

The Twelve Tribes of Hattie Study Guide

The Twelve Tribes of Hattie by Ayana Mathis

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Plot Summary

Hattie flees Georgia in the Great Migration with her mother and two sisters. It is 1923 and Hattie is only fifteen. When she first walks out onto the streets of Philadelphia, she sees the difference freedom makes and vows to never return to the South again. However, she ends up marrying August, with whom life is nothing but poverty, disappointment and endless children. *The Twelve Tribes of Hattie* chronicles her life through the stories of her children up to 1980. The book comprises seven chapters. Each chapter tells the story of one or more of the children but also tells readers more about Hattie.

Hattie's children are: twins Jubilee and Philadelphia, Floyd, Six, Ruthie, Ella, Alice and Billup, Franklin, Bell, and Cassie. She also ends up raising Cassie's daughter Sala. Hattie's first children, the twins Jubilee and Philadelphia, die of pneumonia before they are a year old in 1925. Her next son, Floyd, leaves home to be a jazz musician in 1948 and faces his homosexuality and his weakness. In 1950, Hattie sends her son Six on a revival circuit in the South with his minister after beating a boy nearly to death. He decides to stay on in the South as Reverend Six.

In 1951, Hattie leaves her husband August to run off with her boyfriend, Lawrence, who is the biological father of Hattie's daughter Ruthie. Hattie returns after only a night, unable to leave her children for longer. She and August grimly come to accept their lives together. Three years later, in 1954, Hattie is 46 and pregnant again. She gives birth to her daughter Ella, but times are even leaner and Hattie is struggling to keep her children fed. Her sister, Pearl, is married to a well-off black business man in Georgia and propositions to adopt Ella. After much internal and external conflict, Hattie and August give Ella up to Pearl.

In 1968, Hattie's daughter Alice is married to a black doctor and lives in a big house with servants. She tries to keep Hattie's son Billup her little brother forever — as someone who needs her — but he rebels. He gets a full-time job behind her back and is in a relationship with Alice's maid. Meanwhile Hattie's son, Franklin is destroying his marriage to the love of his life through his gambling and drinking habit. Readers find him in Vietnam grieving his self-destruction.

Twenty years after Hattie's affair with Lawrence, her daughter Bell runs into him. Bell recognizes him immediately and uses a fake name to seduce him. It is half vengeance on her mother and half attraction. At the point that the relationship is on the verge of developing into something more than a sexual one, Lawrence introduces Hattie to Bell and Bell's ruse is up. She doesn't see either of them for years. Ten years later, in 1975, she is willfully dying alone of tuberculosis before her mother comes and saves her.

In 1980, Hattie and August take their oldest living daughter Cassie to a mental asylum because Cassie is hearing voices that bring harm onto herself and her daughter, Sala. Sala, Hattie's granddaughter, is ten. She is torn between her loyalty to her mother and her fear of her sick mother. Hattie is overwhelmed by the emotional needs of Sala and



feels that she cannot raise yet another child. However, when Sala attempts to be “saved” at church, Hattie prevents it, knowing that it is a fraudulent desire. She finds within herself the strength to once again do what is hard to save her children.



Philadelphia and Jubilee

Summary

The Twelve Tribes of Hattie is a story that follows a family that has arrived in Philadelphia during the Great Migration. The book spans more than 57 years from 1923-1980 and three generations. The main character is Hattie, who comes to Philadelphia with her mother and sister when she is 15. Two years after her arrival, she gets pregnant by August and marries him against her mother's blessings. It is a difficult marriage but a prolific one and Hattie ends up having 11 children — 10 of them by August, one out of wedlock with her lover, Lawrence. Hattie gives her last baby, Ella, to her sister, Pearl because she thinks Ella will have a better life. At the end of the book, Hattie is raising one last child, a granddaughter, Sala. The book explores motherhood, fatherhood, mental illness, poverty, and family as it chronicles the lives of Hattie's offspring.

The first chapter tells readers about her baby twins — Jubilee and Philadelphia. It is 1925. Hattie had married August because she is pregnant. Hattie's mother, who had disapproved of Hattie marrying August, has died. Her sisters have both moved back to Georgia. August is training to be an electrician. They are renting in a nice neighborhood with the hopes of buying their own house soon.

The book starts with hope. It starts with the names of the babies, "Philadelphia and Jubilee", in hopes of giving them a new future. The babies are born in June and the robins are singing. Hattie imagines the babies at one, and how they may be tottering around.

However, at seven months, both babies catch pneumonia. Hattie is in a steamy bathroom with them desperately trying to help them breathe. She has been up all night with them. August has also been up feeding the furnace in order to have the hot water for the steam treatment the doctor had recommended. August had not wanted to leave Hattie with the babies to go to work but Hattie had reassured them that the babies were going to be okay.

In this chapter readers learn that Hattie's father was a blacksmith who was shot by two white men in his shop. Hattie had seen her father's body and the white men who shot him. She would never, in all her life, forget what she saw. Thirty-two hours after her father's death, Hattie, her mother, and her sisters fled Georgia. Hattie arrived in Philadelphia full of hope and fear. In the station, she got separated from her family and emerged on the sidewalk of Philadelphia alone. She was overwhelmed by the sound and smell of the big city, but did not see that Philadelphia was any different than Atlanta except in size.

While she waited for her family, however, she witnessed an exchange between a black woman and a white flower vendor. Hattie was mesmerized by the casualness of the



exchange; she noticed the lack of menace of the white flower vendor towards the black woman. When the black woman accidentally upset several vases, Hattie expected the white vendor to explode. There is, however, no explosion.

Then Hattie paid closer attention to the crowd and noticed that the black pedestrians didn't step in the gutter to let the white ones pass them. Four black girls walked and talked casually in a way that only white girls did in Georgia. This is when Hattie decided she was never returning to the South again.

The babies' condition worsen and Hattie runs out of her apartment with them to seek help from a neighbor. The neighbor can only offer more steam and camphor. It becomes quickly evident that this is not enough and the babies will not survive. Hattie is beside herself with grief, but in a last gesture of motherhood, she decides she wants her babies to leave the earth peacefully and murmurs terms of endearment instead of screaming as she feels like doing.

Analysis

This chapter introduces Hattie and her first two children. It also gives readers quick glimpses of August, Hattie's mother, and the community Hattie lives in. It is important Hattie is shown as a happy young mother —full of hope — in this first chapter. Hattie and August are living in a rented apartment in Germantown. However, it is only until they buy a home of their own. With this mention of owning a home, Hattie's greatest desire is revealed. She wants a place where she feels safe to be her truest self, since a home a symbol of safety and protection. In later chapters, a very different Hattie will be presented. A lifetime of disappointment, poverty, and hardship will turn Hattie into an angry and cold mother. This chapter sets up the contrast between who Hattie was and who she becomes. It serves to humanize Hattie, for its firmly established by this chapter that Hattie's bitterness is not a character flaw as much as a consequence of circumstances. This scene sets the stage for the rest of the book. It shows how grief changes people.

Although August is mentioned only briefly, it shows him at his best. Again, this acts to contrast against who he becomes. In this chapter, August stays up all night to tend to his children. He then still goes to work. August did not want to leave his young wife with two sick babies. For the rest of the book, August is a good-for-nothing husband who barely works and spends the money he does earn at the clubs where he goes to cavort with women. This chapter works to complicate August's character. When it is gossiped later that the death of the babies is what destroyed August, there is some evidence to support it.

Although community is not addressed heavily in this book, it still hums as a constant background. In this chapter, Hattie seeks the help of her community twice. Both times, she comes in contact with older woman. Although they cannot save her children, they are warm and nurturing towards her. They come to her aid as best they can and show concern.



This chapter also works to show the depth of Hattie's commitment to live in the North even when things get tough. Since the allure of the South is always intimated, it is important to know why returning to Georgia is not an option for Hattie. In this way, the desperateness of her situation is accentuated. It serves to show a certain integrity in her as well. Hattie will not compromise her freedom even when her physical life becomes unbearably hard in the North. She cannot physically or metaphorically reverse the journey she has taken.

When Philadelphia and Jubilee die, Hattie describes it as drowning. Death by drowning is symbolic of life's struggles. Philadelphia and Jubilee's internal drowning symbolizes the struggles life has in store for Hattie and August.

Discussion Question 1

What does Hattie's choice of names "Philadelphia and Jubilee" reveal about Hattie's attitude towards life at this point?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Hattie remember her father's death while she she is taking care of her sick babies?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Hattie say, "I'll never go back." to her mother about Georgia?

Vocabulary

totter, cholera, scarlet fever, pleurisy, opaque, ipecac, billowed, eucalyptus, laggards, bluing, stoke, slew, radiator, slather, capillaries, thoroughfare



Floyd

Summary

This chapter follows Floyd, the first son Hattie had after the death of the twins. It is the year 1948,. 25 years have passed and a grown Floyd is in the South playing gigs. Readers learn about his longing for Hattie and the tender relationship he has with her. When the chapter opens, Floyd is with a strange woman at a boarding house and boasts of being a womanizer — that they called him “Pretty Boy Floyd” in Philadelphia. The woman’s name is Darla. She wonders aloud why Floyd is living the transient life he leads.

Outside, people are celebrating. Floyd doesn’t know why. He goes out to take a look and is lured by a pretty woman into a parade who offers him corn liquor that he consumes too quickly. He loses the woman and starts to feel claustrophobic surrounded by so much humanity. He finally breaks free of the crowd and finds a tree. He vomits violently. He is startled by a young man named Lafayette who explains to him the celebration is called Seven Days, a tradition with its roots in pagan beliefs. Lafayette also takes Floyd to a pump, from which Floyd drinks gratefully.

