man wind up saving one another. His intent to stay alive long enough to save Robin sparks Don's will to live.

## Parent/Child Relationships

An underlying theme in many of the stories in this collection is that of relations between parents and children. The story "Sticks" tells the story of a man who tries to seek forgiveness from his children through an unconventional yard display. The story "The Tenth of December" also investigates relationships between parents and children. Don remembers his step-father becoming hateful as he battled with a disease similar to the one with which Don now struggles. It is only after he begins to think that he really might die that Don remembers the way that his step-father also took pains to encourage him and congratulate him on jobs well done even when he must have been feeling badly. Don realizes that he would be doing more harm to his children by leaving them through suicide than being there and allowing them to take care of him.

Another aspect of the parent/child relationship investigated through these stories is the parents' desire for their children to have a better childhood than they believe they did. In the story "Puppy" Marie does everything that she possibly can to ensure that her



children have a happy childhood. As a victim of abuse as a child, she does not want her children to grow up the same way that she did. Instead of being abusive, however, Marie is guilty of overindulging her children to the point that they are spoiled.

The story "The Semplica Girl Diaries" also speaks of a parent's desire to make a better life for his children. The dad, who serves as the narrator for the story, struggles to pay bills and still provide his oldest daughter a nice birthday party. He remembers the disaster that was his thirteenth birthday and wants better for his children. The family has a bit of good fortune when the dad wins \$10,000 with a lottery ticket. Instead of investing this money in a positive way, the parents spend it on a yard makeover for the daughter's birthday. Although they tried to make a good memory for their daughter, the family finds itself in even a worse place when the Semplica Girls they bought for their yard go missing, meaning they must pay a good deal of money to the nursery from which they rented the girls.

## Unusual Circumstances

Unusual circumstances that are sometimes never fully explained are another feature of many of Saunders' stories. The story that most clearly fits this theme of unusual, unexplained circumstances is the story "Exhortation." The author gives the idea that workers at this factory are being asked to do something that might be morally questionable to other people. However, it is never fully explained what kind of work they are actually doing. A similar circumstance takes place in the story "Escape from Spiderhead." Jeff, the main character, is the perpetrator of a murder who has been sentenced to serve his time in some sort of experimentation facility. The experimenters tell Jeff they are working on a potion to elicit love in people, but there is a hint that these experimenters might actually be trying to push Jeff to see how far he has to be pushed before he will do something that might harm someone else. It is uncertain if the experimenters expected Jeff to act so drastically and harm himself instead of the others.

Another unusual circumstance is found in the story "The Semplica Girl Diaries." Although the basis of the story is fairly common, it is the yard decorations dealt with in this story that are strange. Using live women is something that would generally never be considered as a yard decoration, but in this story, it is commonplace. Another aspect of the unusual nature of the girls is that the adults in the story are more accepting of the idea of using people as decorations than the children are. In this story, it is the young Eva who sets the girls free even though she may not realize that she has really not done the girls, or her family, any favors.



# Style

## Point of View

The stories in this collection are told from a variety of points of view. In the story "Victory Lap," for instance, the third person point of view is used. Instead of having a third person omniscient narrator, this story is told from the points of view of three different characters. The story starts out being told by a third person narrator from Alison's point of view, and then switches to Kyle's point of view. Portions of the story are also told from the point of view of the meter reader.

The story "The Tenth of December" is also told from the third person point of view. This narrator tells the story from the viewpoints of both Robin and Don Eber.

Similarly, the story "Puppy" is told from the third person point of view of both Marie and Callie. The story "Al Roosten" is also told from a third person point of view. Unlike the other third person point of view stories, however, this story is told only from the viewpoint of Al Roosten.

Other stories, such as "The Semplica Diaries," are told from the first person point of view. The diaries are told from the point of view of the father as he records the details of his family's daily life in a journal. The story "Sticks" is also told from the first person point of view. "Escape from Spiderhead" is told from the first person point of view of Jeff, a prisoner in an alternative hospital. "Exhortation," "Home," and "My Chivalric Disaster" are also stories told from the first person point of view.

## Setting

The settings are different in each story. None of them are specific to any particular country or place. The story "Victory Lap" takes place in a neighborhood that includes a Russian Church. Some of the action takes place inside Alison's house and some in Kyle's house. The most important setting, however, is Alison's yard where Kyle saves Alison from being abducted.

The brief story "Sticks" takes place in a particular spot in the yard of a home where a man keeps a cross that he decorates for various occasions.

