Unless Study Guide

Unless by Carol Shields

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

Unless is written in the first person, and thus the reader becomes intensely involved in the thoughts and feelings of the author's alter ego, Reta Winter. Like Carol Shields, Reta is a successful writer. She is forty-three years old and lives near Orangetown, Ontario. Although not legally married to her common-law husband, a family doctor named Tom, they have been together in a monogamous twenty-six-year relationship. Tom and Reta have three daughters: Norah, Christine, and Natalie. They enjoy a comfortable upper-middle class lifestyle in the beautiful rural countryside north of Toronto.

The story begins in June 2000. The timing of the novel is important, since it represents not only a new century, but a new life after a detour into grief. Her oldest daughter, Norah, has left behind her family, her boyfriend, and her university studies in order to discover the nature of goodness. Her journey of discovery leads her to renounce everything that is safe and ordinary. Norah has chosen to sit day after day, rain, snow, or shine, on a street corner in Toronto with a begging bowl in her lap. She maintains complete silence, communicating only with a cardboard sign around her neck which states in bold letters, GOODNESS. Reta is desperately trying to maintain an ordinary life in the face of grief and crisis.

On the surface, the novel appears to be an account of an ordinary Canadian family trying to come to terms with a daughter's decision to run away from home to live an apparently unproductive and dangerous life. Reta begins the story of her unhappiness with the question of how to deal with life's grief and losses. She speaks about the fragility of happiness, its elusive qualities, and the emotional cost of keeping that happiness vital and current within an ordinary life. She concludes that she must focus on her blessings, and it immediately becomes clear that her writing is crucial to her sense of self and her sense of happiness.

The story of the Winters family and their bewildered grief when Norah disappears is told entirely though the confused perspective of Reta. The reader journeys through a narrative more akin to a stream-of -consciousness process than a definitive story about the family. Reta is far too preoccupied with herself to permit the reader a clear picture of the events which pop up now and again in relation to Norah's disappearance. Words chase themselves round and round her brain, one moment agreeing, the next in complete contradiction. The events that occur in this year of her life and her concurrent thoughts frequently fail to be synchronized into a discernable pattern of cause and effect.

As a result of this style of narration, the book is a series of apparently unconnected events, circling above the actual lives of Reta and her family, now and then touching base with the real world, but quickly taking flight as Reta's inner dialogue wanders from one speculative thought to another. For Reta, reality does not appear to be a solid and real entity, but one that fluid and process-driven. She attempts to solve her grief by indulging in an open-ended dialogue with herself which is at once complex and ambiguous. Divergent impulses constantly rise to the surface. Psychologically isolated

from Tom, her daughters, her mother-in-law, and her friends, she attempts to find her way through a chaotic, grief-stricken world back to normalcy.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

As the story opens, the reader is immediately drawn into the private thoughts and feelings of Reta Winter. She begins by revealing that she is experiencing a time of profound unhappiness and grief, though she does not immediately discuss the nature of her dilemma. Reta only discloses that her dramatic loss must be offset by counting her blessings, even as she notes with some loathing that this is a repellant exercise to her. Reta briefly introduces us to her husband, Tom, who is a family doctor. She describes him as faithful and decent looking. Then she mentions two of her three daughters, Christine, sixteen, and Natalie, fifteen, saying that they are intelligent, loving, and attractive young women.

Above all, though, Reta makes it clear that her writing career is the most important aspect of her life; she numbers and explains each literary work she has accomplished. "My Writing," as she calls her work, is described in chronological order. She begins with her translation work for another author, a French professor at the University of Toronto named Danielle Westerman. She speaks with great admiration of this successful literary figure, who continues to be an important influence in her life, both as a mentor and a friend.

Reta relates a short history of her writing career. She mentions the publication of her first successful short story when she was a young pregnant mother with two little girls. She joined a local writing workshop group with six other women writers, and together, they published an anthology of their writings. Their success prompted Reta to continue in her chosen career. While it is clear that her family is an important part of her life, as she weaves in comments about her husband and her daughters, it is equally clear that the members of her family are always viewed in context of her writing life and their response to her work. Her musings about her desire to write a novel finally lead her to speak about Norah.

Reta describes Norah as a docile child who had grown into an obedient and good little girl. Her habitual goodness of character has become the catalyst of the Winters' present family crisis. It led Norah to turn her back on the life she had known and to become a beggar on the streets of Toronto. Even in her poverty, Norah's goodness compels her to give nine-tenths of the money she collects to other street people; the one word on the cardboard sign on her chest - GOODNESS - declares both her character and her intentions.

The word has become a puzzle to Reta, though. She confesses that she really does not understand the meaning of goodness. She tries to grasp its meaning by studying the history and development of this word. Reta cannot equate the GOODNESS on her daughter's cardboard sign with anything positive. As an antidote to her grief, her editor,

Mr. Scribano, suggests that she begin writing another novel, a sequel to an earlier work entitled *My Thyme is Up.*

Chapter 1 Analysis

The reader is invited into the inner life of Reta Winter, but there is some danger that this front-row seat in main character's consciousness may lead to some restlessness while reading, as Reta's thoughts constantly jump from one subject to another. At times she lives in the real world of husband and children; at other times her past accomplishments take center stage.

Reta shifts between thinking of her family and her past, and then her thoughts turn yet again, this time focusing on her fictional characters, Alicia and Roman, in her planned novel, *Thyme in Bloom*. The real world of crisis, grief, and coming to terms with the meaning of the spiritual or ethical concept of goodness is soon sublimated in Reta's mind to make way for the fictional world she begins to create. Without that fictional world, she cannot understand the real one in which she lives.

There is a clear demarcation in the life of Reta Winter. There was the "old" life in which husband and daughters neatly coalesced into her life as a writer. Now Reta must deal with the "new" life in which her family has metamorphosed into something strange and uncontrollable. Her daughter, Norah, becomes the symbol of the real world which Reta cannot understand. Thus, the first chapter reveals the main character's essential weakness and poses the major question that this novel attempts to answer: What is goodness?

In Reta's view, goodness is an abnegation, a lack. Goodness means to become invisible and to reside in a world based on passivity and inaction. How Reta longs for something deeper in that word! She wants focus; she wants irony; she wants rebellion. She cannot reconcile the comfortable life Norah had within the family with her steadfast desire to achieve goodness. Reta views goodness as an entity which is slowly and brutally killing her family.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

It is the beginning of August 2000. Tom's friend, a physicist by the name of Colin Glass, joins them for dinner one night, and during the evening he tries to explain the theory of relativity to Reta. She had always wanted to understand this theory, but the explanation eludes her once again. She thinks about her love of long August evenings, the good company, the wonderful food. Then her thoughts turn once again to Norah sitting on a pavement with that sign GOODNESS in front of her. Suddenly, Reta loses all track of the conversation.

Instead of concentrating on Colin's continuing attempts to explain Einstein's theory, her mind wanders to such inane subjects as the possibility of her guest's coffee sloshing out of its cup and the reasons why she is now using cloth napkins. She thinks of her friend, Danielle Westerman, and Pet, their golden retriever, who is lying under the dining room table. Finally, her thoughts turn to the troubled state of Colin's marriage because; his wife, Marietta, had suddenly packed her bags and left him recently.

Unexpectedly, she turns to Colin and asks him if the theory of relativity had decreased the weight of goodness and depravity in the world. With some puzzlement, he tries to explain that the theory holds no moral weight and then promptly complains that her coffee is undrinkable. However, Reta persists. She asks if it is possible to perceive goodness as a wave or particle of energy. Colin is equally persistent in denying this view.

Reta sees Colin as a man who is kind enough to be willing to spend the evening in the futile task of explaining a scientific theory to her. Then the thought occurs to her that perhaps the entire evening was merely a diversion for him, part of his restructuring of a life without his wife. Reta thinks that she, too, should seek the solace of diversion as the antidote to her grief, but she does not equate the break-up of Colin's marriage to the loss of her daughter. She believes that it is possible for a wife to be erased from a man's life but that a daughter can never suffer such a fate.

Chapter 2 Analysis

Unlike the first chapter, Chapter 2 shows Reta fully engaged in the here and now of her real life. A friend at the dinner table, the comforting presence of the family dog, the problems of Colin's marriage, and the Winters' own crisis with Norah's inexplicable behavior are the vignettes which form the background to her thoughts.

There is a parallel story of loss, failure, and grief in the lives of Colin and Marietta and Tom and Reta. Another parallel exists between the disappearances of Marietta and Norah, since both have attempted to escape toward goodness. Reta appears oblivious to the common goal in the lives of these two women. Colin's callous attitude toward

Marietta, his love of pleasure, and his easily expressed displeasure do not even raise the possibility in her mind that his behavior could possibly reflect something quite the opposite of goodness. Even as she ponders the nature of that word, Reta does not appear to have a corresponding idea of evil.

Reta continues to be haunted by the question of how goodness fits into the universe. She tries to see goodness in a more positive light and hopes that Colin may provide her with some insight and hope. What if the theory of relativity involved not only particles and atoms, but virtue itself? Reta's question to Colin may appear impulsive at first glance, but it reflects the intensity of her struggle to come to terms with the idea of goodness and with its place in her life.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

It is early September, and Reta has to attend a series of interviews in Toronto on behalf of her 85 year-old mentor, Danielle Westerman. She travels by car to the city, and then drives by the corner of Bloor and Bathurst to catch a glimpse of Norah. Reta is gratified to find her daughter in her usual place in front of the subway entrance with her begging bowl and cardboard sign.

She parks the car and walks over to her daughter. She has brought food with her, and a picture of Pet. Reta knows, perhaps, that she is bribing her daughter to come home by bringing something of her former comfortable life to her street corner existence. However, Norah still refuses to look directly at her, nor is she willing to speak. Somehow, though, the encounter fills Reta with happiness, and she leaves her daughter for an appointment to have her eyebrows tinted.

The aesthetician, Madame Sylvia, displays no qualms about lecturing Reta on her failures in the beauty department. She haughtily informs her client that a woman must pay constant attention to the cultivation of feminine beauty and charm. At first, Reta thinks that she might become a regular customer, but once out of the shop she sees that charm and beauty are really nothing more than cheap tricks. It is all too calculated, too concentrated on projecting radiance, a metaphoric expression of self-hatred. Reta understands that charm has a complete lack of value in comparison to the pursuit of goodness.

From charm and beauty, her thoughts turn to politeness and her own determination never to be polite again. She muses on the mechanics of professional courtesy: sucking in the breath, letting the face become expressionless, listening and registering questions, letting out the breath, evaluating the feelings of all those who depend on your performance at that moment. Her reasons for disdaining such practices center on partly on her status as a middle-aged woman but even more on the fact that she has a daughter living on the street. Charm has no power to help her cope with her grief and her deep sense of loss.

Reta's contemplation of these facts leads her to determine that she will not answer the silly questions interviewers always ask her. This particular interview takes place in a cappuccino bar in mid-town. Reta cannot discern with any accuracy whether the interviewer is thirty or forty. All she can think is that this insignificant little man with his undoubtedly superior thoughts will ignore her carefully chosen outfit and the glossy chignon of which she is so proud, choosing to concentrate instead on asking inane questions. Reta's instincts prove correct. The newly appointed books columnist at *Booktime* is much more interested in his own opinions about the literature of the Great North than he is in anything else. Reta is determined that she will not allow him to probe into every corner of her life.

Chapter 3 Analysis

Reta remains grounded in her real life in this chapter. She gives of her time so that her elderly friend, Danielle Westerman, will not have to be subjected to the difficulties of the personal interview. She looks for Norah and finds her at her usual place. Reta comes prepared for this rare encounter with her daughter and rejoices in the simple fact that her offer of food is not rejected.

Both Madame Sylvia and the columnist from *Booktime* are absorbed in the superficialities of life. Madame believes that charm and beauty are a woman's most precious assets, and must be carefully studied and applied. Unlike Norah, her voice is heard, but she speaks of banalities. Reta quickly realizes that charm is nothing other than a metaphor for self-hatred.

The columnist is also absorbed in a closed world. In his case, he is eager to convey his own opinions about the meaning of contemporary Canadian literature. Reta is merely another author to be dissected and analyzed by his superior mind. He also speaks, but Reta cannot bear the sound of his voice. Clearly, speaking is not necessarily the means of true communication between people.

Norah's silence and her self-denial contrast greatly with these other two people Reta encounters. As contradictory as it may seen, Norah's silence may become the means for communication between mother and daughter. No banalities are discussed; no superior opinions are given; no self-hatred communicated. Reta can remain in the present reality of her life. She begins to catch a glimpse of the true meaning of goodness, seeing that neither charm, nor sincerity, nor lofty opinions can be of lasting value in human life.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

The scene is a late afternoon in early October. Reta has dropped by the Orangetown Library to pick up a book by Dennis Ford-Helpern, *The Goodness Gap*. She is acutely aware of the absurdity of believing that it is possible to obtain virtue simply by reading a book, and she knows that she could have purchased the book while in Toronto the week before. Instead, Reta has chosen to pursue the more difficult path of being good. She views her presence in the library as an act of the good citizen who continues to support her local public library. Thus, she believes that she has made the first small step in her resolve to reconnect with her daughter.