Floyd finds himself courting Lafayette as they sit on a bench after he has quenched his thirst. Lafayette makes some sexual advances to which Floyd is amiable. Then Lafayette leads him to a clearing where they have sex. Floyd is hesitant but Lafayette is confident. Some idle chit-chat follows during which time Floyd finds himself wanting to hold Lafayette’s hand, which makes him contemplate what that makes him. They eventually have sex again.

Lafayette, suddenly becomes anxious to leave, but Floyd finds himself wanting to spend more time with Lafayette. He invites Lafayette to the club where he will be playing a gig the next night. Lafayette agrees. Floyd parts overjoyed at the prospect of this date. He even fantasizes about taking off with Lafayette. However, this new feeling forces Floyd to consider his identity and face the past.

The story flashes back to Floyd as a 13-year-old with his friend Carl. They were at Carl’s room when Carl’s mother found them sitting on the bed with Carl’s hands on Floyd. She immediately knew what was going on with them. Floyd ran away and heard the beating Carl was getting from his mother.

Recalling this memory makes Floyd desperate to talk to his mother. He finds a bakery that lets him use a phone for a dollar and he calls Hattie. Floyd asks her what happened to Carl. Hattie replies that she doesn’t know because he moved away.

The next night, Floyd is at the club waiting for Lafayette to show up before he starts. Lafayette shows up, he starts playing, and everything is going well when suddenly a fat drunken man attacks Lafayette. Lafayette defends himself and is kicked out. Floyd



stops playing and realizes that Lafayette was the one that got escorted out and was jeered at for being a homosexual. Lafayette breaks free long enough to look at Floyd. Floyd has an impulse to jump off the stage and come to Lafayette's defense, but weakens and begins to play again.

Floyd's gig is a success and he is taken out later, but in the midst of the celebration, he feels compelled to go out and try to find Lafayette. Outside, he is confronted by a drunk man who was at the gig and accuses Floyd of knowing Lafayette. Floyd does not have the courage to claim Lafayette. Darla reappears. She calls Floyd out on his sexual orientation and attributes his restlessness to it. Floyd denies it. He recognizes his own cowardice and compares himself to Judas in the last sentence of the chapter.

Analysis

First, although briefly, this chapter gives insight into what happened to Hattie in the years soon after the death of the twins, which is where the last chapter ended. It shows a picture of the depression she was in for many years. It is apparent that Hattie that inadequately took care of her young surviving children Cassie and Floyd. However, ironically, Floyd remembers this as a magical time when there was egalitarian companionship between mother and child. Floyd feels comfort in his mother's presence the way he does in no one else's. Readers will learn in future chapters that this feeling is not shared by subsequent children who did not experience the depressed Hattie.

However, the focus of the chapter is on adult Floyd's struggle with his homosexuality. The story spans a period of roughly 24 hours, but in these 24 hours, Floyd goes through a range of emotions and realizations and emerges with a completely different self-identity. Darla — who appears at first to be no more than a prop — has an important role in shaping the story. Darla's observation regarding Floyd's transient lifestyle at the beginning of the chapter foreshadows that Floyd's secret will be revealed by the end of the chapter. Her comment sets the story up.

She appears at the end of the story to tie it together. She articulates Floyd's secret and forces him in a position of taking ownership of his secret or denying it. Floyd denies it, despite Darla's insistence that she does not care about his homosexuality. In other words, it is abundantly clear to the reader that Darla would be a safe person with whom Floyd can begin to be himself. Yet, Floyd is not ready. It is not just threat of physical danger that makes him cling to his secret.

At the same time, Darla's interaction with Floyd highlights the change that has happened within Floyd. In the beginning of the chapter, Floyd is still deep enough in denial that he can fool Darla. By the end of the chapter, his attempt to recreate the same dynamic with Darla rings of hollowness.

Outside, it smells of rotting jasmine. Since jasmine is a white flower that represents love and joy, a reference to the smell of rotting jasmine foreshadows and symbolizes the



potential for Floyd to find love and joy. This reference comes shortly before Floyd meets Lafayette towards whom he quickly imagines a future with.

Lafayette's character acts as a contrast to Floyd's. Lafayette wears a scarlet ascot and does not hide who he is. Floyd finds this appalling at first and wonders how anyone could lack so much common sense. Indeed, violence, scorn, and rejection all befall Lafayette for his refusal to hide who he is. Floyd, who denies his true self, is rewarded with admiration, inclusion, and drinks. Yet, Floyd is full of self-loathing.

Floyd's attraction to Lafayette is symbolic of who Floyd wants to be. He doesn't know Lafayette well. In fact, he doesn't even know Lafayette's last name. However, Floyd fantasizes about running off with Lafayette. This desire reflects his desire to be more like Lafayette. Despite his outwardly disapproval of Lafayette's unwillingness to hide himself, Floyd's attraction to Lafayette shows his desire to embrace his true self.

Floyd aligning himself with Judas at the end of the chapter shows his self-perception as a traitor. He feels that he, like Judas, is too weak to protect the one he loves. He takes on the guilt of society upon his back.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you think Floyd feel so at peace with his mother?

Discussion Question 2

How has Floyd changed by the end of the chapter?

Discussion Question 3

Is Floyd's judgment of himself as Judas justified?

Vocabulary

fumigation, wan, ruckus, beckon, barreled, juju, coiffed, reveler, paunch, lolling, indulge, scorn, flinty, derelict, revulsion, shaft, amber, hayseed, asylum, proprietor, prime

Six

Summary

The third chapter is about Six. The scene opens in a revival tent in the South in 1950. It is two years since Floyd's story. The story unfolds in a series of flashbacks to different times of Six's life.

Chronological to Six's life (although not in the order it is told), the story begins when Six was nine, on the night of his oldest sister Cassie's prom. Hattie had given permission to Cassie to go to prom when a boy asked her because Cassie was college bound. Cassie paid for part of her pale green chiffon dress by cleaning house. That night, Cassie and Bell – his other sister - were making Cassie's hair into curls. Six — who adored and was adored by the two sisters — was acting as their “butler” by doing as they bid him to. The girls filled the bathtub with scalding water. Six sat on the edge of it. In an act of exaggerated chivalry, Six stood to bow — but fell into the tub and burned himself. He was rushed to the hospital in an ambulance where Hattie was told that more than 50% of his body was burned and his survival was tenuous.

Six survived, but with major scars that continue to cause him both physical and emotional pain. The keloids pulled across his body itch and burn. His relationship with his sisters became marred with their guilt. His father stopped spending time with him. Six assumes it's because his father is disgusted by Six' frailty.

There was another boy in the neighborhood that was frail like Six. His name was Avery. He was delicate but healthy so was not spared physical abuse by the other boys. Avery's tactic was to not resist when the boys came after him. Six found this pathetic. One day, Six found Avery picking up the books that the bullies had just knocked down and was provoked to kick away a book that Avery was trying to pick up. The book landed in a puddle. Avery retaliated by telling Six that Hattie was a whore and August wasn't shit. Six thought he would give Avery one punch, but when he was finally dragged away by grown men, Avery was bloody and unconscious.

It was decided by Hattie and the Reverend Grist that Six would go away with him on a tent revival circuit in Alabama to get Six away. Avery's family was angry and there was danger of them killing Six. Six would be gone two weeks — hopefully long enough for things to cool down.

Although Six is not a believer himself, he is overtaken by the spirit during his own sermon. He in turn takes over the congregation in this state. Coral, a congregant sitting in the front row confesses her sins and tells him about her sister who is mysteriously ailing. Six prays with her and when he is done, he comes to. Suddenly shy, he walks out of the tent and hides in a tree.



The next day, word has spread that Six healed Coral's sister. The other ministers are jealous and disallow Six to preach at the revival. Reverend Grist agrees in exchange for Six being allowed to stay on in Alabama with him. However, Rose has heard of how Six healed Coral and seeks him out to heal her mysteriously ailing mother. Since Rose is the pretty girl who had caught Six' eye on the first day of the revival, he agrees to see her mother. Again, after the prayer, Six leaves the building.

Rose finds him in the yard to tell him that he has healed her mother. She takes him to the sofa in the living room. There, they have sex. Presumably, it is Six' first time. Afterwards, Six contemplates his future. He remembers the preachers talking about an assistant pastorship in the town. He decides he will apply for it. He justifies this decision to be a spiritual leader despite his own lack of faith by telling himself that regardless of whether he has a gift or not, he will still bring the people who believe in his powers to God. The chapter ends with Rose whispering Reverend Six over and over.

Analysis

This chapter tells the story of Six's coming of age. He begins as a boy with low self-esteem due to his physical deformity. He is afraid of his mother, estranged from his father, deplored by his peers. He spends his time hiding in the dark small places of his home. His own insecurity causes him to despise Avery who reminds Six of himself. Avery, in turn seems to have a similar reaction to Six and this mutual loathing of the self and each other leads to devastating consequences. It is relevant that his name is "Six". In the bible, Six is the number that symbolizes man, human weakness, evil, and Satan.

At first, Six is homesick and uncomfortable in his new environment. However, the story of Jericho symbolizes the necessity for Six to let go of his past to find his future. In Alabama, Six is hailed as a healer. This reputation gains him the love of a girl he did not dare approach at the beginning of the chapter. He loses his virginity to her.