Setting is particularly important to the story "Puppy" since the main idea of the tale deals with the collision of two different ways of life. Marie and her family are from the affluent neighborhoods while Callie and her family live in a poorer area of town. Particularly important in this story are the cornfields since it is these fields that Marie tries to get her children to appreciate as they drive to see a puppy. In the end of the story, it is in one of these fields that Callie leaves the puppy to die because Marie refused to take it.



The story "Escape from Spiderhead" is set in some sort of alternative prison where prisoners are the subjects of drug testing. "Exhortation" is written as a memo to employees who work in some sort of factory where the labor is apparently distasteful. Stories "The Semplica Girl Diaries," "Al Roosten," and "Home" could take place in neighborhoods in any time. The Story "My Chivalric Disaster" is set against the backdrop of some sort of medieval amusement park while "The Tenth of December" takes place at a park within walking distance from Robin's home.

## Language and Meaning

One aspect that makes this collection of short stories interesting is that author Saunders writes each story in a unique voice and style. "Victory Lap," for instance, captures the personalities of each of its characters by giving them each a unique voice. Alison thinks, and acts, like a teenaged girl who believes the world is ultimately good and that it revolves around her. Kyle, meanwhile, is portrayed in a style of frenzied activity as Kyle tries to keep himself from breaking one of his parents' rules for him and getting caught. The meter man is given his own voice as well. He is at first self assured as he first abducts Alison, then melts into self-aberration when he realizes his entire plan has been foiled by a teenager with a rock.

Another story that is interesting because of its style is "My Chivalric Disaster." The story is set against the backdrop of some sort of medieval themed amusement park. The language of the story follows this theme especially after Ted's Knight Lyfe kicks in. He begins using words such as "anon," "sundry," and "damsel" generally associated with medieval speech. This use of language ties the title and theme together.

A final story that is particularly interesting in the way that it is written is "The Semplica Girl Diaries." This story is in the form of a diary written by a man short on time and money because of family obligations. For these reasons, the sentences are brief and clipped. He sometimes uses sentence fragments to express his thoughts, a way in which the author demonstrates the father's rush through the words that he chooses.

## Structure

This book is divided into ten short stories. The shortest of these stories is "Sticks" at only two pages long. The longest story is "The Semplica Girl Diaries" at 60 pages. Most of the stories are one section but a few of them are divided into separate sections or chapters. The most notable is "The Semplica Girl Diaries," which is divided into several days during which the narrator writes in a journal. Other stories that are divided into sections include "Home" and "Escape from Spiderhead." "Home" includes fifteen short sections notated with Arabic numerals while "Escape from Spiderhead" has ten different short sections notated with Roman numerals. One story "Exhortation" is written in the form of a memo to a group of employees.





## Quotes

"But seriously! Is life fun or scary? Are people good or bad?" Tenth of December: Stories, Victory Lap, p. 9

"Then he saw that the kid was going to bring the rock down. He closed his eyes and waited and was not at peace at all but instead felt the beginnings of a terrible dread welling up inside him, and if that dread kept growing at the current rate, he realized in a flash of insight, there was a name for the place he would be then, and it was Hell." Tenth of December: Stories, Victory Lap, p. 25

"Down came the rock. Then the guy had no head. The blow just literally dissolved his head. Then his body tumped over and Kyle turned to her with this heartbroken look of, My life is over. I killed a guy." Tenth of December: Stories, Victory Lap, p. 26

"'A bad thing happened to you kids,' Dad said. 'But it could have been worse.'" Tenth of December: Stories, Victory Lap, p. 28

"We left home, married, had children of our own, found the seeds of meanness blooming also within us." Tenth of December: Stories, Sticks, p. 30

"He painted a sign saying LOVE and hung it from the pole and another that said FORGIVE? and then he died in the hall with the radio on and we sold the house to a young couple who yanked out the pole and left it by the road on garbage day." Tenth of December: Stories, Sticks, p. 30

"'Please do not touch anything, please do not touch,' she said to Josh and Abbie, but just in her head, wanting to give the children a chance to observe her being democratic and accepting, and afterward they could all wash up at the half-remodeled McDonald's, as long as they just please please kept their hands out of their mouths, and God forbid they should rub their eyes." Tenth of December: Stories, Puppy, p. 38

"Which maybe that's what love was: liking someone how he was and doing things to help him get even better." Tenth of December: Stories, Puppy, p. 44

"What does that mean? Why is it super? It means that ED289/ 290 is the real deal. It can make love, it can take love away." Tenth of December: Stories, Escape from Spiderhead, p. 64