Tessa and Cheryl are the two local librarians, and each possesses a deep empathy for Reta and Tom in their present crisis with Norah. The mystery of her sudden disappearance six months earlier had been quite accidentally solved by Tessa. She had traveled to Toronto to visit her elderly mother, and as she came up out of the subway had seen Norah panhandling on the sidewalk. Tessa had tried to talk to Norah, but the young woman had remained silent. Once out of her sight, Tessa had called Reta and told her of her daughter's location in Toronto. Reta recalls how Norah's self-renunciation even made her choose a corner of the streets which was least amenable to beggars. She remembers how she explained Norah's strange behavior to Christine and Natalie by saying that their sister was now living a life in pursuit of goodness. Somehow, to use the phrase "the pursuit of goodness" seemed a better choice of words than telling them that their sister was a vagabond living on the street.

As Reta enters the reading room of the library, she notes the presence of some familiar faces, a scene which is at once familiar and unique. Reta discerns that this precise pattern of time and place and people will only occur once, returning only as an event engraved in memory. Her sense of awe at this insight leads her to experiences a sense of being carried away by pure sensation. She is unable to understand how she is manages to step from difficult reality into an intermediate space and change from skeptic to believer. She is disturbed at her warped sense of joy, and at once the ordinary busyness of life comes rushing back. She has two chickens in the oven, a potato casserole which needs to be reheated, and a salad to be made. Yes, life beckons, and she must go home.

Chapter 4 Analysis

Reta decides to embark on a personal struggle to be good and to understand goodness itself. This slowly becomes her life's focus. She begins her own journey toward reconciliation and reconnection with Norah by attempting to consciously follow in her daughter's footsteps. While not quite ready to renounce her comfortable life, Reta begins by going to the unpopular local library, which is threatened by cutbacks in its

budget and staff. This act is not simply prompted by the desire to obtain a particular book, but by a conscious decision to be a good person who is willing to show support for the local library. Her decision to read a book on the nature of goodness is another small step on that journey.

The core of Reta's bewilderment with her daughter is not limited to her experience of intense maternal anguish. Rather, it is the meaning of Norah's actions which primarily concerns her. How does the meaning of Norah's life impact on her own view of the world? At times reality appears to be a state beyond Reta's grasp. Her connection to her real life remains intact until the moment she steps into the reading room. Suddenly her reality becomes infused with an other-worldly sense of awe and joy quite at variance with the grief in her life. She is unable to integrate goodness and grief, grace and skepticism into a discernable pattern in her life.

Thus, Reta continues to move between two worlds and wonders at the strangeness of suddenly finding herself in a state of joy and yet in grief. The experience is of short duration and fades as she remembers the chickens roasting in the oven and the need to prepare supper for her family. She rushes into reality once again.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

This chapter involves all things domestic in the life of Reta Winters. She describes her home in great detail. The reader is permitted a glimpse of Reta as a house-proud wife and mother. The work of writing and its world of alternative reality has been brushed aside for the moment, and Reta leads the reader on a grand tour of her Ontario farmhouse perched on a high hill in the rolling back country north of Toronto.

Reta reminisces at length about the McGinn Family, who had owned the house previously. Reta has many questions about their lives, their hopes and dreams, their relationships. She admits that she often thinks about this family even though she has never met them. As she discovers one of the family's old letters, left behind by the furnace, Reta muses to herself that it might be a suicide note, or a child's report card, or a confession of some past indiscretion; it turns out to be only an invitation to a baby shower in 1961. Reta's thoughts continue to speed forward on the twisting, turning highways of her mind, and she suddenly thinks of Danielle Westerman. Then Reta thinks about Mr. McGinn's rifle collection in the specially built cupboard and speculates as to whether or not one of those guns ever fired accidentally. She wonders about Mrs. McGinn's first name and pictures her at the kitchen sink, cutting beans into one-inch pieces.

Reta's meandering thoughts lead once again to the house and how much she loves living there. Reta describes it as "full of rough corners that seem to me just about to come into their full beauty." She admits that for her, all the dusting and polishing and waxing offer a tangible reward. That reward lies in preventing threat and disorder from taking over her life; she dusts and polishes so that she can shield herself and her family from damage. If only she could commit strongly enough to the meticulous care of her home, she thinks, she would be able to reclaim her lost Norah from the path of goodness. Reta realizes that she could spend her time doing other things, but each morning she wakes up full of an unspoken anxiety to clean her house. She wants to use Q-tips and toothpicks in every crack and corner. New cleaning products fascinate her and she yearns for them. She feels comforted each day by the tasks that she plans to accomplish.

Sometimes when she works on her writing in the afternoon, she finds herself distracted by other activities. Going out with friends for coffee, traveling to Toronto, attending Library Board meetings, and accompanying Tom to a one-day conference at the museum on the subject of trilobites are some of those distractions. One evening after a meal in a restaurant she finds herself fascinated with the graffiti on the bathroom walls. Reta adds a line: My Heart is Broken. She instantly regards this short phrase as being one of revealing truth. Even as she joins the others on the pavement outside the restaurant, those words continue to resonate within her soul: My Heart is Broken.

Chapter 5 Analysis

Reta continues to grieve for her daughter Norah. Although she remains grounded in her real life and maintains a careful schedule dedicated to the meticulous routines of caring for her house, she also indulges herself in "the grand avoidance" of her sorrow by speculating at length about the former owners of the home. She cannot yet come to terms with the loss of Norah, and she sublimates her anxiety and grief into an obsession with cleanliness. She longs to clean every nook and cranny; each crack and niche. If only she would give herself over entirely to the cleaning and polishing of her house, maybe Norah would forsake her search for goodness and come back.

When cleaning fails to reduce her anxiety Reta spends her time with friends at the local coffee-shop, the Orange Blossom Tearoom, or she travels to Toronto on one errand or another. At other times, she accompanies her husband to a meeting or conference. Her intense anxiety does not permit her to simply "be"; activity is the balm which will bring her relief. Her anxiety does not permit her to experience the full weight of the guilt she bears deep inside; her house is her metaphor for redemption. Reta is compulsive and fragmented, and she rejects any comprehensive coherence to her world despite her constant search for it. After all, everything could change tomorrow.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

Reta has a flashback to a conversation she had with Norah when her daughter was about nine years old. Her little girl wanted to know whether or not her parents were married. Reta had carefully explained to Norah about the attitudes toward marriage in the 1970s, how Daddy and she had exchanged vows in front of their friends, and about the lovely tea party that followed. Norah had seemed both satisfied and impressed.

Reta then brings the story forward to the present time and a recent conversation she had with a friend. Emma Allen, a medical journalist living in Newfoundland, had telephoned to ask about Norah. Reta's thoughts then jump to her husband, Tom, and she remembers his rebel ways as a young man. He is now a family doctor at the Orangetown Clinic, universally loved and admired by his patients. His hobby is the study of trilobites, and Reta is convinced that he is totally preoccupied with his passion. Perhaps he is also trying futilely to compensate for Norah's absence.

An incident involving her daughter, Christine, comes to the forefront. Earlier, Reta had confronted her daughter with a bent cigarette she had accidentally discovered in the pocket of Christine's winter parka. A quarrel had nearly ensued when Christine suddenly said, "No wonder Norah. . ." and then stopped in mid-sentence. Reta knew that she had meant to say "No wonder Norah left home." She took her daughter into her arms and reassured her that everything was all right.

Reta's narrative ends with some small details of her family life. Natalie and Christine both have small parts in the high school play; her husband is busy with a paper on trilobites for a conference the following year. When Tom asks her if she would like to accompany him to the conference in Estonia, she tells him that she doesn't know. Everything depends on Norah And whether she comes back.

Chapter 6 Analysis

This chapter is a disjointed narrative of unconnected events in Reta's life. Reta understands the isolation of circumstances, plans, and conversations in relationship to the whole of her life's perspective. She cannot see any connection, or overriding plan, between one event in her life and another. As a writer, it is much easier to use a word as an arbitrary method to connect events into a cohesive pattern. She has chosen the word "so" to maintain her hope to find some sort of coherency in her life. Each event begins with someone saying the word "so." Norah's disappearance has unraveled the web of Reta's life; her desperation to maintain her orientation to the here and now becomes more convoluted and artificial as the novel continues.

Reta's view of the world requires her to explore the meaning of the universe, not through received truths, or even through a renewed quest for truth, but through the use

of language itself. Reality is not a material space, but a logical one. Therefore, her primary concern is not so much with truth as with meaning and sense. This is the world in which her independent self must necessarily reside and seek its true place.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

In this chapter, Reta describes the genesis of her first novel *My Thyme is Up.* She relates its surprising success and its winning of the Offenden Prize a year previously. It was widely hailed as a "sunny" novel, but Reta dislikes the idea of being perceived as a sunny person. She feels a greater sense of affinity for Danielle Westerman's belief that everyone has a dark side and that truth is the fruit of acknowledging the presence of that darkness. Reta has some difficulty rejoicing in the success of her first novel.

During a short book-signing tour in Washington, D.C. that year, Reta had decided to go shopping in the tiny boutique district of Georgetown. Her daughter, Norah, would be celebrating her seventeenth birthday a week later and had expressed her desire for a beautiful scarf. Reta describes the boutiques and the "squadron of very slender saleswomen" presiding over the merchandise in each shop. Reta had been determined to bring home the perfect scarf for her daughter and had succeeded in her quest.

The following morning Reta took the train to Baltimore, and after a radio interview she met an old friend for lunch. She had not seen Gwen since the days of their old writing group in Orangetown. When they met at the restaurant, Reta was surprised to notice that Gwen had changed. Instead of wearing her usual jeans and sweater, Gwen was wearing a strange outfit apparently made out of unstructured cloth, including a matching wrapping around her head. She also looked sad, and Reta attempted to cheer her up by relating her recent adventures shopping for Norah's scarf.

Suddenly a rather banal shopping trip became transformed from the ordinary into the extraordinary; from satisfying mere female vanity to a transcendental experience only the female soul could appreciate and understand. Reta thought of other gifts in her life, and in the lives of her three daughters, her mother-in-law, and her own deceased mother. She at once perceived with a renewed clarity that women never get what they really want. As Reta looks back on the memory, she comes to believe that Norah has also realized this "big female secret." What does this mean to Reta? Simply that the world is not ready for women.

Chapter 7 Analysis

This chapter is haunted by Norah. It was Reta who won a prize for her first novel, but the events which followed are bound to her oldest daughter. Norah's wish for a beautiful scarf, a trivial wish, becomes an event in Reta's life as a shopping trip becomes a search for meaning among the artificial brick facades of upscale boutiques in an American suburb.

A visit with an old friend and the recounting of this shopping trip transform the mundane into a renewed insight into the nature of the female experience. It is not the relationship

with men that dominates the female experience, she realizes, but woman's relationship with the objective world; it is this which throws her into an existential crisis as she realizes that even her basic needs and wants are never met. Thus, any received cultural truths concerning man and civilization are indicted as intellectually corrupt. Perhaps if Reta had some greater understanding of virtue and goodness, she would be able to judge these truths as morally corrupt as well. Reta is completed disenchanted when she is forced to face up to the unpleasant changes in her life, and she sees the world is a chaotic and dangerous place for women.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

Reta begins this chapter by stating the need for further discussion of the problems women experience in situations of dismissal and exclusion from "the most primary of entitlements." She does not believe that women have "arrived" at all, for in spite of the start of a new millennium, women are still on the sidelines of life. The power of the strong over the weak and the inevitable defeat that comes from that situation is all part of being "sent over to the side pocket of the snooker table" in Reta's view.

Reta goes on to discuss a literary television show she had watched the Sunday before. The host had asked the male author about influences on his work. Naturally, the author mentioned only male authors such as Chekhov and Proust. Reta indignantly wonders what is wrong with this man. Is he so stupid that he has never heard of Virginia Woolf, Danielle Westerman, or Iris Murdoch? She grows more and more indignant as she contemplates the unfairness of life.

Reta's thoughts return to her work for Danielle Westerman and the difficult work of translating French poetry into English. Reta is aware of the differences between her mentor and herself; one is single and childless, the other married with children. Danielle sometimes asks Reta how it is possible that she permits herself to live with a man and to submit to the humiliation of being penetrated. What Danielle fails to understand, though, is that Reta's body and her conscious thoughts have never been separated even for a moment from her girls. Danielle cannot comprehend that the ties that bind mothers and daughters are stronger than those that bind women to men.

Danielle is not moved by Reta's distress regarding Norah's activities. She views Norah's behavior merely as a developmental stage, in which she is succumbing for a brief moment to the traditional places of safety for those without power in this world. Instead of fighting for power, Norah has simply embraced her powerlessness in a deliberate state of complete passivity. Reta is unwilling to accept Danielle's ideas of Norah's motives, however, and does not want to believe that her daughter is concerned with questions of power. Instead, Reta prefers to think that Norah has descended into a form of strange dementia, some state of mind from which she will one day suddenly reemerge whole.