Until this time, all of Six's thoughts turn to the past. His thoughts are representative of a desire to return to the womb. He longs to be in a fetal position in a space too small for him. First, he longs to return to his mother's home. Then, he longs to return to a time when he was the favored young brother of his beautiful sisters. His thoughts take him further and further back to childhood.

The loss of his virginity is associated with the achievement of manhood. With the loss of his virginity, Six' thoughts turn forward. He begins to plan his future in concrete ways. He decides to apply for a job which will enable him to be self-sufficient. The willingness to apply for a job so far away from his natal home shows the severing of the umbilical cord. There is a clear demarcation. With his first experience with sex, Six becomes a man. In order to do this, however, Six must compromise his integrity. Six loses his innocence in both the positive and negative meaning.



Discussion Question 1

What is Six's perception of Hattie? How is it different from Floyd's? Why are their perceptions so different?

Discussion Question 2

Do you agree with Six' plan to stay in Alabama as an assistant pastor?

Discussion Question 3

Is the use of sex as Six' initiation to manhood a cliché or an effective use of a metaphor? Why?

Vocabulary

keloids stoicism, tribulations, strife, makeshift, frailty, trellis, scarce, chiffon, frothed, entity, claustrophobia, intimation, tangible, convalescence



Ruthie

Summary

Chapter four takes place a year after Six' story. It is about the day Hattie runs off with her lover Lawrence to Baltimore. One morning, August wakes up late and comes to the kitchen for coffee and is confronted by Hattie about using the money set aside to pay the electric bill. They fight and make the baby, cry. When August seeks to comfort the baby, Hattie stops him and tells him the baby is not his. They fight and he storms off.

When he returns to the house hours later, Hattie is gone and she has left a note saying that she has left him and has gone to Baltimore with Lawrence. August, in charge of taking care of the children is unable to feed them even one meal. He cannot find any food or money in the house. Nor does he have any cooking skills. He finds out that none of his children have any survival skills either. Faced with the charge of keeping the children alive without Hattie, he is completely overwhelmed.

When Hattie meets Lawrence with the baby and tells him that she has left August for good, he realizes he has a choice between abandoning her or taking care of her forever. He chooses the latter and makes arrangements to take her to his Baltimore, his hometown. They agree that once they settle down, she will get her other children. Lawrence arranges to rent an apartment for the short-term —until they find a house to buy that is big enough for all of Hattie's children.

However, Lawrence has not been upfront with Hattie about the fact that he makes his living as a gambler. Hattie knows he gambles, but does not know the extent. When they get to Baltimore, he has only a few dollars. His plan is to sneak a visit to the gambling parlor and make enough to pay the rent and feed them. To Hattie, he says that he hardly ever gambles anymore and will quit completely immediately.

Hattie seems dubious about this. It adds to her anxiety about the wisdom of her decision to choose life with Lawrence over life with August. She is pessimistic. Lawrence does not like this. He feels that he needs Hattie to be optimistic for their life to work. Hattie's doubt acts to raise doubt in Lawrence.

Finally, when they get to Baltimore, Lawrence says he has to make a quick stop at the station despite Hattie's pleas to get to the apartment and rest. Lawrence has to make some money gambling, so he tells Hattie it will be just a minute. Hattie insists on getting out of the car and visiting the restroom. It takes Lawrence longer than he expects and when he comes out, Hattie is gone. She has taken the last train back to Philadelphia with the baby.

August cannot believe that Hattie has come back. He is so relieved; he cannot admonish her for leaving him or for having a child with another man. He accepts her



back and even grants her request that the baby be called Ruthie — the name given by Lawrence— instead of the name Margaret, given by August.

Analysis

Chapter four is titled Ruthie—the daughter Hattie had with her lover Lawrence. However, it has nothing to do with Ruthie. The story is told in the limited third person point of view alternating in perspective between Lawrence and August. The reader gets insight into Hattie's thoughts through her dialog with the two men. The reader also sees her body language and actions as they experience it. In this manner intimacy is achieved between the reader and Hattie without ever being in her head.

The reader sees her as she is seen by the men in her life which adds complexity to Hattie as a character. Lawrence and August are both attracted to her proud manner and her strength. Lawrence recalls the first time he saw Hattie and saw that she did not have the "mark of a mule". Mules are bred for labor and symbolizes subservience. Hattie, despite her hard life, never belonged to anyone. At the same time, August and Lawrence, are both uncomfortable with Hattie's capacity for darkness and pessimistic outlook.

Hattie's strength is clearly articulated by the chaos that ensues the minute she leaves. All that Hattie does to keep her children alive becomes evident. It is by experiencing the absence of Hattie with August that the reader feels the impact of Hattie's existence.

Conversely, in Hattie's presence Lawrence experiences Hattie's distress. Hattie cannot be made a fool of again. Hattie is ashamed. Hattie cannot live with her head in the clouds. The reader feels Hattie's fears in the visceral way that Lawrence does.

When Hattie returns to August, there is no illusion that things between the couple will be any different. August will still be irresponsible and Hattie will still be bitter. There is no discussion or pretense of anyone doing better. Yet, they've both come to realize the value and weight of the life they've made together and their strong commitment to it is implicitly reinforced. Nobody is leaving this marriage.

Discussion Question 1

What does Hattie hope to gain by leaving August? What makes her return to him?

Discussion Question 2

Why is Hattie unable to be happy? Is the problem with her, the men around her, or something else completely?



Discussion Question 3

Why does August agree to call the baby Ruthie? Why does the author make it clear that he consented even though Hattie could not see him consenting?

Vocabulary

docile, pragmatically, satchel, incredulous, skittish, downtrodden, elaborate, huddles, ramparts, distraught, quivered, repulsed, intimacies, teated, swaddled.



Ella

Summary

Three years later, it is 1954 and Hattie has had another baby, Ella. Times are even leaner than they ever have been and Hattie has been forced to receive governmental aid. Hattie is demoralized by this, the community shuns her, and the woman sent by the relief office is rude. Life is hard and getting harder.

Her sister Pearl hears about Hattie's struggles through their other sister Marion. Pearl lives in Georgia in a big house. Her husband owns a funeral parlor and is well off. However, Pearl has been unable to have children despite all her efforts. Pearl offers to adopt Ella. Marion comes to be in the position of mediating between Hattie and Pearl.

Hattie is angered by the request. She is even more angered when she finds out that August has communicated behind Hattie's back that he thinks the adoption would be in the best interest of Ella. This culminates in a fight between Hattie and August which comes close to violence. However, through it Hattie comes to realize August's limitation and the impossibility of ever being able to give Ella a better life. With this realization, she decides to agree on the adoption.

It is decided that Pearl and her husband Benny will come and pick up Ella in Philadelphia from Georgia. Pearl is over the moon and has packed a wonderful picnic. Benny does not think of Ella as his child, though. Marital tension is evident in their exchange. It eases a little when they stop for the picnic, but at that moment, they are humiliated and chased off by white men. This brings the tension back between the two as Pearl accuses Benny of cowardice. Nonetheless, Pearl's happiness cannot be dampened for long and by the time she is close to Hattie's house, she is in high form.

Meanwhile, Hattie's heart is breaking knowing it is her last day with Ella. She regrets her decision and fantasizes about running off. August is at work when Pearl and Benny arrive with Marion. Hattie refuses the chestnuts. She also decides she cannot give Ella away and tells Pearl to leave. Pearl is in a panic when August comes home and implores him to talk sense into Hattie. August defends Hattie — surprising Hattie — but does convince Hattie that this pain is not the same as the pain of losing children to death. Hattie finally consents and gives Ella to Pearl. Pearl, Benny, and Ella drive off.

Analysis

This chapter is the heart wrenching story about a mother who must make the difficult decision of keeping her child or giving her up to adoption in hopes of a better life. Hattie's conflicting desires cause a tension that can be felt by the reader. The uncertainty of the situation adds to this tension. Although it is true that Pearl has more material resources to offer Ella, her capacity as a mother is unknowable. She is not painted in a flattering manner and it is hard to have faith in her as a parent. Her capacity



as a human is rather dubious too. For example, Pearl brings chestnuts to Hattie when she picks up Ella. Chestnuts symbolizes fertility and abundance. Pearl sees this as a peace-offering, thus exposing herself to be utterly lacking in empathy. She fails to see that for Hattie this is a day of terrible loss.

In addition to issues with Pearl as a mother, the reader is made to understand that Benny has no intention of considering Ella his child. He and Pearl are not on the same page about many things — including Ella's adoption.

Beyond this, in the background of this chapter's story, readers see the domestic consequences of disempowered men. Benny — despite being a successful business man in his own town — cannot stand up to white men who harass him while he and Pearl are eating a picnic at a public rest stop without risking his life and Pearl's safety. He chooses to kowtow to the men to avoid violence. Pearl feels the sting of humiliation and lashes out at him — thus destroying the marital harmony that was budding with the lovely meal they were enjoying.

August cannot get work to make money to feed his family. Hattie must therefore apply for aid and Ella must be given up for adoption. Hattie feels humiliated, ostracized, and disrespected. She blames August for the fact that Ella must be given up for adoption — it is because August will never do better. In her own despair and anger, Hattie is incapable of seeing that losing Ella torments August just as much as it does her until the end. Only then does she see that August is an ally — a fact that surprises her.

In order to successfully survive a hostile environment, it behooves people to turn towards each other. Unfortunately, it is when one is in a hostile environment when it is hardest to see each other's positive intent. This leads to greater loneliness.

Hattie catches butterflies in a mason jar to amuse Ella while they wait for Pearl. When Ella leaves with Pearl, Hattie smashes the jar against the wall. Butterflies symbolizes soul, transformation, and dreams. This act of destroying the butterflies capture the devastation Hattie feels.