"My only regret was Mom. I hoped someday, in some better place, I'd get a chance to explain it to her, and maybe she'd be proud of me, one last time, after all these years." Tenth of December: Stories, Escape from Spiderhead, p. 80

"I joined them, flew among them, they did not recognize me as something apart from them, and I was happy, so happy, because for the first time in years, and forevermore, I had not killed, and never would." Tenth of December: Stories, Escape from Spiderhead, p. 82



"And I was asked to remind you— to remind us, all of us, myself included— that if we are unable to clean our assigned 'shelf,' not only will someone else be brought in to clean that 'shelf,' but we ourselves may find ourselves on that 'shelf,' being that 'shelf,' with someone else exerting themselves with good positive energy all over us." Tenth of December: Stories, Exhortation, pp. 88-90

"Frozen in the harsh spotlight, he looked so crazy and old and forlorn and yet residually arrogant that an intense discomfort settled on the room, a discomfort that, in a non-charity situation, might have led to shouted insults or thrown objects but in this case drew a kind of pity whoop from near the salad bar." Tenth of December: Stories, Al Roosten, p. 94

"Anyway, what the heck, am not planning on writing encyclopedia, if any future person is reading this, if you want to know what a 'demon' was, go look it up, in something called an encyclopedia, if you even still have those!" Tenth of December: Stories, The Semplica Girl Diaries, p. 110

"Have to do better! Be kinder. Start now. Soon they will be grown and how sad, if only memory of you is testy stressed guy in bad car." Tenth of December: Stories, The Semplica Girl Diaries, p. 112

"But Eva getting older now, this tendency to object on principle starting to feel a bit precious + becoming fundamental to how she views self?" Tenth of December: Stories, The Semplica Girl Diaries, p.140

"In resulting calm, sat on wheelbarrow, had to laugh at situation. Won Scratch-Off, greatest luck of life, quickly converted greatest luck of life into greatest fiasco of life." Tenth of December: Stories, The Semplica Girl Diaries, p. 156

"At that point, I started feeling like a chump, like I was being held down by a bunch of guys so another guy could come over and put his New Age fist up my ass while explaining that having his fist up my ass was far from his first choice and was actually making him feel conflicted." Tenth of December: Stories, Home, p. 187

"It was like either: (A) I was a terrible guy who was knowingly doing this rotten thing over and over, or (B) it wasn't so rotten, really, just normal, and the way to confirm it was normal was to keep doing it, over and over. Years later, at Al-Raz, it was a familiar feeling." Tenth of December: Stories, Home, p. 200

"Based on my experience of life, which I have not exactly hit out of the park, I tend to agree with that thing about, If it's not broke, don't fix it. And would go even further, to: Even if it is broke, leave it alone, you'll probably make it worse." Tenth of December: Stories, My Chivalric Disaster, p. 207

"The twerpy thing was, you never really got to save anyone." Tenth of December: Stories, Tenth of December, p. 219



"He was a father. That's what a father does. Eases the burdens of those he loves. Saves the ones he loves from painful last images that might endure for a lifetime." Tenth of December: Stories, Tenth of December, p. 224

"At this he remembered that the brown spot was as much in his head as ever." Tenth of December: Stories, Tenth of December, p. 248

"She'd been too busy nursing him to notice how scared he was." Tenth of December: Stories, Tenth of December, p. 251



## Topics for Discussion

Discuss the way that Kyle reacts to his dilemma in the story "Victory Lap." What seems to be the key that helps him decide to help Alison? Why is it so hard for him to make this decision?

What do you think the father in the story "Sticks" is trying to communicate through his yard decorations? What is the significance of the new owner throwing the sticks in the garbage heap?

In the story "Puppy," which mother loved her children the most? What characteristics do you use to determine which mother is best?

The story "Escape from Spiderhead" deals with the danger of experimenting with a person's emotions. In what ways are Jeff's emotions manipulated? Do you believe the experimenters intended to push Jeff as hard as they did?

Keeping up with the Joneses is a theme in the story "The Semplica Girl Diaries." In their attempt to be like everyone else, how does this family make their life harder for themselves?

Although the main character in the story "My Chivalric Disaster" does nothing wrong, he makes life more difficult for other characters in the story. He witnesses a rape and cannot keep silent about it even though he knows it will cost him his job. Should he have kept quiet about the crime as well as the bribe to keep quiet or should he have told about the rape?

Robin and Don save each other in the story "The Tenth of December." In what way does this experience give both characters a new lease on life? How does Don's view of his illness change after his near death experience?