Danielle reluctantly agrees with her friend. Yes, this is also entirely possible, she thinks. Perhaps Norah's behavior is a clever inversion of her own devising, laying a claim to existence while ceasing to exist. Danielle then changes the subject and with disappointment in her voice asks Reta why the translation of her memoirs still remains incomplete. She wants to know why Reta has decided instead to write another novel. Reta herself has difficulties understanding her decision. She tells her friend that it was her publisher, Mr. Scribano, who had urged her to write another novel in the belief that Reta needed a distraction from the constant worry and anxiety about her daughter.

Chapter 8 Analysis

In this chapter, Reta gives the first indication of a radical sense of displacement in the world, a sense which she also projects onto Norah. This reveals a fundamental aspect of her personality, and develops the earlier suggestion in the chapter entitled "Otherwise" that it is the dark side of a woman's experience that gives direction to her life. Displacement is accompanied by suffering as Reta comes to terms with the stark nature of the reality in which her life must unfold.

In spite of her realizations, Reta does not fully embrace the feminist perspective. Danielle, her friend and a feminist, suggests to Reta that Norah's problems somehow revolve around the lack of power she must be experiencing. She rejects this idea outright and in doing so reveals yet another aspect of her character. It seems that she rarely thinks matters through. She wants to believe that her conscious thoughts are always with her daughters, but to the reader it becomes obvious that Reta is indulging herself in a significant deception.

Incredibly, the question of Norah's changed personality is never based on a realistic scenario, nor on a determined search for an answer to this terrible dilemma. Reta accepts the crisis, suffers intensely, but refuses to ask any substantial questions about her daughter. She seems to be able to dismiss Norah from her mind and concentrate on her writing life, which she actively uses to distract her from the situation with Norah. It seems that it is Reta's fate to be a psychological nomad, wandering through a desert where self-awareness can only be found by going through the states of error and ambiguity.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

The chapter opens with Reta and her fellow writer friends enjoying a coffee time at the Orange Blossom Room on Main Street. The discussion revolves around the nature of goodness. One friend describes goodness as an abstraction, simply a representation of the general goodwill of a particular group of people. Goodness and greatness are viewed as two incompatible qualities, especially for women. The four friends then discuss the general disinterest that men, including their husbands, demonstrate toward them. They conclude that women are excluded from real life because women are viewed by men as lacking in moral authority and capability.

The discussion veers toward actual events, which leads them to speculate that perhaps men are right; perhaps women are simply incapable of transforming their sense of shock at injustice into acts of goodness. The first event they discuss concerns a woman in Mozambique who had given birth to her baby in a tree during the terrible floods of the previous year. The second event concerns the self-immolation of a Muslim woman in Nathan Philips Square. Someone had tried to save her, but the unidentified woman had died. Reta listens to the conversation in an idle and disinterested manner, her thoughts concentrated on the plastic flowers on the table and the dog hairs on her dark blue sleeve.

Chapter 9 Analysis

The mercurial nature of Reta's internal dialogue is once again revealed in this chapter. Although her thoughts carry forward with the themes of displacement and suffering, Reta does not give full assent to a complete feminist perspective. Her contributions to the conversation appear distracted and, in some sense, disinterested. Since all four women are in long-term relationships with men, the conversation and the conclusion that men are generally disinterested in the details of women's lives is more an expression of general discontent than an actual analysis of relational problems between men and women.

As in the chapter entitled "Nearly," when Colin Glass comes to dinner at their home, Reta appears out of focus and out of context in this chapter. Her mind wanders easily to the banal and unimportant, veering from a discussion about women's lives to an idle contemplation of plastic flowers and dog hairs. She seems to miss the point too often and never appears to have the ability to figure out the sequences of cause and effect. Whether in conversation or in the events that happen to her, Reta maintains a disturbingly free-floating detachment.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

This chapter is devoted entirely to Norah. Reta recalls how her daughter had been accepted at McGill University in 1998. At the same time, Norah had met a young man and had fallen in love. Ben Abbot was a twenty-two-year-old philosophy student at the University of Toronto. Consequently, Norah changed her mind about attending McGill, enrolled at Toronto instead, and moved into an apartment off Bathurst with her boyfriend. Reta finds it strange to contemplate the presence of a stranger in Norah's life - a stranger who is intimately involved with her. She recognizes that she might simply be one of those women who experience problems coping with the sexual maturity of their daughters.

She recalls an incident the previous year, which had been Norah's second year at university. Norah was home in Orangetown for the weekend, and early one morning she was sitting in the kitchen with her mother. As she looked at Norah, Reta realized that there was something wrong with her. "Her face looked oddly fallen. Her eyes were swollen, filled, though not with tears." She puts on her reading glasses and looks more closely at her daughter and starts a conversation about what is troubling her.

Norah is anxious and disturbed about an inner sense that she simply cannot love anyone enough. Ideas about existence and the world of nature have taken hold of her thoughts and dreams; she cannot live in the small world of university, Ben, and family. Reta thinks that this problem is probably just a simple depression, or a vitamin deficiency. She urges Norah to see her father, who is, after all, a medical doctor. Perhaps Norah should consider going into counseling as well, she suggests. Norah holds on to her mother in a desperate embrace, and Reta is equally desperate in trying to discover just what is wrong with her daughter. Could it be drugs? A religious cult? Mononucleosis? A brain tumor? All of these possibilities pass through her thoughts.

At that time, Reta had known in her heart that the exchange with Norah would be the beginning of grief. Norah left home within the hour and departed so quietly that no one noticed her absence. Reta searched all over the house for her and for her belongings but found nothing. "Then," she says, "I knew how wildly out of control she was, how she'd become dangerous to her own being. She was lost."

Chapter 10 Analysis

In this chapter the reader is finally informed about the events which occurred just prior to Norah's disappearance. It begin with an ordinary everyday event: a mother and daughter sitting in the kitchen early one morning. The mother notices that there is something not quite right with her daughter. A conversation follows, but the mother remains baffled. The daughter, in turn, feels misunderstood and alone in her experience

of life. Despite the fact that Reta has made the claim that her conscious thoughts are always with her girls, it appears that this is not a reciprocal act. Her daughter cannot communicate with her.

This lack of communication leads to a sense of despair and desperation on Reta's part, as she tries to understand what is wrong with Norah. While Norah tries to tell her mother that her problem is an inner struggle and a sense of claustrophobia at being forced to live in a world too small for her heart and mind, Reta again demonstrates her inability to make connections and her tendency toward obvious explanations. She does not grasp the fact that Norah has discovered freedom, albeit freedom of a terrible form that condemns her to carry the entire weight of the world and existence on her shoulders. Norah does not know how this new sense of freedom can possibly encompass all of existence, and so her notion of freedom becomes a prison of isolation and self-rejection. Without answers from her mother, Norah has no choice but to embark on her solitary search.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

On October 8, 2000 Reta writes a letter to the editor of a literary magazine, the first of a series that will appear throughout the remainder of the book. Her complaint centers around one of the magazine's advertising pages, which promotes a series of books called "Great Minds of the Western Intellectual World." Reta notes that women have been left out of the list and asks the editor how this is possible. She mentions Norah by name and the fact that she is often troubled by the fact that there is a complete and callous lack of curiosity about the minds of great women.

In her letter, Reta predicts that the editor will respond by compiling a list of all the political and economic rights women have won, offering them as evidence that the playing field is level. However, she insists that it is not level and never has been. It is her fervent hope that Norah will never accidentally pick up a copy of the magazine, read the ad, and then realize that as a woman she is completely shut out of the universe. She signs the letter "Yours. Reta Winters The Hermitage, Orangetown, Canada."

Chapter 11 Analysis

This short chapter displays Reta's problems in dealing with her daughter's refusal to live a normal life. In her search for answers, Reta cannot look at her own life, at her own inabilities to understand or communicate; she instead places the blame for her grief on the notion that women are completely shut of the universe. This is precisely the opposite of the sentiment that Norah had expressed to her. To Norah, the world is a huge place, so full of possibility that she feels she cannot contain within herself all that the world has to offer. Norah does not even hint that she feels shut out of the universe, but Reta prefers to believe that it is a sense of displacement that constitutes the core of her daughter's problem.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

Reta has become extremely concerned about the development of her two main characters, Alicia and Roman, in her sequel to her first novel. She struggles with the question of how much background information a writer of fiction should give to the reader, wondering whether accounts of childhood reminisces should be included. Her thoughts segue back into her own life, and memories of her childhood observations about nature and her mother's disinterested reaction to those childish opinions come to the forefront. She thinks once again about Norah and her curiously strange ideas about life. Reta recalls how her daughter had once talked quite openly about hearing voices in her head; both Reta and Tom had decided that Norah must have become aware of that inner dialogue, "the longest conversation," that goes on for a lifetime in a person's mind.

Reta's own inner dialogue moves to consider her sense of having experienced a confused childhood. She believes that perhaps the fact that both English and French were spoken in her home had somehow contributed to the formation of her confused and contrary ideas about the world. She wonders why her parents were not occupied by questions about the meaning of the universe in which they lived. It seems to Reta, as she reflects back on her childhood, that her parents were too busy with the questions of survival and caring for their children to ever entertain such philosophical notions. Reta then thinks that Norah is just like her And that perhaps this is the problem with her oldest daughter.

Chapter 12 Analysis

Reta's sense of bafflement with Norah continues in this chapter, and Reta's mind continues on its mercurial musings. She wants to relate everything about Norah to her own life, her own childhood, her own parents. She does not seem to have the vaguest idea of what her daughter is feeling or thinking and continues to view Norah from her own egocentric perspective. Since Reta has not grasped her daughter's problem, she continues to believe that it has a connection to her own experiences.

Reta's preoccupation with language and words also comes to the forefront in this chapter. It is not truth which determines reality, but meaning and sense. Languages necessarily give different connotations to words which are difficult to translate from one language into another. Reta believes that she has been struck with a two-sided view of the world as the result of her childhood experience speaking both English and French, each with its own connotations, each with its contradictions and confusions.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

It is October 12, and it is Christine's seventeenth birthday. "Thank you," she teases her mother, "for releasing me from your loins." A short conversation about childbirth follows. That same morning, Natalie suddenly thanks her for not naming her Ophelia. Another mother-daughter follows, this time concerning friends and invitations for dinner. Reta believes that Natalie and Christine are trying hard to compensate for Norah's absence. She comments on how these poignant attempts pierce her heart with sadness. The two girls have given up playing volleyball on Saturday mornings at the Orangetown High School. Tom drives them into town each Saturday and then they catch the bus for Toronto. When they reach the city, they travel by subway and spend the day with Norah on the sidewalk.

They take mats to sit on, food and water, magazines and books, toilet paper and other sundries to make life a little easier for Norah. They tell Reta and Tom about Norah's alternate silences and conversations; her amazing ability to simply smile at people and be given money. Natalie and Christine try very hard to give the impression that all of this is just part of a normal routine, but both of them are beginning to experience problems such as disturbed sleep and lack of concentration at school. Now Reta speculates that Norah is caught in a cycle of irresponsibility common to childhood, and that she refuses to understand the impact of her actions on the lives of her sisters and parents.

Chapter 13 Analysis

The characters of Christine and Natalie are not well-developed in terms of how Reta perceives them. Reta can only see the surface behaviors of her children, and she comes to conclusions about them which may or may not be warranted. Whether or not her other two daughters are trying to compensate for Norah's absence can be questioned.

Their selfless act of sitting with Norah on the street corner every Saturday does not seem to strike Reta as an act of goodness. The suspicion begins to arise that Reta Winters simply does not recognize goodness at all; she appears only capable of a tentative theory of goodness, but the theory never has a concrete relationship to her daily life. Reta's avowed search for the meaning of goodness appears self-deluding, as she does not seriously grapple with questions of spirituality or virtue. In her mind, Norah has abandoned the others her family and thus is doomed to non-being. Reta appears oblivious to the fact that the answer to her question "What is goodness?" will continue to elude her.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

Reta writes another letter, the second one in the series. This time it is addressed to Alexander Valkner and is a comment on his most recent article "The History of Dictionaries." She speaks of her love of words and praises him for the article's personal narrative style, but then she

chides him for his failure to mention some of the great female writers of the century: Danielle Westerman, Joyce Carol Oates, Alice Munroe and Sylvia Plath. Reta scathes Valkner with the sarcastic observation that he must have been experiencing a bout of extreme fatigue when he thought up the list of "literary big cats." She wonders if there was some significance in the fact that not a single woman was mentioned in his lengthy article. Reta claims that any woman who would take this article seriously would soon find herself in a state of self-denigration. She goes on to excuse her own despondent reaction to his work by explaining the situation with Norah. She cannot understand how her intelligent, book-loving daughter could just drop out of life and beg for money on a curb in Toronto. She offers her rationale for Norah's strange behavior: it is a deliberate effort to extinguish herself, to be a nothing. Reta concludes her letter with a statement that women have always been forced into the position of complaining about their lots in life and then of needing comfort from an unfeeling world that is dominated by men. She signs the letter "Yours, Renata Winters The Orangery, Wychwood City."