Discussion Question 1

Why did Pearl blame Benny for not standing up for himself?

Discussion Question 2

Why did the community shun Hattie for seeking government aid?

Discussion Question 3

What are arguments for Hattie giving up Ella? Where could be arguments against it?

Vocabulary

trilled, pirouetting, sporadic, hurl, jerry-rigged, emphatic, clasped, hydrangeas, dole



Alice and Billup

Summary

When Alice and Billup were young, they were sent to Thomas' house to be tutored. Thomas molested Billup while Alice was locked inside the parlor. Neither of them ever told anyone else and this secret bonds the two of them and scars them in different ways. Both of them blame Alice for not having told an adult. However, while Billup comes to realize that this is not true and endeavors to move on with his life, Alice cannot let go. She attempts to cope with this guilt by assigning herself as Billup's lifetime caretaker. Her guilt also manifests in delusion of seeing Thomas and finally bringing him to justice — but even in her moment of delusion, she is overtaken by fear and becomes paralyzed.

Alice grows up to marry a black doctor, live in a big house, and have servants. She supports Billup and convinces him he can only work part time. She puts him up in an expensive apartment. She herself does not have any children, not because she cannot but because she has decided not to until she feels her relationship with her husband is better. This is a decision she has not told her husband. The story does not explain what she means by “better” but it is revealed through Alice's conversation with Billup that her husband keeps her heavily medicated.

The story takes place on the day that Alice is hosting a party in honor of Floyd's concert. Her whole family will come to her home. Hattie will come as well, although Alice believes Hattie does not like her. Alice has a list of things she has to attend to — such as getting dressed — but she is obsessed about seeing Thomas again. When Billup comes to visit her, he tells her he has something to talk to her about, but she does not allow him to talk.

Later that day, she finds her efficient and competent maid Eudine in the arms of Billup. Billup explains that they have been together for six months now, he has had a full-time job behind Alice's back, and he has an apartment of his own that he can afford to pay rent himself. Alice is hurt and outraged and threatens to tell Eugene about Thomas. Billup hits her. Eudine intervenes. Much shaken, Billup leaves.

At the end of the day, Eudine tells Alice that it was her last day. Billup comes to pick up Eudine. Alice thinks she sees Thomas again, but Billup points out that it is only her husband Royce. Alice sees the failure of her day and her life and wishes she and Billup were children again and it was them against Thomas.

Analysis

This chapter has the discombobulated feel of a dream sequence which reflects Alice's drugged state. It's a chapter that deals with the theme of unresolved guilt. Alice's guilt about the childhood incident is so crippling that she is unable to move on. This forces



her to perpetually relive the nightmare. This debilitates her and renders her unable to even get dressed.

She continues to fantasize about coming to Billup's rescue the way she most likely fantasized about coming to Billup's rescue as a child. Until she accomplishes this, she needs Billup to stay the little brother that needed rescuing. She is unable to see that it is not possible to resolve the problem in this manner anymore; it would not help Billup to resolve the problem in this manner anymore.

When Billup decides to move on and have a life as an adult, Alice is threatened. She has only lived in the same nightmare for so long, she is unable to envision any other life. The true heartbreak lies in the fact that Alice herself is a victim. Even though she did not experience the molestation first hand, to be locked in the room helpless while you know your younger brother is being molested is just as terrifying. Alice's inability to acknowledge her powerlessness in this situation keeps her stuck in the role she thinks she was supposed to take.

Discussion Question 1

What do you think of Alice' decision to take birth control pills behind her husband's back/?

Discussion Question 2

What do you think will happen to Alice now that Billup has moved on?

Discussion Question 3

What responsibility do Hattie and August have about what happened to Billup?

Vocabulary

knead, foreboding indecipherable, immaculate, granite, foyer, chignon, smirking, sabotage



Franklin

Summary

Eleven years later, in 1969, Franklin is stationed on an island in Vietnam. The rest of his squad is planting mines but he has been relegated to guard because his paranoia has made him unreliable. He keeps imaging danger where there is none and putting everyone in real danger.

When he is not obsessing with non-existent threats, he is obsessing over his failing marriage to Sissy. Sissy is the love of his life but Franklin sabotages his marriage. He has a gambling problem, which leads to a drinking problem, which leads to women problems. All in all, Franklin has been an unreliable partner and provider. Sissy gives him several chances — to no avail. After he is deployed, she moves in with a man who does not gamble their furniture away. While on leave, Franklin visits her and tries to woo her back. He is unsuccessful but they do have sex.

At the time the story takes place, Franklin has just received a letter from Sissy informing him that he has a daughter. She does not know what he will do with that information; nor does she know what she wants him to do with the information. Franklin alternates between wanting to convince Sissy to take him back and having no faith that he is worthy of their love. He struggles to write a letter to Sissy.

Ultimately, he decides that he is incapable of ever becoming a man deserving of their love and that his daughter is better off never knowing him. He would only destroy her life and break her heart the way he did Sissy's. He throws his letter away.

Analysis

The recurring theme of self-loathing common amongst Hattie's children emerges in this story. Floyd, Six, Alice, and Franklin all suffer from it. Franklin cannot muster the strength to overcome his addictions because he does not believe that he is capable of it. He does not have faith in anything. Even the potential of raising a daughter with Sissy is not enough for him to believe in himself.

The theme of mental illness is also recurring. Hattie suffers from depression, Six beat up Avery in an unconscious state, Alice suffers from delusions, and Franklin is suffering from paranoia and addiction.

Franklin continues the tradition of the unreliable male figure. He is not the provider he is supposed to be, he does not have control over his own actions, and he is the constant disappointment of the woman he loves. He resembles his father in this way. Hattie refers to August as the greatest disappointment in her life. Although Sissy does not say this, Her disappointment can be felt through Franklin. It appears that Sissy also loves Franklin but cannot tolerate life with an addict.



This chapter differentiates between Franklin's thoughts about the mission which is in the here-and-now and his reminiscence about Sissy. Italics are used for when he is thinking about the mission. The italics are hard on the eyes to read for a sustained length of time, making it uncomfortable for the reader. When the text turns into normal font, the reader feels a sense of relief. Thus when his thoughts turn to Sissy, Franklin feels relief. However, as the story progresses, the sections about Sissy continue on for an increasing amount of time in italics. By the end, it is all in italics. This shows that towards the end of the story, there is no relief for Franklin. Nothing is safe for him.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Franklin believe he is incapable of being a better human being?

Discussion Question 2

Is the use of italics effective?

Discussion Question 3

What are the benefits of Franklin staying out of Lucille's life? What are the benefits of Franklin being in her life?

Vocabulary

sampan, burgundy, rabid, doting, gizzards, rouge, camisole, cajoled, wager, epaulets, recklessness



Bell

Summary

When Hattie had her affair with Lawrence in 1951, Bell was a teenager. One day, she saw Hattie with Lawrence on the street and saw a side of Hattie she had never seen. Hattie was laughing and happy — unlike the bitter and miserable person she was at home.

Twenty years later, she runs into Lawrence and recognizes him. She was buying a hat at a department store when Lawrence came in to buy his daughter a hat. She approached him and introduced herself as Caroline Jackson from Boston.

Lawrence and Bell had a relationship that Bell controlled to keep it a purely sexual one. She would not go on dates with him but met him only at his home. After four months, however, he suggested they have a real date and Bell was surprised she wanted to. They arranged to meet at Wanamaker's at 6:00. When she arrived, she saw that he was there already waiting with flowers. As she came closer, she noticed that he was talking to someone, but the other person was obscured. When the other person stepped into the aisle, Bell recognized Hattie.

Bell didn't see Hattie or Lawrence after that. Years pass. She starts seeing Walter, and moved into the apartment on Dauphin Street. This estranged her from her sisters because they thought Walter was a criminal and Dauphin the ghetto. Bell thinks that she has always been a woman with base instincts and for that reason Walter was perfect for her because with him she can be as dirty as she wants to be.

Bell works at a dirty bar. The Belmont Lounge where she befriends Evelyn. When Evelyn finds Bell coughing uncontrollably, she takes Bell to a friend who could give her something. The friend turns out to be Willie, an old neighbor from her childhood home who knows her parents. Willie tells her she has tuberculosis and to go see a doctor. She also gives her medicine but Bell throws it away.

Walter leaves and Bell decides to die through neglect. She decides she will lie down, not get up, not eat, not take medicine and one day she will be dead. It is 1975, 6 years after Franklin's story. Bell finds herself craving Hattie's soup despite her best efforts to not want anything.

Eventually, she hears someone calling her name but thinks she is hallucinating. She isn't. Willie had told Hattie and they came to take Bell to the hospital. At the hospital, Bell is under quarantine for a long time but Hattie comes every day.

When the quarantine is lifted, Hattie continues to come every day and sit next to Bell. Bell tries to explain to Hattie why she had betrayed Hattie and Lawrence but Hattie does not want to hear it. Hattie says she has forgiven as much as she can and that she has learned that being angry doesn't serve her. So she has put her anger down.



Hattie invites Bell to live with them in their newly bought house while Bell convalesces. She says August would like it. When Bell asks if Hattie would like it, Hattie changes the subject. The chapter ends with Hattie leaving for the day and Bell feeling panicked - the same panic she felt as a teenager when she thought that her mother would not come back after she left with Lawrence.