Chapter 14 Analysis

Reta cannot change her perspective about Norah. There is no indication that her daughter actually believes in the idea that she is powerless and, as a result of that lack of power, must now live a life which stands against any notion of growth, advancement, and fulfillment of her own potential. There is an obsessive quality to the way in which Reta holds onto this idea, and her reluctance to abandon it is baffling, since there is no indication that it is helpful to Norah or to the other members of her family. This continuing inner dialogue remains within the private sphere of Reta's consciousness but does not result in any real actions to solve the dilemma or to soothe her family's grief.

Reta is consumed by the idea of Norah's non-being, her existence in a state of complete powerlessness. Her daughter's non-being threatens to dissolve Reta as well. If humanity is exclusively bound to relationships, and if those relationships are abandoned, then the basis for Reta's existence is threatened. It is little wonder that Norah's disappearance out of the Winters' family circle is so disturbing to her. Reta's grief is on a level much deeper than that of a mother grieving for her child; she grieves for herself.

Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary

While Reta's oldest daughter is living the life of a beggar in Toronto, life goes on in the Winters' household. Four yards of screened bark mulch have been delivered to the house on the morning that this chapter opens, and Reta is now faced with the task of spreading it between the shrubs and perennials in the garden. By late afternoon, Tom and Reta have finished the work and go into the house for dinner. Everything appears so normal. Christine is playing the piano; Natalie is watching TV. Tom sits down in a chair beside her; Pet sprawls in front of him.

At seven o'clock dinner is ready. Reta shuts the red kitchen curtains, her signal to Lois, her mother-in-law, to come over for her nightly meal with the family. Everyone sits down at the dinner table and talks about a variety of subjects as they eat, just like any normal family on a weekday night. However, Reta views this normal activity as an attempt to compensate for Norah's absence, the conversation exaggerated and turned up in volume.

At the same time, though, Reta is able to turn her thoughts away from Norah with ease; she begins to think about Alicia and Roman, the two main characters in her new novel. Perhaps Alicia and Roman ought not to get married after all. Are they really suited to each other? Hasn't she detected a slight frisson of tension between them? Perhaps she can find some suitable reason for postponing the wedding. Then again, Reta thinks, that would pose another series of problems. She would have to write about guests being informed of the break-up, as well as a scene about the return of the wedding gifts. As she is caught up in these thoughts, the telephone rings; the caller informs her that Mr. Scribano, her New York editor at Scribano & Lawrence, had suddenly died in his home that afternoon.

Chapter 15 Analysis

The reader is led through an ordinary day in the life of the Winters family. From spreading mulch in the garden to cooking dinner and having Grandmother Lois Winters join the family in a daily ritual of food and conversation, and then to Reta's thoughts about the characters in her novel-in-progress, there seems to be little that has been affected by Norah's life on the streets of Toronto. However, Reta is convinced that everything her other daughters do and say is really an exaggerated attempt to compensate for their oldest sister's absence. It becomes increasingly difficult for the reader to discern which perspective reflects reality.

Chapter 16

Chapter 16 Summary

Reta confesses that she did not know Mr. Scribano very well at all. They had met only two or three times and sometimes conversed on the phone. She finds that she cannot grieve for someone she did not really know at all. She decides not to attend the funeral and instead sends flowers and a note to his secretary. Mr. Scribano is easily forgotten.

It is early November, and Reta drives to Toronto as she does every Wednesday. This is another trip to the city just to see Norah on her street corner. Reta is very careful not to appear threatening to her daughter, so she avoids actual contact with her. She observes Norah's activities but remains unseen in the background. When she finally does get the courage to approach her, she walks very quietly toward Norah and, without speaking, leaves a parcel of food within her reach. For her part, Norah still refuses to acknowledge her mother's presence.

Following this unsatisfactory encounter with Norah, Reta goes to visit her friend, Danielle Westerman, in her Rosedale apartment. They have a long discussion about literary matters. After she leaves, Reta drives once more past Bloor and Bathurst and looks for Norah. She spots her on that familiar corner, and then returns home to Orangetown.

Chapter 16 Analysis

Death, alienation, and Reta's conversation with her elderly friend and mentor form the focus of this chapter. Reta's thoughts reveal a woman with a confused perspective on life. Every thought seems banal and disconnected from the emotions she ought to be experiencing. Mr. Scribano is quickly banished from her thoughts, even though he was instrumental in the modest success of her first novel.

In this chapter, Reta also displays an inordinate fear of her own daughter. Where is the maternal determination to solve Norah's problem? Reta employs such dissatisfactory efforts to connect with Norah, moving effortlessly from watching Norah on her street corner to driving to her friend's apartment for an afternoon of literary discussion. Danielle Westerman has yet another book for Reta to translate from French into English, but Reta is much more interested in her own novel, and thus abandons her friend as well.

Chapter 17

Chapter 17 Summary

Reta informs the reader that she and her husband, Tom, still have a sexual relationship. She describes her sexual life as a familiar and safe routine. Sex itself has become an act which requires all of her concentration. Reta questions whether or not she really loves Tom, but then concludes that the question is irrelevant. After all, they live together in the same house, are parents to three daughters, and share a lifetime of common experiences; they fit together.

Reta reminisces about their first meeting and reveals that they were intimate the first time they met. Reta's mind wanders once again to her daughters and her attempted discussions with them about birth control. Immediately her thoughts turn to Alicia and Roman's sex life. She wonders how she will write about their intimate relationship and questions the sense of prudishness which inexplicably runs through their story. There is a sense that Roman and Alicia are too scrubbed, too clean, too tidy to have a truly erotic sexual relationship. Reta shrinks from the idea of being too explicit in her book. She worries about what her daughters will think, and what the people in Orangetown will say to each other when they meet Tom. She stops writing and shuts down her computer; sensuality is foreign territory to Reta.

Chapter 17 Analysis

In this chapter, the reader is permitted a glimpse at Reta's relationship with Tom. It is striking that in this relationship as well, there seems to be another maze of emotion and bewilderment. Does she love Tom? Does Tom love her? Their sexual relationship appears to be boring and routine; she needs all of her concentration merely to become aroused.

The narrative segues into the story of her fictional characters and their sexual feelings for each other. Reta struggles with the subject of sexuality; she is at ease neither with sex in her relationship with Tom, nor with the necessity that she deal with the sexuality of Alicia and Roman in her writing. She recognizes that the prudishness which runs through her novel must come from within herself. Reta admits that she cannot write sexual scenes; her own sexuality seems to be based on routine and comfort, rather than on the sensuality and eroticism that are the basic requirements for a satisfactory sexual life.

Chapter 18

Chapter 18 Summary

At the beginning of each month since Norah left, Reta has written a check to the Promise Hostel in Toronto. She always cries as she writes out the amount, cries as she folds it into an envelope, and cries as she walks down the road to the mailbox. Her tears are not those of grief, but are an expression of the heartfelt appreciation she feels for the compassionate people who run this place of refuge for the homeless. She knows that Norah sleeps at this hostel every night and is grateful that her daughter has found a safe haven in a dangerous environment.

As soon as the Winters had discovered where Norah was spending her nights, the family had traveled to Toronto and toured the hostel. Reta describes its dormitory appearance, the meals served, the curfew enforced. After the tour, Tom, Reta, Christine and Natalie had returned to their car. Although it was raining, the four of them had just remained sitting quietly in the car, staring at the water streaming down the windshield; everyone cried.

Chapter 18 Analysis

Reta is caught up in her emotions as she writes a check to the charity which houses her daughter each night. She recalls the visit the entire family made to the hostel when they discovered where Norah was finding shelter. There is a sense of helplessness in this account. The Winters family does not seem to be able to communicate with Norah on any level, and even when they tour the hostel, it is without her knowledge.

There seems to be nothing but a confused maze of emotion - bewilderment, grief, fear, and love -all tumbling over each other in the minds and hearts of Tom, Reta, Christine, and Natalie. What is missing from the emotional mix is the determination to solve the problem which Norah presents to them. Where is the sense that perhaps some "tough love" is necessary in order to rescue this young woman from such a destructive lifestyle?

Chapter 19

Chapter 19 Summary

Despite the grief in her life, Reta continues to immerse herself in the fictional world of Alicia and Roman. Tom and the girls still watch the news on television and are presently fixated on the American presidential election, which seemed to have more to do with "chads" than with actual votes. They all agree that there is quite a contradiction between the election results in Florida and the proud words of the American constitution as it outlines a government system of checks and balances.

In the meantime, Christine and Natalie also study for their exams. French, history, math, and language arts are still important subjects even in the light of their sister's rejection of all that is normal in society. Reta muses to herself that perhaps it is all this normalcy which is so monstrous. Everything seems to be turned on its head. She has increasing difficulty holding on to a normal orientation to her life. How is it possible, she wonders, that she can sit in front of her computer and worry about the outcome of Alicia's and Roman's romance, or that Tom can just sit comfortably in his easy chair and read a new book on trilobites? The wind blows, and the snow drifts piles up against the house. How can she still maintain her composure in the face of Norah's absence?

Chapter 19 Analysis

Life goes on according to its normal routine for the Winters family. Christine and Natalie continue to be oriented in the real world of school, study, and exams; Tom continues his daily work as a doctor and relaxes in the evening. Reta, however, hides in Alicia's and Roman's world and considers the progression of their lives in her narrative.

Once again, Reta's tries to negotiate the barriers between her fictional and real worlds. Her thoughts turn to Norah, but once again, it is only her thoughts that move. Action does not appear to follow her maternal worries and concerns. Although she knows that the weather has brought chilling temperatures and snow storms, Reta is more interested in her own internal world. How is it, she asks herself, that I can still be so composed? Isn't reality monstrous? Such thoughts, of course, do not lend themselves well to the need to communicate with Norah. More to the point, Norah desperately needs to be rescued from her vagabond and lonely life, but there seems to be little in the way of determination to accomplish this goal in the hearts and minds of the Winters family.

Chapter 20

Chapter 20 Summary

This chapter is a flashback to the initial events surrounding Norah's disappearance. When Norah first went missing, Reta thought that perhaps her problems stemmed from her relationship with Ben Abbot. She deplores the fact that young adults in the twenty-first century live in an age of prolonged childhood and protracted dependency on their parents. After they had discovered that Norah was living the life of a vagabond, Tom and Reta had driven to Toronto to visit Ben in the basement apartment he shared with their daughter. It had been Reta's intention to demonstrate her disapproval of Ben, but she soon realized that he was as distraught and puzzled about Norah's sudden change as she was. Ben told them that Norah had changed drastically in the few weeks prior to her disappearance. She had become uncharacteristically irritable and short-tempered. Ben thought that she might have had a problem with one of her professors, but when he tried to question her about it Norah became very angry. Soon afterwards she had disappeared. Ben had assumed that she had gone shopping or perhaps had returned to Orangetown. It was only after several days that a friend told him Norah had been seen panhandling at the corner of Bloor and Bathurst.

When he finished recounting his story, Ben burst into tears of unrestrained grief, and Reta understood that she, Tom, and Ben all shared the same experience of loss and disappointment. She also understood that there was nothing she could have done to save Norah from herself.

Chapter 20 Analysis

Reta continues to search out the reason for Norah's disappearance. It is, of course, quite natural for a distraught mother to blame Ben Abbot, the boyfriend; he is basically a stranger to the Winters family. However, the discussion that followed in his basement apartment soon convinced both Reta and Tom that Ben grieved for Norah. What Reta does not appear to notice, is that there is a complete lack of communication between Norah and Ben. Even after he had learned that his girlfriend was living on the streets of Toronto, Ben had not gone to the corner where she was panhandling, but had behaved in the same strange aloof manner that is also the hallmark of the Winters family. The expected rescue attempt by a loving boyfriend is completely missing.

Ben's account of the events leading up to Norah's disappearance gives Reta yet another excuse to do nothing. She believes that if Ben could not talk to Norah, and if Ben could not prevent her from running away, then she is exonerated from any self-blame or guilt. The blame for Norah's behavior is placed on Norah; she is beyond rescue in Reta's eyes.

Chapter 21

Chapter 21 Summary

Following her memories about the encounter with Ben, Reta once again becomes totally absorbed in the task of creating a fictional, yet believable world for her characters. She worries about the development of Alicia's personality, her upcoming wedding, her choice of career, her age, her appearance. Should she write the novel in the first person? How should she detail something of Alicia's personality in the vocabulary she uses? How should she dress?

Reta realizes that she cannot create a perfect woman as the heroine of this novel. There must be some imperfections; this is not a romance with impossibly beautiful people. Reta senses that in some ways, this constant preoccupation with a world that only exists in her imagination is not a normal activity to anyone but writers. "This matters," she thinks, "the remaking of an untenable world through the nib of a pen; it matters so much I can't stop doing it."

Chapter 21 Analysis

This chapter finds Reta totally immersed in the world of her novel-in-progress, *Thyme in Bloom*. Her earlier encounter with Ben has significantly relieved her of the pressure to so something constructive about her daughter's vagrant life in Toronto. She is able to ignore the real world and immerse herself in the problems of creating realistic characters in a fictional world. Reta admits to herself that this fictional world matters enormously to her; it matters so much, in fact, that she cannot stop doing it. This ceaseless activity in the creation of a suitable world for Alicia and Roman, the constant worry about their lives and relationships, is placed in an odd juxtaposition with Reta's failure to create a livable world for Norah.

Chapter 22

Chapter 22 Summary

It is another early morning in the Winters' household; the kitchen telephone rings and Reta answers it. The male voice on the other end of the telephone introduces himself as Arthur Springer from her publishers, Scribano & Lawrence. He informs Reta that he has the honor of being her new editor. Of course, he can never really replace old Mr. Scribano, but he is willing to place himself entirely at her service. He believes that he can be of more help to her in the writing of her new novel, *Thyme in Bloom*, if Reta would just send him the first draft of anything she has already written. Reta protests that much of the novel is only in her mind, and that there is really no first draft in existence at all. Arthur suggests that perhaps Reta would find it helpful to read another author he has had published and promises to send her a copy of this novel as soon as possible. Reta is still not eager to comply with his request for her first draft, so he tries another tactic. He tells Reta how much he loves her character, Alicia. In fact, he insists that he is so devoted to her that he has read *My Thyme is Up* several times. Each time, he is impressed anew by Alicia's "golden qualities," her generosity, and her goodness. He declares that it is the character's goodness which holds such an attraction for him: "her profound human goodness." Reta's protests are silenced.

Chapter 22 Analysis

Reta has her first encounter with her new editor at the publishing house of Scribano & Lawrence in this chapter. Mr. Arthur Springer seems to be enthusiastic about his new author and insists that she send him her first draft so that he can be of as much help as possible.

In attempting to convince her when to send him a first draft, Arthur comments that he loved her first novel so much that he read it several times. He remarks that Alicia is a wonderful fictional character and that it is her goodness which attracts him. Strangely enough, the fictional Alicia possesses the same type of goodness as the real-life Norah. Perhaps Reta's silence indicates a sudden understanding that she has been trying to figure out Norah through the creation of Alicia.

Chapter 23

Chapter 23 Summary

The Winters' friends all have varying opinions about how the situation with Norah ought to be handled. Some believe that she ought to be kidnapped and reprogrammed. Reta actually had once tried to forcibly remove Norah from her street corner, but her daughter's screaming had called attention to her attempt, and Reta had hastily returned to her car. Others suggested that living on the street was not a real problem at all, and they simply could not understand why Reta and Tom were so concerned.

Reta and Tom had also consulted a psychiatrist, who advised them not to interfere in the situation. The doctor believed that Norah was actually giving the gift of freedom to herself, and that this was a process in her life which should not be interrupted. "Vagrancy can be thoughtful or careless; she has chosen the latter," he told them. The family is not convinced, though. Christine and Natalie believe that something terrible must have happened to Norah in order for her to make such a drastic change in her life. They wonder if perhaps she is not in her right mind after all. Grandmother Lois tearfully declares that she cannot bear to think about Norah on the street.

Then, of course, there are those friends who propose decidedly silly solutions. One of Norah's friends, Tracy Halliday, had come up with the idea of taking a huge jar of marbles to Norah. The marbles were supposed to represent the number of Saturdays in Norah's life if she lived to be eighty. The entire idea behind the jar of marbles lay in its visible representation of the days and weeks Norah had left. Norah was not impressed; she allowed Tracy to place the jar of marbles beside her on the sidewalk and just as impassively left them there when she returned to the hostel for the night.

Reta's journalist friend Emma, who had lost her own son to a heroin overdose, tries to comfort Reta by assuring her that she is still connected to her daughter in time and space. Reta knows where Norah lives; she knows that she isn't drunk or on drugs; she hasn't mutilated herself or shaved off her hair. She tries to find some comfort in her friend's words, but she is neither entirely convinced nor reassured.

Other friends try to be helpful by telling the Winters that they are praying for Norah, or by stating that all is well and will end well. In the meantime, Tom has also been considering the question of Norah's life on the street and has come to the conclusion that she is probably being manipulative, punishing her parents for some undisclosed wrong they have committed. Reta cannot accept Tom's explanations, and she finds little comfort in the words of her friends.

Reta visits Danielle again. Her friend has not changed her ideas about Norah's reasons for leaving her old life behind, and Danielle still insists that Norah is reacting to her state of powerlessness in society. This time her friend's viewpoint resonates within Reta as

true, and she comes to accept the idea that this is the reason for Norah's inexplicable change of lifestyle.

Chapter 23 Analysis

The sense of confusion caused by Norah's vagrant lifestyle becomes more complicated for the Winters family. Everyone around them appears to have some perfectly workable solution to the problem, but each suggestion by well-meaning friends brings a painful renewal of grief and bewilderment to Reta and Tom. What is wrong with Norah? That question haunts them as they attempt to live a normal life and accept the loss of their daughter.

Reta's maternal heart becomes more entangled in bewilderment and grief. The escalation of her confusion and uncertainty is apparent in the inner dialogue she carries on with herself. Reta cannot even discover what path she ought to take in order to solve her terrible dilemma. She contemplates one idea after another, but cannot find a consistent explanation or solution. Sometimes she thinks that compulsive cleaning will somehow bring order back to her world; at other times she is convinced that Norah is too much like her; in other moments, she desperately takes hold of Danielle's ideas about powerlessness and woman's lack of place in the world.

Chapter 24

Chapter 24 Summary

Reta writes another letter in this chapter, the third in the series. On December 2, 2000 she writes to Dennis Ford-Halpern after she had finished reading his book, "The Goodness Gap." She chides him for failing to mention the contributions of any women and calls this omission "a moral dilemma in itself." Her loss of Norah comes to the forefront once again as she writes this letter; Reta has a compulsion to write about the heartbreak and anguish Norah has caused her to suffer. She describes her daughter as alienated from family and society and echoes Danielle's sentiment that Norah cannot help but react in this manner. She is a woman in a universe that ignores her existence. She describes Norah's world as one in which all she can see "is an endless series of obstacles, an alignment of locked doors." Since she wants to protect her other daughters from a similar fate, Reta tells Dennis Ford-Halpern that they must be given every opportunity to be fully human. She signs the letter "Yours, Rita Orange d'Ville."

Chapter 24 Analysis

Reta's confusion and distraction is once again in evidence. In trying to find goodness and to discern its meaning, she reacts in a surprisingly hostile manner to the author of this book. Reta has no real idea of goodness at all; her world is ordered according to the dimensions of her grief. She also has no idea of what is taking place in Norah's life, and so she repeats Danielle's unsupported idea that powerlessness is at the root of her daughter's dilemma. Her sense of reality has become warped and shaped into an uninspiring, flat, and tedious repetition of another's perspective. The reader comes to question whether she will ever understand.

Chapter 25

Chapter 25 Summary

This chapter opens with Reta having lunch with Danielle. A long discussion on the nature of virtue dominates the conversation. Reta is also aware that Danielle is quite disappointed with her decision to write another novel instead of concentrating on the work of translating another one of her books. Her friend possesses enormous persuasive powers, and Reta is beginning to think that perhaps novel writing is a pointless exercise when there is so much moral injustice in the world. She immediately questions this conclusion, though, and thinks that novels do have an important role in the life of a society. "Novels help us turn down the volume of our own interior discourse," she reasons. Another thought follows, though, that unless a novel can provide a rational and hopeful view of life then, it will only be so much "narrative crumble. Unless, unless . . ."

Reta thinks about that word and describes it as the "worry word" of life: "unless you're lucky, unless you're healthy, fertile, unless you're loved and fed," then you are in danger of disappearing into dark despair. That thought culminates in a question to her friend. How is it possible that Danielle has been able to bear life for these eighty-five years? Danielle's answer is surprising. In order to move forward, she says, the past must be forgotten. Danielle has completely deleted her early life - her childhood, her parents, her home, everything - and re-invented herself.

Chapter 25 Analysis

This chapter carries the same title as the novel: "Unless." The fact is not incidental to understanding the story. Reta describes "unless" as the "worry word of the English language." Thus, the author prods the reader toward the obvious conclusion that the theme of this book is woven around the emotion of worry and all that accompanies it - bewilderment, grief, disappointment, suppressed rage, dislocated lives, and so on.

On the other hand, "unless" is also a word of hope, because the presence of an "unless" in one's life raises the possibility of a "tunnel into the light." Reta is still unable to integrate goodness and grief into the reality of her life, though. Norah's disappearance has taken apart Reta's world, but she continues her search to maintain her orientation within reality. Her visit with Danielle Westerman again raises the question of Norah, and of the nature of goodness and virtue. In spite of all of her questioning and thinking, though, Reta still cannot stand back from Norah's experiences and search for an objective answer to the question of her disappearance. Her inability to do this is Reta's greatest flaw.

Chapter 26

Chapter 26 Summary

The story moves forward to the month of December. The scene opens with Reta and Tom walking hand in hand in the Orangetown cemetery on a Sunday morning. She speaks of her fascination with the stone monuments, particularly an "ugly, vast, and arresting" one in which these words are carved: "Mary Leland, 1863-1921." Underneath the name there is a single line: "She Took Good Care of Her Chickens." Reta describes the inscription as baffling and says that most people assume that the stone mason made a mistake and meant to carve the word "children' instead. Her thoughts veer toward the long-dead Mary and she speculates about the kind of life she must have led.

Suddenly, she stops, realizing that "Lately, [she had] been trying to focus [her] thoughts on the immensity rather than the particulars." Exerting her will, thoughts of Mary Leland are banished from Reta's mind, and she concentrates instead on the three acres of monuments to the dead, thinking about the many people who have died. From death, her mind wanders to marriage and Tom. She remembers what he told her about his childhood and his troubling memories of his mother, who was such a terrible housekeeper that nothing was ever cleaned properly.

As Tom and Reta continue their walk in the cemetery, they talk about his mother, Lois Winters, who has been a widow for twelve years. Reta sees the gaps between her mother-in-law and herself. For instance, although Lois meticulously keeps Reta's books stacked on her coffee table, she has never read any of her work. Reta is merely the wife of her son and the mother of her grandchildren.

Lois loves her granddaughters. Since Norah left there has been a change in her. Although she has dinner with them every night, she no longer enjoys mealtime conversations. She keeps asking the question "Where's Norah?" and then inventing some story about Norah's whereabouts. Reta assumes that once Norah is back in the family, Lois will snap out of her delusions.

Reta then mentions that the whole family has grown into a silence that seems to reflect Norah's silence. Sometimes she wonders if they have all become actors in a shadow play about Norah's life. Reta's thoughts quickly turn away from these musings though, to focus on the family's outside circle of friends and acquaintances. Colin and Mariette Glass have reconciled; Jean Chretien is the Prime Minister again; and Margaret Atwood has won the Booker Prize. She thinks of Christmas and how the family will spend it, and with this thought, finds herself thinking of Norah again. Reta is thrown out of her private sphere of security and safety; she wonders about Norah on the cold streets of Toronto.

Then, instantly, she forces her thoughts away from Norah, returning to the fictional problems of Alicia and Roman. She worries about how she is going to end her novel and then finds herself wondering how it is possible that she can "bristle with invention"

when she contemplates the ending of her book while enduring the grief of her daughter's absence.

Chapter 26 Analysis

Reta and Tom walk through the Orangetown Cemetery, a metaphor for the death of their family through Norah's self-destructive choice to live a vagrant life on the streets of Toronto. Here in the quiet of the cemetery, they are surrounded by death in the shape of granite monuments. Norah's silence has extended to her family. Reta thinks that perhaps Norah's disappearance is just a play on a stage where the rest of the family are relegated to the shadows.

This chapter follows the line of thought from two previous chapters: "Otherwise" and "Instead." It continues the theme of radical displacement, for what is more radical and antithetical to life than death? Reta's moody thoughts demonstrate her natural penchant for the dark side of woman's experience; she believes that it is this which ultimately gives direction to her life. She also ponders that displacement accompanied by suffering must be part of a woman's unfolding life; the meaning is found in the process, not in whatever conclusion that life may come to in the end.

Chapter 27

Chapter 27 Summary

One day just after Christmas, Arthur Springer telephones Reta. He tells her with his customary boisterous enthusiasm that her partial first draft of *Thyme in Bloom* is quite wonderful and that he had been up all night thinking about Alicia. Arthur once again is filled with admiration for Alicia's goodness. Reta interrupts him and tries to tell him that this is just the very point she is trying to work out. What is goodness? What is it's essence? And so on. But Arthur rushes on to his next subject: Roman. He thinks that Roman is an indescribable and complex character. He tells her that he has read all the reviews of her first novel, *My Thyme is Up*, and he continues to speak even though Reta tries to interrupt his flow of words.

Arthur wants Reta to come to New York as soon as possible. He claims that it is absolutely urgent that they have a conference about the new novel before she finishes the first draft. Reta refuses to go to New York, but he is persistent and suggests instead that he come to see her in Orangetown. Arrangements are made for Arthur to visit her on January second.