Analysis

Once again the theme of self-loathing and guilt return. Bell feels guilty of having deceived both her mother and Lawrence in order to seek vengeance on her mother. She cannot forget the image of her mother looking old, crumpling a paper shopping bag, and crying. She refers to her mother not forgiving her but it is she that does not forgive herself. Due to this lack of self-forgiveness, Bell cannot allow herself anything. She feels only worthy of being with someone like Walter in a dirty apartment, ex-communicated from everyone. She thinks it is fitting that she die alone in a dirty apartment with no one the wiser.

Bell imagines the failing of her lungs to be caused by the moths in them. Moths are symbolic of insanity and self-destruction. Both are themes throughout the book. Bell suffers from both tendencies.

Bell believes she pursued Lawrence as an act of vengeance. What Bell was seeking vengeance for is never explicitly discussed but she mentions being jealous of the happiness Lawrence evoked in her mother. Perhaps Bell felt vengeful towards Hattie for withholding her own happiness from her children.

Yet, it is not clear if Bell's goal was actually vengeance. Bell is clearly attracted to Lawrence from the beginning. It is noted that she keeps trying to convince herself that she is not interested in him, but the sheer effort it is requiring to stay disinterested is proof of her attraction. It is wasted effort in any case because ultimately she is happy to start a true romance with Lawrence.

Hattie is once again the mother who does everything to keep her children alive. It is Hattie's way of loving her children, as she herself explains. Life being as hard as it is and resources being as slim as they are, this is no small task and nothing to dismiss. Yet, for the children, it is somehow not enough. Physical survival is not enough. Ultimately, it seems that the lack of anything beyond providing the bare physical needs seems to not ensure long-term survival. Hattie's children are struggling to survive in their adulthood not for lack of physical resources but for lack of self-love.

Discussion Question 1

What is Bell seeking vengeance for when she seduces Lawrence? From whom is she seeking vengeance?



Discussion Question 2

How does Hattie show her maternal love?

Discussion Question 3

Bells says that people say she is like Hattie. Do you think so?

Vocabulary

rigors, grimace, husk, hallucination, commotion, ferocious, quarantine, cowardice



Cassie and Sala

Summary

It is 1980, five years after Bell's story. Cassie and her daughter Sala are living with Hattie and August in the home they finally own in Jersey. It is a small two bedroom home with a small yard. Cassie is hearing voices. She calls them the Banshees. They tell her to do terrible things that harm herself and Sala. They also tell her to do things that destruct the home and say things that hurt people's feelings. Cassie does not want to do as they say and fights furiously but loses.

The Banshees tell Cassie that her parents lie to her, poison her food, and are trying to harm her. As an antidote to her parents poison, Cassie looks for the right plants in the yard. She digs up the whole yard, then chops up the roots furiously without eating or allowing Sala to eat with her parents.

Sala is ten and loves her mother. She is torn between her loyalty to her mother and her fear of her mother when the Banshees start talking to her. She does not want her mother when she is having her fit but she does not want her mother to be taken away.

Hattie, decides to get Cassie care. She tells Cassie that they are taking her to a doctor's appointment. Cassie does not believe her but gets in the car. August is driving and Hattie is sitting in the passenger seat. Hattie had intended for Cassie to be gone before Sala came home from school but had forgotten that it was a half day for Sala. She comes home just as the car is pulling away. Hattie noticed but did not tell August because he would have wanted to stop the car.

In the car, the Banshees tell Cassie to tell Hattie that she never loved anything. She refuses and fights it. She thinks she has won, but she had whispered it. Hattie hears and stiffens. Then the Banshee tells Cassie to open the door and jump out. When the car is stopped on the freeway because of the heavy traffic, Cassie opens the car door and rolls onto the ground. She runs off into the ditch where she hears a kitten dying. The Banshees scream at her to keep running but Cassie does not want the kitten to die alone. While she is tending to the kitten's death bed, the police and paramedics catch-up to her and she is taken to the mental hospital in an ambulance.

Sala faints at school the day after Cassie leaves and is sent home. Hattie nurses her but has not the capacity to comfort Sala when she begins to cry. Hattie wonders at how she is so old and still taking care of sick and sad children. She does not think she has it in her to raise one more.

On Sunday, Sala is well enough to go to church. August has found faith in his old age, which Hattie sees as another sign of his weakness. She views it as August seeking solace in the easy places yet again. Hattie started going because August asked her to



and found to her surprise that she enjoys the solace and fellowship the church offers her. She is not a believer in a benevolent God, however, so she sees herself a fraud.

Sala also does not believe. Yet, when the preacher asks for those who want to be saved to come up, she has so much yearning for some kind of love that she steps into the aisle. Hattie intervenes. When the preacher asks if Sala accepts Jesus as her savior and Sala says yes. Hattie goes up and pulls Sala away. She will not allow her granddaughter to be a fraud. Hattie realizes that if this gets her ostracized by the church and she has to give up the fellowship, she is still not too old to make another sacrifice. She goes one step beyond that and tries her best to awkwardly offer Sala tenderness as well.

Analysis

First, the obvious mental illness theme that has been building up reaches a crescendo with Cassie's story. Of all the children, Cassie, who was college bound in Six' story is a single mother with a debilitating mental illness. Once again, it is Hattie who does what she needs to do to try to save her child. She describes August as someone who always takes the easy way. Hattie, on the other hand, does not. She is willing to make the hard decision if it is in the best interest of the child. She let Six go to the revival circuit to save him from Avery's family. She came back to August to keep her children alive. She let Ella go in hopes of a better life for her. She went to nurse Bell despite her broken heart. Now, she sends Cassie to a mental health institute and takes over the care of her granddaughter.

In every story, it is evident that Hattie's strength as a mother is her grit and will to keep her children alive. Her weakness is her inability to be tender with anyone. Pearl describes her as hard to love. Hattie herself is aware of this and addresses it in this story. She defends herself by saying that it took all her love to keep them alive.

In the last scene, the reader sees a new Hattie, however. Although it does not come easily for her, she realizes that she must make effort to give Sala tenderness: physical care alone is not enough to keep children alive. The book closes on the image of Hattie roughly patting Sala's back. In this way, the book that starts with hope comes full circle and ends with hope.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Hattie pat Sala on the back at the end of the story? What does it signify about the future?

Discussion Question 2

Hattie is well aware of her children's perception of her as a hard mother. What is her explanation for her lack of tenderness?



Discussion Question 3

What do you think about August as a character? How do you think his children view him as opposed to Hattie? Do you think the children would agree with Hattie's assessment of how they view him?

Vocabulary

reverence, divine, sanctuary, feigned, fellowship, solace, shrillness, shirr, articulated, rigid.



Characters

Hattie

Hattie is the main character. She was born and raised in Georgia. Her father was a blacksmith and her family lived in a house on the hill until two white men from town came and shot Hattie's father in his shop. Thirty-two hours later, Hattie, her mother, and her two sisters fled Georgia to Philadelphia in 1923. Hattie was fifteen.

In Philadelphia, Hattie meets August and dates him behind her mother's back. When she gets pregnant the two marry, breaking her mother's heart. They rent an apartment in a nice neighborhood with hopes of buying a place of their own soon. August is training to be an electrician. The summer the twins are born is full of green grass, singing birds, and sunshine. Hattie is so happy, she can't stop giggling.

When the twins are seven months, they die of pneumonia. All the hope and promise that Hattie felt with the birth of her twins dies with them. Her life with August proves to be full of disappointment, anger, and poverty. August abandons regular work and is constantly sleeping around with other women. The children keep coming, though, and Hattie is an exhausted mother desperately trying to keep her family fed on the little her husband does bring home.

In her forties, Hattie has an affair with Lawrence and has a daughter with him. At one point, she tells August and leaves him to live in Baltimore with Lawrence. However, as soon as she gets to Baltimore, she gets on a train back to Philadelphia and returns to her home, her children, and August. Her relationship with August does not change but she comes to a grim realization that she cannot run away from the life she has made with him and the family she has created with him.

Her children view Hattie as a cold and angry mother. Hattie is aware of this perception her children have of her. Her defense is that it took all her energy to keep them alive... and keeping her children alive is a way of loving too.

With age, however, Hattie mellows. She finds that anger has not served her well in life and learns to let it go. She continues to fight fiercely to keep her children alive, however, as is evidenced when she comes to the rescue of Bell — the daughter from whom she had been estranged for a decade.

August

August is Hattie's husband and the father of ten of her children. He also comes from Georgia, like Hattie. However, August grew up in poverty, unlike Hattie — who grew up in a house on the hill. The inability to effectively talk about the class difference in their origin creates a tension that pervades their marriage.



At the beginning of the story, August is a dedicated family man. He stays up all night to tend the furnace so Hattie can administer the steam treatment the doctor recommended for his twin babies who have pneumonia. When morning comes, he doesn't want to leave Hattie alone with the babies. However, he goes to work after staying up all night to support his family. He is training to be an electrician.

The death of the twins devastates him. He gives up his training and his calling to be a dedicated family man. He works sporadically and only gives some of the money to Hattie to manage the home. He spends the rest on nice clothes for himself, or going to the clubs where he seduces other women. He is a constant disappointment to Hattie.

His defense is the Hattie is so hard to be around and gives him such little affection, he turns to other women for some gentleness. He thinks that if Hattie would show even a little warmth, he could turn himself around. He does not see why Hattie finds him so deplorable since he doesn't do any worse than most men.

He loves babies, though. No matter how tight they are on money, he is always happy to hear that Hattie is pregnant. This is something that Hattie both appreciates and is enraged by. He also shows the children the affection that Hattie doesn't. According to Hattie, the children light up around him because of this.