Chapter 27 Analysis

The real world beckons Reta once again, this time in the form of her second encounter with her new editor. For a second time, she gives in to his demands. She had given Arthur a partial first draft of her novel against her better judgment after their first conversation, and now he demands that she comes to see him in New York. She protests somewhat more vigorously this time, and he modifies his demand for an immediate meeting but still insists that that they should have one around the New Year. In this interaction, Reta appears to be a woman without much knowledge of her own wants, needs, and rights, although she seems to think about these matters often throughout the book.

Chapter 28

Chapter 28 Summary

Reta writes another letter, the fourth in the series. This time it is to a writer called Emily Helt of the Chicago Tribune. The subject concerns the writer's review of a book by a female author. Reta takes issue with Helt's thesis that women writers are only concerned with feelings and that all relationships are interpreted through "the lens of sensual yearning." She does agree, however, with Emily Helt's assessment of her first novel. Reta assents to the judgment that it was quickly written and a light read, but she has great problems with the idea of being placed in the shadows and disregarded as a serious writer. Reta tells her that in literature class in high school, she had learned that the great themes of literature were birth, death, love, connections, work, and understanding. A confinement to those themes was definitely not an indication that the writer suffered from a lack of range in subject and theme. Reta then comes to the central point of her short letter - a defense of her idea that each individual must come to an understanding of both good and evil. She claims that there are no rules about virtue or vice, but that the human race, on the whole, appears happier when doing good.

Reta concludes by revealing that her daughter has been isolated from the real world precisely because she feels disregarded and displaced. In her opinion, her daughter's strategy for dealing with the deep frustration of existence is to be self-sacrificial. Norah can never have both goodness and greatness; she will always have to choose one or the other. She signs the letter "Yours, Xeta d'Orange."

Chapter 28 Analysis

This chapter is another letter in Reta's series of letters; in this one, Reta disputes the author's idea that women writers are consumed with a sexual interpretation of life. Although she agrees with Helt's estimation of her first novel, she also displays a flash of annoyance at being sidelined and dismissed. She argues that the great themes of literature have been proven more than adequate in the writer's work of interpreting the world.

Reta's central point involves the idea that necessity is placed upon each individual to discover virtue and that there can be no rule for goodness by reason of its nature as a virtue. Although she declines to define goodness, she nevertheless believes that the human race is happier when it is good. Her last point is simply another repetitive chorus about Norah's powerlessness and frustration. Reta has not come very far in understanding her daughter.

Chapter 29

Chapter 29 Summary

The date is January 2, 2001. Instead of meeting with Arthur Springer, Reta has telephoned his office and assertively told his secretary that she would not be available until the fifth. Arthur had acquiesced to her demand and arranged to meet with her on the nineteenth. In the meantime, since it is a Tuesday morning, Reta is enjoying some time with her friends at the Orange Blossom Room in town. As usual, the four friends discuss life, love, men, and friendship.

When she returns home again, she goes to her study and contemplates the novel, which she has left in limbo since her last conversation with Arthur Springer. She finds herself reluctant to continue with it, yet she knows that it is this novel that has been able to distract her from grieving for Norah. At once she is back in the world of Alicia and Roman. She worries about their wedding; about his work as a trombonist; about Alicia's goodness.

Reta muses that goodness is not a virtue that can be guaranteed. It takes practice to live a principled life; "contractual morality" does not prevent people from making mistakes. In the end, goodness is simply what people want to do; it is a convenient virtue and thus has no force whatsoever. With these thoughts, Reta leaves her writing and begins the joyless task of taking down the Christmas tree. She thinks about the telephone conversation with Arthur Springer as she works.

Chapter 29 Analysis

For the first time, Reta asserts herself against the demands of her new editor at Scribano & Lawrence. Unwilling to give up her time with her friends, she telephones his secretary and informs her that she cannot possibly meet with Arthur Springer. The usual kind of conversation takes place in the Orange Blossom Room, but these meetings with her friends appear to ground Reta in reality again. When she returns from the morning of coffee and conversation, she does not spend much time writing her novel. The banal duties of being a housewife call louder to her, and she embarks upon the task of taking down the Christmas tree.

Chapter 30

Chapter 30 Summary

After the Christmas break, Natalie and Christine start to visit Norah again. Reta remembers the package they had given to Norah: a thermal lined tracksuit, perfumed soap, a brush and comb, fruit and chocolate. The family believes that she probably gave everything away to other homeless people on the street, but no one is willing to talk about it.

Reta wishes that someone would perform a lobotomy on her so that she could forget some of the painful memories of her life, especially those which involve Norah. She remembers that the week before, she had noticed that Norah's wrists were ringed with scabs and red sores. She mentions Norah's wrists to Tom, and they speculate about the possibility that she has used a razor in a suicide attempt. Tom travels to Toronto and tries to take a look at Norah without actually touching or speaking to her; he leaves a jar of cortisone cream and a pair of long sheepskin gloves next to the square of cardboard on which she sits. Reta realizes that they have not been so intensely involved with Norah since she was an infant. Now, of course, everything they try to do is based on sheer guesswork.

Tom wonders if Norah is suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome. He forgets about his trilobites and spends hours on his computer researching stress and trauma. From that point, Reta begins to think about Roman, Alicia's trombonist lover; she now wishes that she had made him a doctor instead. Her mind wanders off into a long inner dialogue concerning the kinds of work authors give to their fictional characters and how they are crucial to their development in the story.

Chapter 30 Analysis

The story takes a different turn in this chapter and returns the reader to the world that Norah inhabits. Reta's observation that her daughter's wrists are strangely reddened leads her husband, Tom, to embark on prolonged research about stress and trauma. Although Reta's mind once again meanders around the fictional city of Wychwood thinking about the characters of Alicia and Roman, this chapter is a turning point in the story of Norah.

Chapter 31

Chapter 31 Summary

Reta writes another letter, the fifth in the series. This time it is addressed to Peter Harding on the occasion of his death! She begins by mentioning his obituary, which had appeared in the *Globe and Mail* that morning. She tells him why she reads obituaries, saying that many years ago, when she was still a young writer, an older friend had advised her to read them because they contain the "putty" of life: the personal details which lend themselves so well to giving authenticity to a writer's fictional world.

After her comments about Peter Harding's life, Reta turns to her own difficulties. "I am going through some bleak days," she writes in her letter. She wants the comfort of the universe, but like Norah, she does not know how to take its component parts and assemble them into a cocoon of security. There is something missing in the arrangement of the world, but she cannot quite define what is wrong. Reta is fearful that she has missed out on some indefinable something, and that her daughter feels the same way. She signs the letter "I grieve for you too. Rita Hayworth Orange Blossom City.

Chapter 31 Analysis

Reta composes another letter in her mind as she peruses the obituaries in the Globe and Mail. Once again she turns to the subject of Norah, but she is unable to present another perspective on her daughter's problem. This chapter essentially finishes the long inner dialogue in which Reta has been indulging since the beginning of the novel. Reality is about to enter her life once again.

Chapter 32

Chapter 32 Summary

Reta finally meets Arthur Springer when he arrives at her home on January nineteenth. He tells her that it is an honor to be greeted so warmly and he praises her lovely home, the beautiful scenery, the rose light of the late afternoon. He never stops speaking and, as usual, Reta has difficulty carrying on a conversation with him. However, they soon begin to discuss her novel.

Arthur is impressed with the three hundred pages of her manuscript. However, he notes that the most important chapter has not been finished: the last chapter. He tries to suggest to Reta how the story of Alicia and Roman should end, telling her "I think of the final chapter as the kiln . . . the clay is still malleable, but the ending will harden your words into something enduring and beautiful"

Reta tells him that she is completely open to editing suggestions, but her words begin a rather heated discussion on the nature of writing, the problems of discovering identity, and Arthur's complete conviction that he can mold this new novel into something current and contemporary. He even suggests that she change the title to just *Bloom*. Reta can hardly believe his audacity.

Arthur suggests other significant changes as well; the most egregious one involves making Roman the focus of the novel instead of Alicia. Arthur argues that Roman is the moral center of the book and that Alicia is simply too lightweight for that role. Reta states rather bluntly that he wants these changes because Alicia is a woman, and the very fact of her femaleness renders her incapable of being the moral center of the novel in his eyes. The editor claims that the character is unfocused and undisciplined. Therefore, no serious reader would ever accept Alicia as the "decisive fulcrum of a serious work of art." Reta, however, insists that her own interpretation of Arthur's problem with Alicia is correct.

Chapter 32 Analysis

Reta is grounded in her real life as she is forced to deal with the loud, aggressive, and insistent Arthur Springer on his visit to her home. Once again, she refuses to passively accept his assessment of her characters and forcibly insists that he has a major problem with the main character because she is a woman. This chapter marks another turning point in Reta's life, as she shifts from her habitual attitude of passivity to one of assertiveness.

Chapter 33

Chapter 33 Summary

Just as Reta is insisting that Arthur has problems with Alicia simply because she is a woman, three things happen in quick succession. As Arthur lifts his arm in a polite protest, he knocks over the wine bottle on the coffee table, frightening Pet so that he slides backwards, ending up in a corner. At that moment Reta's two daughters walk in, and as Reta tries to introduce them to the editor, the phone rings.

It is Tom. He tells her that Norah is in the Toronto General Hospital with pneumonia. Reta and the girls immediately drive to the city, leaving Arthur in the house by himself. He makes himself at home, finds the television, another bottle of wine and settles into the den for the evening. He is suddenly aware that someone is knocking at the door and when he opens it finds Lois with her usual dish of dessert. She had been waiting for the usual signal that dinner was to be served, and seeing nothing, had come over to investigate. The two of them sit down to dinner and a conversation follows.

Chapter 33 Analysis

Events begin to follow one another in quick succession. A comic scene unfolds in which the clumsy Arthur activates a series of events by merely raising his arm in protest at Reta's words. Simultaneously, the telephone rings. Finally, she is told the news that she had longed to hear for almost a year. Reta is no longer on the street. However, she is in the hospital with pneumonia. As quickly as possible, Reta and her two daughters head for the Toronto General Hospital, leaving Arthur to his own devices. Reta no longer cares what he thinks; her thoughts are completely focused on Norah.

Chapter 34

Chapter 34 Summary

Lois finally tells her life's story in this chapter, and Arthur Springer listens without interrupting her. She beings with a play she had attended many years ago and the sight of two young people sitting in front of her very much in love. She remarks that she is now a widow, her husband having died in 1988. She tells Arthur that sometimes she would look out of her kitchen window at one of the oak trees on which a lone leaf still remained. She could not be sure whether this leaf was so deformed that it could not fall off the branch, or if it was healthy and strong. Either way the leaf was an anomaly.

She changes the subject and asks if Mr. Springer likes a good bread pudding. She informs him that she has a list of one hundred desserts arranged in alphabetical order in a recipe box. She had thought that it was rather mean when her granddaughter, Christine, had made fun of her dessert list and careful organization of each evening's dessert.

Lois talks some more, ranging from Tom's birth to the births of her granddaughters; she then changes the subject to speak of Crystal McGinn, the woman who once lived next door. Lois demonstrates that she is as adept as her daughter-in-law at changing subjects in mid-stride. Next up for discussion is the fact that she had once won a prize at the Orangetown Fair for German honey cake, and then she quickly moves on to say how much she enjoys watching Oprah on television every day; she tells Arthur that she schedules her daily activities around her favorite show And that Oprah had helped her to develop some new-found courage.

Finally, Lois touches on the subject of Norah. Lois understands about difficult times; she once had to stay in bed for two entire weeks when she was in her early fifties. She was able to resume life only when she discovered the joy of housecleaning, which had enabled her to cope with life again. In spite of this, she goes on to say, lately she has been experiencing some difficulties with speaking and fears that people will think she is crazy if she expresses her opinion about what really happened to Norah. Women are expected to be strong, she says, but she knows that this is not true. Women are easily injured. Now that Norah is in the hospital with pneumonia, she feels that everything would be alright. She breaks off to say that she hopes Mr. Springer likes bread pudding with lemon sauce, and then expresses her anxiousness for Reta to phone

Chapter 34 Analysis

For one brief chapter, the reader is permitted a glimpse into the life of Lois Winters. Her silence and self-denial have disappeared in the warmth of Arthur's request to tell him all about herself. For Lois, as well many of the novel's other characters, the lack of communication and silence in the family has led to a severe sense of despair and

anxiety. Through a monologue aimed at the hapless editor while they share dinner without the rest of the Winters family, the reader learns some facts about Lois' life. It seems that Lois and Reta are not very different after all. Both of them appear to have the same hapless talent for jumping from subject to subject with only the slightest connection between them; both are absorbed in a closed world. If she has similar habits to Reta, though, she is far from identical; in this chapter, Lois Winters is at last revealed as a flesh and blood person with her own life, her own sorrows, and her own thoughts.

Chapter 35

Chapter 35 Summary

Norah is asleep on her hospital bed connected to an oxygen tube. Reta sits on a plastic chair drawn close to the bed and considers it heaven to be so near her daughter, even though she is alarmed by the sight of Norah's scarred red hands resting on the white hospital coverlet. Tom tells her that the injuries are a combination of second-degree burns and resulting infection.

When did Norah get burned? No one seems to know. Natalie reminds her family that Norah had been wearing garden gloves since the previous summer, even in the middle of July when the weather was hot and humid. Reta suddenly remembers that Norah had been wearing these same gloves when they found her on the corner of Bloor and Bathurst last April. She had assumed that

Norah wore them to protect her hands, but now she realizes that her daughter had been in severe pain. Francis Quinn from the Promise Hostel had told Tom that Norah even slept in the gloves, removing them only to eat. Although this seemed rather odd to the staff, everyone dismissed her as just another eccentric street person. Dr. DeVita from the burn unit declared that the burns the gloves had hidden were at least six months old.

Reta's horrified mind goes back to the previous summer, and she wonders if Ben had known about the burns; Tom informs her that Ben had assured him he had no idea of how Norah had received those injuries. Reta feels relieved and then phones Lois to tell her about the latest news. Reta remains by Norah's bedside all through the night. Finally, at three-thirty in the morning, Norah opens her eyes, looks at her mother, and smiles faintly at her. She then reaches for Reta. "Norah, you're awake," she remarks. Norah mouths the word "yes."

Chapter 35 Analysis

In this chapter, the connection between mother and daughter is re-established after nearly a year of alienation and silence. Reta's love for her daughter may not extend to completely understanding her; nevertheless, there is no doubt that her love for her daughter, and her daughter's for her, completely ground Reta again. She is free to live her life in her real world, and Roman and Alicia are now easily banished from her mind.

Chapter 36

Chapter 36 Summary

Reta writes one last letter, the sixth in the series. It is dated February 1, 2001 and is addressed to Russell Sandor, a short story writer. She gives a short synopsis of the story, in which a Czech philosophy professor has moved to Los Angeles and discovered that American culture is "raw and thin and undigested." He finds the fast food hideous and the English language eroded, but he is especially horrified to pass by a medical supply shop one day and discover a mastectomy bra in the window display. The professor is so horrified that the author describes him as feeling nothing but nauseous disgust.

"Get a grip, Mr. Sandor," Reta orders him. She tells him in no uncertain terms that a mastectomy bra is like any other bra. It varies only in that it has two pockets in which a gel-like breast replacement form can be placed. Reta mentions her writer friend, Emma Allen, who has had to endure the death of her husband, the suicide of her son, and a double mastectomy; with the last, she has also lost the integrity of her body.

Reta suggests that the Czech professor in Sandor's story must hate women. In fact, he hates not only women, but any garment that touches a woman's body, any chair she sits on, and, in particular, any words she writes. Reta says that the character's reference to "the matter of woman's ink" as self-pitying, demanding, and claustrophobic reveals everything that makes him a misogynist.

Reta writes, "I am shockingly offended." In fact, she goes on to say, she has written several letters during the past year, but never mailed a single one. However, she is so outraged by this story that she is going to make an exception, and actually mail the letter to him. Reta writes that she has experienced a terrible year of bereavement and estrangement, but that now she fears nothing. Her ordeal pales in comparison to what Norah had gone through.

She then hints at what happened to her daughter, saying that the roots of her estrangement were in "a spring day like any other," when a single horrifying moment caught on videotape (the nature of which is not revealed at this point), had turned out to be the pivotal event in Norah's life. Reta acknowledges that she had held on to the wrong theory about why her daughter disappeared. She ends her letter by signing it "Reta Winters Six Corners Road, R.R.4 Orangetown."

Chapter 36 Analysis

Reta's words make up this letter, but behind them we hear the voice of Carol Shields, the novel's author. Shields was diagnosed with stage three breast cancer in 1998, five years before this book was published. There is a discontinuity in the plot line in this chapter, in that breast cancer had never been mentioned earlier in connection with the

character of Emma Allen, and certainly mastectomies are not part of the novel's plot. The apparent discontinuity makes sense in light of the author's own experiences, though. Carol Shields had continued to write after her diagnosis, and by the time she wrote "Unless" she knew that she was dying; she died the same year it was published.

Is there significance in the fact that this is the sixth letter written by Reta? Throughout the novel, Shields makes some allusions to the Christian religion, and it seems clear that she had familiarity with the Anglican tradition. In the Scriptures, the number six is a significant number. It is not only the number that represents humanity, but also the number that represents humanity's incompleteness; seven is the number of perfection. In this sixth letter, the author goes outside of the story line and, for a moment, speaks on a personal level. She obliquely refers to her own breast cancer through the story of the Czech professor and his horrified reaction toward a mastectomy bra. Shields' impending death is also obliquely referred to in the number six, as her own life is incomplete and nearing its end. Although the letter hints at Norah's reasons for disappearing, it does not give any concrete information on that topic; it is the author who rages against the incompleteness of her own life. Thus, this chapter must be seen in juxtaposition against the plot line of the novel.

Chapter 37

Chapter 37 Summary

The novel returns to the plot line in this final chapter, in which we learn that Gemma Walsh, Reta's friend, has been appointed to a university Chair in Theology. Reta speaks about language as the material that gives events a coherent narrative, because life is really "full of isolated events." Gemma has told her that the Christian faith is balanced on the words "already" and "not yet;" "Christ has *already* come, but he has *not yet* come." Reta continues by explaining that if one could bring two opposing images together in the same way in which the traditional Christian faith brings the Trinity together - God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit - then it could be understood that unsorted, yet unrelated words, can exert a powerful and metaphysical force. She uses the word "unless" as an example. She does not believe in mere coincidence and, as a writer, does not want to use coincidence in her plot line simply to bring the story to an ending.

At this point, the reader is finally told why Norah ran away and lived on the street. One spring day she had gone shopping to Honest Ed's on Nathan Philips Square in Toronto. She emerged from the store with a plastic dish rack. Just as she did so, a woman dressed in Muslim clothes poured gasoline over her veil and gown and then set herself on fire. Norah was so horrified by the sight that she began to beat out the flames with the dish rack. The plastic became a second fire and burned itself into Norah's flesh.

Norah screamed, "Stop!" at the woman, and continued to beat at the flames, but she found that her hands were sinking into burning, melting human flesh. Fireman pulled Norah away, and she was taken by ambulance to the hospital where she was given first aid. However, Norah slipped out of the emergency ward without giving her name. Reta says that the family would never have known if the security cameras outside of Honest Ed's had not videotaped the entire incident. They would not have known "*Unless* we ask[ed] questions."

As for the rest of the story - Reta refused to listen to her editor, but her new novel was successful and Danielle Westerman began translating her own work at age eighty-six. As the novel closes, Reta is thinking about writing a third novel in the trilogy, entitled *Autumn Thyme*, and Norah is recovering at home.

Chapter 37 Analysis

In this chapter, we are finally led to the end of the story. Reta's grief is gone, and in its place is a renewed interest in her life and a new assertiveness. The story leaves the reader with a number of questions, though. Norah left home partially because she was in severe shock. Why did Norah leave the hospital? If she was in pain, why did she not seek medical help, or tell her parents? The reader still does not know the real reason

Norah left for a life of vagrancy. We are reminded in this way that the story is about Reta; her egocentric viewpoint remains until the end.

Characters

Norah Winters

Norah is the oldest of the three Winters daughters. She is described as bright, good, and docile. She horrifies the entire family when she decides to live the life of a vagabond on the streets of Toronto, forsaking everything that is meaningful in our culture: love, family, education, wealth, home. Norah is thoughtful and philosophical; like her mother, Reta, she struggles with the larger questions of life. Although her character is not as well-developed as that of Reta Winters and, in some ways, she remains in the background of the novel, the story centers around her disappearance.

Reta Winters

Reta Winters is a forty-three year old successful writer who began her work as a translator for the feminist philosopher, Danielle Westerman. When the story opens, she has achieved some modest success with her first novel, *My Thyme is Up*, which also won the Offenden Prize. Reta decides to write a sequel during the time of her daughter's disappearance. She is not legally married to her common-law husband, Tom Winters, but they have been together for twenty-six years and are the parents of three teenage daughters, Norah, Christine, and Natalie. Since Tom is a doctor, they enjoy an upper-middle class lifestyle in Orangetown. Reta is not blessed with a sunny personality but prefers to look at the dark side of life. That fundamental aspect of her character leads her down a dark path indeed as she struggles throughout the book to come to terms with Norah's disappearance. In her view, happiness is a fragile commodity, and once it is gone, one is forced to move into a totally different kind of life.

Danielle Westerman

Danielle is an eighty-five years old and is a tough-minded, single French-Canadian poet, philosopher, and Professor at the University of Toronto. She exerts a powerful influence over Reta's life, thought, and work. She does not appear often, but on the occasions when the author brings her into the story, she always influences the direction of Reta's life. Danielle brings a strong feminist perspective to the story; her central thesis is that the root of women's problems is their powerless position in a gendered world.

Tom Winters

Tom is about Reta's age and her common-law husband of twenty-six years; a tall thin man who is one of the local doctors in Orangetown. He appears in the background of the novel. The reader learns very little about him other than that he is respected and loved by his patients, and that he is enthralled by the study of trilobites.

Christine and Natalie Winters

Christine and Natalie are Norah's two younger sisters, aged sixteen and fourteen. They are portrayed as ordinary teenage girls, but with no obvious character flaws. They love their sister Norah and visit her every Saturday on the Toronto street corner where she panhandles.

Lois Winters

Lois is Tom's mother, and except for mealtimes in the evening, Reta has no relationship with her at all. She is a quiet non-entity, yet her love for Tom and her granddaughters is obvious.

Arthur Springer

After the elderly Mr. Scribano dies, thirty-eight-year-old Arthur is appointed in his place to be Reta's editor at Scribano & Lawrence. He is aggressive, loud, and insistent on having his way. He attempts to influence Reta's work on her new novel, *Thyme in Bloom*, but in the end fails.

Objects/Places

Orangetown, Ontario

The Winters family lives in a century old farmhouse outside of this town, just an hour north of Toronto.

GOODNESS

The single word on the sign that Norah Winters wears around her neck as she panhandles on the streets of Toronto.

Bloor at Bathurst

The street corner where Norah sits.

The Promise Hostel

A shelter for the homeless where Norah spends her nights.

The Orange Blossom Room

A restaurant in Orangetown where Reta meets with her friends on the first Tuesday of each month.

Trilobites

Tom's passionate hobby.

Pet

The Winters' golden retriever.

My Thyme is Up and *Thyme in Bloom*

Two novels written by Reta Winters.

The Offenden Prize

The prize Reta won for her first novel, *My Thyme is Up.*

The McGinn House

The name by which the locals refer to the Winters' home.

Themes

Displacement

In this novel, Carol Shields explores the theme of displacement or estrangement as well as its natural consequence, suffering. The most obvious example is the estrangement between Reta and her oldest daughter, Norah. However, this estrangement also extends to other members of the family, including her husband, Tom, their two other daughters, and her mother-in-law, Lois. Throughout the novel, there are no attempts by the characters to comfort each other in the face of what can only be described as a destructive change to their family.

Tom and Reta seem to have a relationship with little cohesiveness or common interests. He demonstrates no interest in her writing; she only tolerates his hobby of studying trilobites. His mother is even further removed from Reta. Although Lois eats dinner every night with Tom and his family, there is no common ground between these two very different women.

Reta and her various friends have several discussions on the displacement of women in a gendered society. Her feminist perspective is largely shaped by her elderly friend and mentor, Danielle Westerman, who persuades her that powerlessness is at the root of Norah's problems. The strongest characters in the novel are Norah Winters and Danielle Westerman. Norah demonstrates her ability to endure pain and estrangement in a dangerous setting without the support of her boyfriend, Ben Abbot, or of her father. Danielle is an older version of Norah in her ability to endure painful experiences and to construct a well-rounded, purposeful life without the necessity for long-term relationships with men.

Lastly, Reta is displaced from her real world as she works on the creation of a fictional world for her characters, Alicia and Roman, in the sequel to her first novel. The story of her grief in real time and real place is interwoven with a fictional world which, at times, appears to carry a greater weight than her own life. Throughout the novel, Reta demonstrates that displacement and despair are fundamental aspects of her personality. She believes that it is the dark side of woman's experience that gives direction to her life. Displacement is always accompanied by suffering as she attempts to come to terms with the stark nature of the present reality in which her life must unfold. Norah's experience almost convinces Reta that evolution into non-being and powerlessness is the natural state of women's lives - the ultimate displacement.

Love

Norah's disappearance causes Reta deep anguish as she confronts the radical lifestyle choice of a daughter whom she loves. She believes that even the love between a man and a woman can never be equal to that which exists between mother and daughter. A

daughter can never be erased from life. Reta demonstrates the strength of her maternal feelings for Norah by driving to the corner of Bloor and Bathurst each Wednesday to see her. She is even willing to accept Norah's silence and refusal to acknowledge her. Those encounters alone fill Reta with momentary happiness.