However, the day Hattie leaves him to go to Baltimore with her lover Lawrence it becomes abundantly clear to him and the children that August is completely incapable of keeping the children alive. He is unable to feed the children even one meal or to comfort them in any way. When Hattie returns, he is relieved, he cannot turn her away as he imagines he should.

Towards the end of the book, Hattie explains August's new found faith by explaining that August always takes the easy way. This succinctly summarizes August's life. He has the warmth that Hattie is missing but he does not have the grit to do what needs to be done.

Floyd

Floyd is Hattie's oldest son who leaves Philadelphia to play jazz in the South. In Georgia, he meets Lafayette who forces Floyd to confront his own homosexuality and his cowardice about it.

Six

Six is sent by Hattie on a revival circuit to the South with his minister because he has run into trouble at home. There, he is credited for healing women with mysterious ailments — and even though he is not a believer himself — he becomes Reverend Six and does not return home.



Ruthie

Ruthie is the love child between Hattie and her lover Lawrence.

Ella

Ella is the daughter Hattie gives up to her well-off but childless sister Pearl so that Ella can have a better future.

Alice

Alice is Hattie's daughter who grows up to marry a black doctor and lives in a big house with servants. Her primary goal in life is to keep her little brother Billup dependent on her. She suffers from paranoia stemming from abuse that happened to Billup as a child.

Billup

Billup is Hattie's son. He was dependent on his sister Alice for many years but comes to see that the dependence is something his sister insisted upon to assuage her own guilt about not being able to protect him as a child when he was being sexually abused by their tutor. He begins a relationship with Alice's competent maid Eudine, gets a full-time job, and moves into an affordable apartment, much to his sister's distress.

Franklin

Franklin is Hattie's son. He marries the love of his life but sabotages his marriage by gambling and womanizing. He obsesses over this relationship and his personal failings while stationed overseas. He suffers from paranoia during his deployment and endangers the lives of himself and others.

Bell

Bell is Hattie's daughter and witnessed Hattie with her lover Lawrence as a teenager. Twenty years later, she runs into Lawrence, recognizes him, hides her identity, and seduces him. Bell is estranged from Hattie when her treachery is revealed. She doesn't see Hattie again for ten years until Hattie finds out through the grapevines that Bell is dying of tuberculosis and comes to save her.



Cassie

Cassie had a promising future as a high school student but ends up with a crippling mental illness that endangers both herself and her daughter Sala. Hattie checks Cassie into a mental hospital and takes over the care of Sala.

Sala

Sala is Cassie's daughter and Hattie's granddaughter. Hattie takes over her care after Cassie is admitted to a mental hospital.

Pearl

Pearl is Hattie's sister who lives in Georgia. Her marriage to a well-to-do business man is rocky and childless. When she hears of Hattie's struggles, she propositions Hattie and August about adopting their youngest daughter Ella.



Symbols and Symbolism

Jasmine

Jasmine is a fragrant, white flower. It represents love and joy. “Rotting jasmine” represents the ruin of young Floyd’s potential to find love and joy because of society’s rejection of homosexuality and his rejection of his own self.

mule

The mule is an animal bred for labor, hence symbolizes subservience. In the chapter about Ruthie, Lawrence says that he thinks that not being anybody’s mule is the most important thing in life and that he has accomplished that. His primary attraction to Hattie is that despite having so many children she has managed to stay her own independent person.

death by drowning

Death by drowning is symbolism for struggling with life. Hattie describes Jubilee and Philadelphia’s final moments as drowning, and with their death, her life takes shape as a constant struggle. Later, when she attempts a new beginning with Lawrence, she tells him the story about her cousin drowning. Hattie had witnessed it, thinking he was playing, not knowing he was drowning. She tells Lawrence, “Drowning doesn’t look how you think it would.” Hattie’s fear that what looks like a jubilant new life is only the beginning of more struggle.

House

A house is symbolic of a private space where you are safe to be your unguarded self. Hattie’s one desire is to own a house. From the first page, this desire is articulated. She was raised in a house on the hill and her life was altered the day she was banished from it. The house is also symbolic of a womb, so her desire to buy a house is symbolic of her desire to return to the womb — the original haven. One recurring marital issue is that August keeps spending the money she has managed to save for a down payment. Hattie cannot buy a house and so cannot feel safe to allow herself to be vulnerable.

Journey

Journey is symbolic of growth and self-awareness. Hattie, Floyd, Six, Pearl, and Franklin all take a physical journey. In her first trip to Philadelphia, she realizes her need for freedom. Floyd is faced with his own desires and fears. Six finds that he's willing to compromise his integrity for a way to feel accepted. Pearl faces her own disdain



towards her husband for being a black man who cannot protect her honor. Franklin faces the fact that he will never have the strength to be the man he needs to be to return to his wife and daughter. Hattie, in traveling to Baltimore comes to accept that she cannot escape the life she has made with August.

Jericho

Jericho was the first city the Israelites had to conquer in order to begin their new life in the Promised Land. It was surrounded by a wall that the Israelites found insurmountable, until God assured them this was not the case. It is symbolic that Six chose this as the topic of his first sermon, for he too had to find a new life. He had been banished from his old life but there seemed no way through the wall to a new life.

Judas

Judas is known as the apostle who betrayed Jesus. The traditional version sees him as having hung himself after the betrayal. Judas is often invoked to symbolize a back-stabber. Floyd's thought that he should hang himself like Judas shows his own self-image as a traitor.

Six

In the bible, Six is the number that symbolizes man, human weakness, evil, and Satan. Six describes his fits as the same as being possessed. He does not ever believe that he is experiencing divination. He eventually decides to embrace the people's perception for the sake of a bearable lifestyle. However, readers learn through the comments of his family member that the life he leads thereafter is far from holy.

Moths

Moths and butterflies have both positive and negative symbolism. They can symbolize souls, transformation, and dreams. When Hattie is getting ready to give Ella away to Pearl, she catches two butterflies in a mason jar, to symbolize the life the Ellas could have if released from the poverty of life in Philadelphia. After Ella is gone, Hattie smashes the mason jar, trapping the butterflies in the broken glass. Choosing the word moth as opposed to butterflies shows an inclination towards the negative symbols, for moths can symbolize self-destruction and insanity. Both are evident in the stories about Hattie's children and certainly in Bell's story. Bell's image of her coughs being caused by moths in her chest symbolizes her own self-destructive behavior to not seek medical help for her tuberculosis. It also may hint at Bell's literary inclination. August described Bell as the daughter who was always reading; the daughter who left books of poetry lying around.

chestnuts

Chestnuts are symbolic of fertility and abundance. When Pearl comes to pick Ella up, she picks up chestnuts on the way as a present for Hattie. She also wonders if Ella has ever seen chestnut trees. Pearl sees the day as the end of her infertility. This day is seen by all as the day that ends Ella's hunger and poverty. However, Hattie does not accept the chestnuts because for her it is not a day to celebrate. It is a day of loss.



Settings

Hattie and August's apartment

This story opens in Hattie and August's apartment in Philadelphia. They live in Germantown — a nice neighborhood. They moved in here when they got married as a temporary place to be until they bought a place. Here, their twin babies died and they went on to raise ten more babies. They sent their last child to Georgia to be adopted by Hattie's sister, Pearl.

Georgia

Floyd's story takes place in Georgia, where he is playing a gig. He meets Lafayette, and fantasizes about running off to New Orleans with him. Floyd invites Lafayette to his show and imagines that after the show, he will proposition Lafayette and they will take off. However, in the middle of the show, a man harasses Lafayette for being gay. Lafayette hits him and is escorted out of the club. Floyd does not have the courage to stand-up for Lafayette or to run after him. After the show, he is frantic to find Lafayette, but is confronted by another man who accuses him of associating with Lafayette. Floyd denies it. He knows then that he does not have the courage to find Lafayette or be true to his feelings.

Alabama

Six's story takes place in Alabama where he is on a revival circuit with his minister. He is giving a sermon when he is overtaken by the Spirit. He heals a woman of an unknown ailment and is approached by a woman in a yellow dress to do the same for her mother. Even though Six himself is not a believer, he decides that he will stay in this town and be Reverend Six. In this way, another child of Hattie returns to the South where she vowed never to return again.

Baltimore

When Hattie decides to leave August, Lawrence takes her and their daughter Ruthie to Baltimore. The plan is to find a place large enough for Hattie to bring all her kids too. However, Hattie does not know that Lawrence' source of income is through gambling. When they get to Baltimore, Lawrence has no money and has to find a way to get some without Hattie finding out. They stop at the train station where the gambling room is. Lawrence tells her he will be right back and Hattie decides to use the woman's room. It takes Lawrence longer than he expects. By the time he is looking for Hattie again, she has gotten on the last train back to Philadelphia.



Alice's Big House

Alice has married a black doctor and lives in a big house with servants. She has no children. She lives half an hour from where she grew-up, but she never visits her parents. Her family visits her and makes comments about how a single hand towel could pay the rent. Her primary obsession is in keeping her younger brother dependent on her. Her husband gives her pills to keep her sedated.

Vietnam

Franklin is deployed to a little island. His paranoia has become a concern amongst his troop so he has been relegated to guarding the bay while the others plant mines. He spends his time imagining that he sees movement when there isn't any and obsessing over how to reclaim his ex-wife and daughter he hasn't met. He ultimately comes to the awareness that he does not have it within him to become the man he needs to be to deserve the love of those he loves.

Bell's Apartment on Dauphin Street

Bell's apartment is shabby and dirty. She has decided to die here alone by not taking medication to help her illness or eating. She can't help craving soup, though. She contemplates her relationship with her last boyfriend Walter and her relationship with Hattie's boyfriend Lawrence twenty years after Hattie. She was exposed of her intentional betrayal of both Lawrence and Hattie and does not see them again. It is, however, Hattie who hears about Bell's slow suicide and comes to save her. They had been estranged for ten years. Bell is taken to a hospital and Hattie visits her every day, even when she is in quarantine.

Hattie and August's House in Jersey

Hattie finally gets her house. It is a small two bedroom house with a yard. Cassie and her ten-year-old daughter live with them here. Cassie is tormented by voices in her head she calls the Banshees that tell her to do terrible things... including digging up the yard in search of the antidote to the poison her parents are giving her. Hattie and August admit Cassie into a mental hospital and take over the care of Sala.



Themes and Motifs

Motherhood

Motherhood is an obvious theme in *The Twelve Tribes of Hattie* since central to the story is the fact that Hattie is the mother of many children. The book is structured to tell the story of each of her children in a way that reveals how Hattie is a mother to them. Some chapters, although titled after the name of a child is not about the child at all. For example, “Ruthie” and “Ella” are not at all about Ruthie or Ella but about decisions that Hattie makes as their mother.

Hattie’s motherhood is portrayed in many ways. It begins with the joyful mother of Philadelphia and Jubilee. She revels in her children and dreams of seeing them grow-up. Then she is the mother who is desperately trying to save her children’s lives. When her children are dying in her arms, she still thinks of them first... wanting her voice to be the last thing they hear.

After the twins’ death, Hattie is deeply depressed. Floyd and Cassie are born, but she cannot care for the adequately. They grow up largely unattended. Despite understanding that they were neglected as children, Floyd looks back on this time with his mother fondly. He remembers feeling united with his mother as companions and continues to view their relationship in this light.

Although the story does not explicitly demarcate the time when Hattie emerged from this debilitating depression, it can be assumed that this state eventually came to an end. Six views his mother as someone who has a strong will. He fears her displeasure and spends a great amount of effort hiding from her. However, when the threat of physical danger befalls him, she does what she can to protect him. She sends him away, back to the South — a place she swore she would never return to.

From this point on, it is clear that Hattie has the ability to make difficult decisions to protect her children. She leaves her lover to return to her children, she gives Ella away so she can have more opportunities, she nurses Bell back from certain death (despite their decade long estrangement), she admits Cassie to a mental hospital, she takes over the care of her granddaughter, Sala, and does not allow Sala to sacrifice her integrity in the name of religion. She has also managed to feed them and keep them alive despite never having much.

Hattie has lost her tenderness, however. Six is scared of her. Alice does not think Hattie likes her. Ella thinks she is mean, and Sala is not comforted by Hattie. Hattie is aware of her children’s perception of her and her inability to address their emotional needs. Feeding them requires so much of her, there is precious little left over. At least that is what Hattie argues.



Yet, is feeding children enough to ensure their survival? Many of Hattie's children are plagued with self-doubt and mental illness. To what extent is Hattie accountable for that?

Regret

After the death of the twins, Hattie and August's marriage falls apart. Hattie regrets her marriage, considers it the greatest mistake of her life. She regrets not having listened to her mother. She regrets the life of poverty August brings upon her. She regrets not having thrown herself in the river after the twins died. She regrets her physical need for August that results in children; she regrets all the children she had except for the ones that were taken from her. Regarding Philadelphia and Jubilee, she regrets that she did not have penicillin to save them.

To counter this regret, Hattie runs off with her lover, Lawrence, to Baltimore. She regrets this decision immediately. Even before she is aware of her regret, she worries about her regret. "I couldn't stand to be made a fool a second time." She says to Lawrence. She ends up unable to spend even a night away from home and takes the last train back to Philadelphia from Baltimore, regretting that she ever left.

Hattie is not the only one with regrets. Floyd regrets his cowardice. He fantasized about leaving for New Orleans with Lafayette. However, when Lafayette is dishonored at the club where he came to see Floyd, Floyd did not have the courage to defend him. He sees himself as a Judas that should hang himself.

Six sustains terrible burns the night of Cassie's prom. Six was acting as her helper when he accidentally fell into the tub full of scalding hot water. Cassie regrets her vanity that led to such a disaster. Six, in turn, regrets beating a boy to a pulp unaware. He only meant to punch the boy once for disrespecting his parents, Hattie and August. The boy had called Hattie a whore and August a nothing.

Franklin regrets destroying his marriage to the love of his life. He had wooed and won Sissy, but was unable to keep his gambling under control. He finds out he has a daughter now but doesn't believe he has the strength to do right by either Sissy or his daughter.

Alice regrets not saving Billup from the abuse inflicted on him by their childhood tutor. This regret manifests in her delusional sightings of the abuser and her insistence on keeping Billup dependent on her. Her regret leads not only to mental instability but also to the demise of her relationship with Billup.

Bell regrets the treacherous love affair she had with her mother's lover Lawrence. She saw him twenty years after the end of her mother's affair with him and recognized him. She used a fake name to get close to him. Her deception was revealed when Lawrence introduced her to Hattie. This led to her estrangement from both her mother and Lawrence and a despair so deep that she ultimately decides she does not want to continue living any more.



Mental Illness

Mental Illness is a theme that continues throughout the book. First, Hattie's depression after the death of her twins is touched upon. According to Floyd, when he and Cassie were little, Hattie was unable to get up, get dressed, or feed the children.

Six is plagued by fits. When another boy insults Hattie and August, Six proceeded to beat the boy to a pulp. Six is unaware of what he is doing. By the time he "came to" the boy was severely injured. Six has no recollection of the fight. Although he is not a believer, Six is also prone to be overtaken by "the Spirit" and give sermons he can barely remember after the fits have passed.

Franklin, on duty in Vietnam, is not allowed to plant the mines like the rest of his troops because he is prone to paranoia. He always imagines danger where there is none. Franklin is aware that the others think he is crazy.

Alice is being sedated by her medical doctor husband. She is prone to paranoia. Her youngest brother Billup was molested as a child and she was witness to it happening. She never told an adult and so her adult life has been focused on absolving her guilt.

Bell is apathetically suicidal. When her boyfriend of two years moves out, she decides she will die alone in her apartment by not eating or taking the medication that will help her get better. She is near death by the time Hattie finds out through the grapevines that Bell is sick and comes to her rescue.

Cassie is admitted to the mental hospital for listening to the voices in her head. She calls them "the Banshees", and they tell her to do terrible things. For example, they tell Cassie not to feed herself or her daughter Sala.

Self-loathing

Self-loathing is a recurring theme amongst Hattie's children. It comes up in Floyd's story. At first Floyd is a cocky womanizer. He boasts of his nickname "Lady Boyd Floyd". Even when he meets Lafayette, his self-hatred is not apparent. Only when he remembers Carl do readers start seeing it. As the story progresses, his integrity is increasingly challenged and he finds time and time again that he cannot rise to the occasion. At the end of his story, he thinks that he should hang himself like Judas.

Six' story goes the other direction. He starts out with self-loathing. He spends his time trying to hide and despising Avery because he identifies with him. He feels shunned by his father, pitied by his sisters, and deplored by his peers. He cannot even find solace in the presence of his mother who is annoyed that he spends so much at home. However, by the end of the story, in the inverse of Floyd, his confidence increases in proportion to the denouncement of his integrity. He is rewarded, in fact for abandoning his integrity.



Franklin marries the love of his life but then sabotages it over and over again with bad habits. When he finds out he has a daughter, he is torn between wanting to become a better man and staying out of her life. Ultimately, his self-loathing is such that he decides he is not capable of being deserving her his wife and daughter's love.

Alice is shouldering guilt from not protecting Billup when they were children. She fails to see that she herself was child and not responsible for Billup's safety. This guilt cripples her and results in self-loathing. This self-loathing manifests in the way she treats others and in the way she allows her husband to treat her. Her husband sedates her with medication instead of addressing her issues and she talks down on people. She also tries to keep Billup under her control behind the guise of "taking care" of him.

Bell seduces her mother's old lover and then is ridden with guilt. The guilt makes her loathe herself so much that she chooses to be with a man who she knows doesn't care about her or anyone else and live in a dirty apartment. Then, when the man leaves, she decides she'll just let herself expire.

Hope

The book starts with the names of Hattie's children Philadelphia and Jubilee. Although the babies die within the year, Hattie named them full of hope for a better life that is different from their history. She wanted names that weren't already on tombstones in the South, names that weren't connected to a sad past, names that weren't burdened with disappointment. Even the way the names sound is hopeful. They both rise up at the end.

The story actually follows the sounds of the names Philadelphia and Jubilee. Both dip down in the middle and then rise up. The book dips down in the middle and then rises up too. Each story has its rise and fall but ultimately the last story ends on a hopeful note.

Floyd's story does not rise up in the chapter that he is the main character. However, in Alice and Billup's story it is implied that he has become a successful musician. Also, even though his chapter ends with him contemplating the lack in his character, it is clear that Floyd is at a moment of self-reflection that he can't turn back from. He stared at the abyss and jumped in. This may lead to hard times, but there is also hope that eventually he comes out with a better integrated self.

Billup too, seems to have found himself. Bell knocks on death's door and is saved by her mother. Ella may indeed have been given a better life. Alice flirted with self-reflection. Next time she may jump in. Franklin may reach rock bottom and come back up. Cassie may be healed.

Each of the stories dip down and remain unresolved. Anything can happen. It may swing back up. The end of the book is ever hopeful. Hattie finds in herself strength she didn't know she had to save her granddaughter. She also finds the grace to give her the

tenderness Sala so desperately needed. Perhaps even though her children are grown, the development of Hattie's tenderness may still save them all.



Styles

Point of View

The point of view changes from chapter to chapter since each chapter follows the story of a different character. The first chapter is third person limited, following Hattie's thoughts. This is important since the reader needs to feel empathy for Hattie and understand why she becomes the person she is. However, because it is not first person, the reader also gets insight into things that Hattie might not be aware of. One example of this is when the reader learns the intention of the neighbor who refuses to let Hattie be alone in watching her children die.

The second chapter follows Floyd in third person limited. The reader is privy to Floyd's shifting feelings of denial, joy, fear, and shame. At the same time, the reader is also able to see Floyd's physical demeanor from a distance. For example, "Floyd frowned down at his shoes." This would be difficult from a first person perspective.

The third chapter, titled, "Six", is third person limited from Six' perspective. This POV gives insight into Six' changing view of himself. It is important for the reader to know Six' interior thoughts since he is a child at the beginning of the chapter but is an adult with a girlfriend and job prospects by the end of the chapter. At the same time, the third person perspective allows the reader to see how Six attempts to constantly make himself invisible.

The chapter titled "Bell" and "Alice and Billup" use the same point of view as the first three chapters towards the same end, except that the chapter titled "Alice and Billup" only follows Alice's perspective.

The chapters named after Ruthie and Ella — two baby girls— follow the perspective of the adults around them in third person limited. Despite the titles, these chapters are not about these girls at all. The limited perspective shifts from one adult to another but does not become omniscient. Even though the reader gets different interpretations of a situation through the eyes of the different characters, all perspective is given equal credibility.

The chapters that follow Franklin and Cassie are in first person. Both Cassie and Franklin suffer from paranoia. The first person point of view's inability to zoom out at all gives the slightly claustrophobic feeling appropriate for their state of mind.

Language and Meaning

Throughout the book, Hattie's children continually mention the fact that they speak "too proper". They are embarrassed by it and often go out of their way to hide it. August and Lawrence both mention the fact that Hattie herself is extremely proper and speaks as if



she went to boarding school. The reader can assume that the children gained their way of speech from Hattie.

For this reason, it does not feel out-of-place that the majority of the book is written in a literary voice with many metaphors. Even though the language is uniform throughout in “properness”, certain characteristics distinguish one character’s voice from another. For example, Bell’s story is punctuated with “Ha!”

The use of dialog brings in variety in language. People outside the family tend to speak in a less florid manner with a stronger dialect. Also, because August comes from a humbler background than Hattie, when he speaks or thinks, the language is simpler.

Since this is a deeply emotional book, the author employs poetic language to evoke feelings both positive and negative. For example, on the first page of the story, Hattie’s happiness is shown through a description of the outside: “At the end of June, robins beset the tress and roofs of Wayne Street. The neighborhood rang with birdsong. The twittering lulled the twins to sleep and put Hattie in such high spirits that she giggled all of the time.” The use of alliteration adds buoyancy to this description. The author sets in place the sounds for r, b, t and s in the first sentence and brings these sounds over and over again.

Structure

The novel is written as a series of interconnected short stories. Each story follows one or more of Hattie’s children — although not necessarily from their perspective. Although readers come to know the children, readers also come to know more about Hattie and August through the stories. There are seven chapters of varying length. The title of each chapter tells the reader whose story is going to be told and what year the story takes place. The stories are told in chronological order. This makes it easy for the reader to place the story in context with the other stories. Within each chapter are flashbacks that reveal backstories. Also, many of the stories happen over the span of a day.

There is little connection shown between the siblings except that at one point they lived in the same house. Except for the chapter about Alice and Billup, the reader hardly sees them interact with each other. Once in a while a sibling is mentioned by another, but mostly it is only Hattie who is referred to.

Each story has a plot of its own and there is no overarching plot to the novel. The enduring desire explicit from beginning to end is Hattie’s dream of owning a home. However, her quest for a house is only mentioned in passing. It is never the subject of the stories. When she does finally own a house in the last chapter, it is just a fact. It is not discussed as an emotional event.

Although there is no overarching plot, there is a pervasive message. The loss of the twins so early in Hattie’s and August’s marriage caused a grief so deep; it impacted the lives of the children and grandchildren who came after. None seemed to have come out

of it unscathed. Ending the book with the young granddaughter, however, leaves room for hope.



Quotes

Until we find a house of our own.

-- Hattie (Philadelphia and Jubilee paragraph 1)

Importance: This is what Hattie says to August when they are first married and moved into the rented house on Wayne Street. This expresses a desire that is a driving force of the book, so it is noteworthy that Hattie says this to August in the beginning of the book and their marriage.

Mama," said Hattie. "I'll never go back. Never.

-- Hattie (Philadelphia and Jubilee paragraph 27)

Importance: This quote is important because it shows Hattie's commitment to freedom. It foreshadows that life in Philadelphia will not be easy and that it will not be easy to live here. There will surely be times of nostalgia and times of temptation. However, if Hattie does go back, it will be a significant event. Later on, when times are hard and Hattie does not return to the South as her sisters did her integrity is demonstrated.

They were companions, mother and children, equally vulnerable and yearning, drifting through the days together. Even now that Floyd was a grown man, there was an understanding between him and his mother, and Hattie was the only person in the world with whom Floyd was serene.

-- Narrator (Floyd paragraph 15)

Importance: This quote shows the impact the grief of losing the babies had on not only Hattie but her children. However, at the same time, readers see the unexpected bond between mother and children. Later children will see a harsher Hattie. This quote serves to complicate the character of Hattie and the many effects of grief on motherhood.

You must got some reason for wanting to live two days here and three days there.

-- Darla (Floyd paragraph 26)

Importance: "Darla's statement foreshadows the revelation of a secret Floyd is keeping. It also supports the restlessness of Floyd's character; he is not at peace. It gives more depth to the previous quote that Hattie is the only one with whom he felt still, thus emphasizing the significance of the relationship."

Hattie didn't like that he was such a homebody; she thought he ought to be out with his brothers. To avoid her displeasure, he skulked around the corners of the house and spent most of his time in the bedroom he shared with Franklin and Billup.

-- Narrator (Six paragraph 4)

Importance: This quote shows Six's lack of self-esteem before the revival circuit. His discomfort with being seen and with himself is clear. This acts as a contrast to the end of the chapter when he has gained the confidence to touch a girl and apply for an



assistant pastorate opening. It also shows Hattie's roughness as a mother and his anxiety concerning her reaction. His reaction to Hattie is the opposite of Floyd's.

Lawrence saw him once at a supper club where all the dirty Negroes went. August was on a date; he was all dressed up like the mayor of Philadelphia while Hattie was at home on Wayne Street elbow deep in dishwater.

-- Narrator (Ruthie paragraph 51)

Importance: This quote gives a picture of Hattie and August's marriage and validates some of the references made previously regarding their marital problems. It also shows Lawrence's perspective and insight into his moral code of conduct. In addition, it evokes compassion for Hattie's situation.

August nodded in the darkened room. He conceded, though Hattie could not see him.

-- Narrator (Ruthie paragraph Last)

Importance: This quote shows August's acceptance of the situation. The fact that he conceded despite the fact that Hattie couldn't see showed his internal commitment to the relationship. This was not about appeasing Hattie. This showed August coming to terms with Hattie's infidelity and understanding that she did not come back to him but to her children.

Mama was right to call him my ruin, Hattie thought. If I would have known things would turn out this way, I would have thrown myself in the river after I buried my twins.

-- Narrator (Ella paragraph 9)

Importance: Hattie says this in reference to August, her marriage, and her life with August. It shows the resentment and regret she has carried around with her for thirty years. She also says this the day before she has to give up her youngest daughter Ella, so it shows her despair.

Mother who never phoned, who did not like parties, who did not, Alice sometimes thought, like Alice.

-- Narrator (Alice and Billup paragraph 3)

Importance: Alice is speaking in reference to Hattie. This quote shows the lack of affection Alice feels from her mother. It characterizes Hattie as a cold mother and Alice as an adult still in need of her mother's approval. Establishing Alice's perception of Hattie as an uninvolved mother validates why she took on the role of Billup's mother.

Hattie had kept them all alive with sheer will and collard greens and some old southern remedies. Mean as the dickens, though.

-- Narrator (Bell paragraph 61)

Importance: This quote shows Bell's perspective of Hattie as a mother. In a few short words, it paints a picture of a mother who physically took good care of her children but had very little affection left over. Bell's respect for mother is apparent with the use of the



word "sheer". Her forgiveness for the latter is shown by how Bell lightens the criticism with the usage of the word, "dickens".

I would like to wash my hair, but when I go into the bathroom, I think of the way the water will slide off of my body, fouled with particles of dead skin and bits of feces, and I have to return to my bedroom.

-- Cassie (Cassie paragraph 1)

Importance: This sentence immediately establishes that Cassie struggles with mental health issues because bathing is such a fundamental activity. Knowing Cassie as the college-bound teenager, it raises questions as to what happened between then and now.

She was not too old to weather another sacrifice.

-- Narrator (Sala paragraph Last)

Importance: This quote is Hattie's thoughts on what she would have to do to protect her granddaughter's integrity. It shows Hattie's own integrity, strength, and grit. At the end of the day, Hattie is not afraid to do what she believes needs to be done to protect her children.