Even Reta's obsessive house cleaning and polishing is connected to her love for Norah. Her cleanliness is an attempt to shield her family from chaos and disorder; if she dusts and polishes enough she feels that she will be able to re-claim Norah from the street of Toronto. Her love for her daughter is sublimated into the meticulous care of her home. Reta's own life has become chaotic and she is desperate to maintain her orientation to the present in order to be ready for the day when Norah finally returns. Each moment of every day, Reta remains conscious in both her body and soul of the daughters to whom she has given life.

Norah is also obsessed with the question of love and is disturbed by a sense of her own inability to love enough. The whole of existence -the world around her, the beauty of nature- has so taken hold of her mind that she fears she can never encompass the whole of reality in order to love enough.

Norah's family loves her enough to check out the Promise Hostel where she stays each night. The result of that tour on a wet and windy night is a family united not just in their love for a sister and daughter, but in their grief for her as well. Grief and love may have become entangled into confusion and bewilderment, but there is never a hint of anger toward Norah. There is a sense of unconditional love for her; their lives are subordinated to the dimensions of their grief. Natalie and Christina even give up their beloved volleyball games on Saturday mornings in order to spend the day with Norah on the street. Grandmother Lois loves her granddaughter so much that she appears almost in a state of catatonic dementia as she constantly asks: "Where's Norah?" and then lapses into silence at family dinner.

Goodness

Norah has left the family in order to embark on the search for goodness. In fact, one of the central questions of the novel is: What is goodness? While she sits in silent passivity on her street corner begging for money, Norah wears a huge cardboard sign around her neck - GOODNESS. This formerly docile and loving child with her habitual goodness of character has unwittingly become the catalyst of a crisis in the life of her family. Even in her poverty, Norah feels compelled for the sake of goodness to give away nine-tenths of her money to other homeless people.

The word "goodness" has become a puzzle to Reta, because she really does not understand the concept at all. She tries to grasp its meaning by studying the history and development of the word, but she cannot come to a positive conclusion. She begins to think of goodness as a lack of virtue. Norah's experience has demonstrated that the truly good are doomed to become invisible and to reside in a world devoid of meaningful

activity. In fact, it seems to Reta that goodness has become an alien entity which is strangling her family to death.

Reta puzzles about goodness and depravity, thinking that if perhaps they were tangible, something could be done. One evening she even asks a physics friend if the theory of relativity could perhaps demonstrate that there is a decreased weight of one or the other in this world. Is it possible to perceive of goodness as a wave or a particle of energy? At the same time, Reta does not give due consideration to depravity or evil. Her intent search for goodness limits her vision to trying to define a virtue, but she gives little attention to the elements that constitute its opposite. She is unable to understand how goodness can possibly fit into the universe, nor how it can be a positive force.

Reta embarks on a personal journey to discover goodness. At first, she thinks that goodness can be achieved by reading a book about it, and by going to get that book from the local underfunded library to show her support as a good citizen. She tries to negate the obvious self-destructiveness of Norah's behavior by describing it to Natalie and Christine as the "pursuit if goodness." Her experiment fails, though, because Reta cannot integrate goodness and grief into a discernable pattern.

In her search for goodness, Reta turns to discussions about the topic with friends. One fellow writer defines goodness as an abstraction; the general goodwill of a society. The reader is led to the conclusion that Reta simply cannot recognize goodness at all. She is capable only of a tentative search, and integrating goodness into her own life appears to escape her completely. The only place in which she is able to create goodness is within her novel, *Thyme in Bloom*. The main character, Alicia, is described by her editor as full of golden qualities, a symbol of all that it good. Thus, there is a bittersweet irony in Reta's desperate search. She cannot find goodness in her own life, but she can create it in her fictional world of Alicia and Roman.

Style

Point of View

Unless is written in the first person, and this perspective heightens the sense of alienation and psychological isolation of the main character. The story of Norah's disappearance and the resultant bewilderment, confusion and grief of her family is told entirely through the perspective of her mother, Reta. The reader is brought along on this journey from grief to resolution through a process very similar to a stream-of-consciousness narrative. The novel is composed of a series of disconnected events which are often only tenuously connected. The last five chapters have more of a linear narrative style and are rooted in the actual train of events, rather than in Reta's thoughts about those events. In many parts of the book, however, the reader is forced to interpret the events of the novel through the narrow lens of Reta's inner dialogue. Frequently, her thoughts do not relate in an immediate sense to the events of her life. Her activities generally involve conversations with her friends, but these merely extend the inner dialogue to an external setting and therefore, become part of her ongoing self-conversation.

Setting

The novel is set in the fictional community of Orangetown, about one hour's drive north of Toronto. Most of the time, the immediate setting is Reta's home. On a few occasions the corner of Bloor and Bathurst becomes the focus of the novel's action, and twice the book moves to Danielle's apartment in the exclusive Toronto suburb of Rosedale. Other occasional settings are Washington D.C. and New York. The confined setting mirrors the novel's confined point of view.

Language and Meaning

The language that Carol Shields employs is not difficult to understand. The meanings behind the language, however, are not always easy to grasp. On the surface, *Unless* appears to be a story of an ordinary family grieving the loss of their runaway daughter. However, because Reta's mind leads the reader on a veritable chase through her psychological landscape, the story becomes convoluted and complex. The story becomes confusing at times, when the reader must discern what is real and what is merely in Reta's mind. The series of letters that Reta writes is a good example; at first, it appears that these are actual letters which she has sent, but toward the end of the book, the reader is told that five of these letters had never been composed outside of Reta's mind; they never existed and were never sent.

Structure

Unless consists of thirty-eight unnumbered chapters, each with a one-word or two-word title. The chapters are uneven in length. The plot is vaguely linear, beginning with Norah's disappearance and ending with her return to the family; interwoven throughout are Reta's reminisces about her life and her daughter. The novel relies primarily on her thoughts about events in her life, rather than on the events themselves. The primary focus is Reta even though the novel is centered around Norah. Shields gives virtually no physical descriptions of her characters and leaves their general appearance and personal style up to the reader's imagination.

Quotes

"All my life I've heard people speak of finding themselves in acute pain, bankrupt in spirit and body, but I have never understood what they meant. To lose. To hate. To have lost. I believed these visitations of darkness lasted only a few minutes or hours and that these saddened people, in between outs, were occupied, as we all were, with the useful purpose of happiness. But happiness is not what I thought. Happiness is the lucky pane of glass you carry in your head, but it takes all of your cunning just to hang on to it, and once it's smashed you have to move into a different sort of life."(p. 1)

"Anyone can be charming. It's really a cheap trick, mere charm, so astonishingly easy to perform, screwing up your face into sunbeams and spewing them forth. The calculated life of the wrist, chin up, thumb and forefinger brought together to form a little feminine loop, the trick of pretending to sit on a little glass chair, the concentration of radiance, l'esprit; little sprinkles of it everywhere, misting the air like bark scent." (p. 28)

"There is a sense of buoyancy, as though I'm being carried along on a tidal wave of sensation, borne forward. Precious and precarious, a bending, subtle wand of desire making itself known. Followed by a tightening of the throat, moistening of the yes, awe for the beauty of ongoing life. Et cetera. Oh, God." (p. 45)

"To paraphrase Danielle Westerman, we don't make metaphors in order to distract ourselves. Metaphors hold their own power over us, even without their fugitive gestures." (p. 61)

"The night was bitingly cold, close to freezing, but for the first time in weeks I was able to take a deep breath. *My Heart is Broken*. My mouth closed on the words, and then I swallowed." (p. 67)

"Two years ago I inhabited another kind of life in which I scarcely registered my notion of heartbreak. Hurt feelings, minor slights, minimal losses, small treacheries, even bad reviews - that's what I thought sadness was made of: tragedy was someone not liking my book." (p. 79)

"I don't consider myself a sunny person. In fact, if I prayed, I would ask every day to be spared the shame of dumb sunniness. Danielle Westerman, her life, her reflection on that life, has taught me that much. Don't hide your dark side from yourself, she said to me once, it's what keeps us going forward, that pushing away from the blinding brilliance." (p. 82)

"I need to speak further about this problem of women, how they are dismissed and excluded from the most primary of entitlements. *But we've come so far*; that's the thinking. So far compared with fifty or a hundred years ago. Well, no, we've arrived at the new millennium and we haven't arrived at all. We've been sent over to the side pocket of the snooker table and made to disappear." (p. 99)

"Ordering my own house calms me down, my careful dusting, my polishing. Speculating about other people's lives helps, too. These lives hold a kind of tenancy in my mind, tricking the neural synapses into a grand avoidance of my own sorrow. The examined life has had altogether too much good publicity. Introversion is piercingly dull in its circularity and lack of air. Far more interesting, at least to a fiction writer going through a bad time, is the imaginative life projected onto others." (p. 107)

"But more than anything else it is the rhythm of typing-and-thinking that soothes me, what is almost an athlete's delight in the piling of clause on clause. Who would have though that this old habit of mine would become a strategy of maintaining a semblance of ongoing life, an unasked-for gift, *une prime.* On days when I don't know which foot to put in front of the other, I can type my way toward becoming a conscious being." (pp. 108-109)

"Early November - I hate this time of year. Dark mornings, broken jack-o-lanterns on the roadway. Winter's harder, I keep thinking, but harder than what? Snow flurries in the headlights. The trees, all bare, divide the sky into segments. A short, sunless Wednesday, the air stretched out on every side like sheets of muslin." (p. 178)

"Tom and I still have sex - have I mentioned this? - even though our oldest daughter is living on the street, a derelict. This happens once or twice a week. We actually lie on our queen-size bed together; it will be midnight, the house quiet, our faces close together, the warm, felt cave beneath Tom's jaw at my cheek, his breath. The specificity of his body keeps me still, as though I'm listening for a signal. He reaches for me; I respond, sometimes slowly, lately quite slowly. Spirals of transcendence drift through me like strands of DNA, always rising upward. Concentrate, concentrate, concentration helps." (p. 183)

"Other writers know how to do vivid sex scenes. They've got the chronology down, first the languorous removal of clothing, some slow dancing maybe to an old Sinatra record, then the nibbling, the rubbing, the sucking, the smelling, the tasting, the barking commands and screaming surrender, yes, yes, and then, finally, 'he enters her.' *Well, come right in, my fine fellow, and make yourself at home."* (p. 187)

"There are people who make a life out of dislocation. Tenancy is all they demand in their refusal to merge with particular neighborhoods or rooms." (p.231)

"And then suddenly I will be thrown out of the circle of safety, aching all over with pain and feeling, a fracture in my cone of consciousness, which is inhabited, every curve of it, by the knowledge (that pale sustenance) that Norah, in the cold and snow of Toronto, has gone as far away as she could go. As was possible to go." (p. 236)

"What I'd like is a lobotomy, a clean job, the top of my head neatly sawn off and designated contents removed. I'd get rid of that week last spring when we didn't know where Norah was. I'd extract the blood pouring out of Natalie's forehead that time years ago when her high chair tipped over in the garden and hit the fence. All body wounds, in fact, would go, including the scabs I saw on Norah's wrists last week, that half-inch

between her mittens and her coat sleeve. I'd take the whole soundtrack of My Fair Lady and the memory of my mother painting china after she had to be put in the care facility because she couldn't cope, couldn't even remember her own name after my father died." (p.261-262)

"What a guessing game we play with this child of ours. She has not had such intense parenting since she was an infant, but this time round all our efforts are based on conjecture." (p.263)

"I passionately believe a novelist must give her characters work to do. Fictional men and women tend, in my view, to collapse unless they're observed doing their work, engaged with their work, the architect seen in a state of concentration at the drafting table, the dance thinking each step as it's performed, the computer programmer tracing a path between information and access." (p. 264)

"The problem is, I'm not sure I believe in the thunderclap of trauma. A stubborn screen of common sense keeps getting in my way and cancelling the filigree of fine-spun theory. Isn't out species smarter than that? Somewhere, wired into our brains, there must exist a little bean-shaped nerve cluster that registers the relative *proportion* of events and separates the exceptional experience from the slow, steady accumulation of incremental knowledge, which is what really delivers us to the brink, one small injury bleeding into another until the whole system tips over." (p. 269)

"I have suffered a period of estrangement from my daughter - she is now at home, safe - and the period of our separation has been very like having a cold knife lodged in my chest." (p. 309)

"Life is full of isolated events, but these events, if they are to form a coherent narrative, require odd pieces of language to cement them together, little chips of grammar (mostly adverbs or prepositions) that are hard to define, since they are abstractions of locations or relative position, words like *therefore, else, other, also, thereof, theretofore, instead, otherwise, already, despite,* and *not yet*."

(p. 313)

"The conjunction *unless*, with its elegiac undertones, is a term used in logic, a word breathed by the hopeful or by the writers of fiction wanting to prise open the crusted world and reveal another plan of being, which is similar in its geographical particulars and peopled by those who resemble ourselves." (pp. 313-314)

Topics for Discussion

Explain Reta's idea of goodness. Does she display this virtue in the novel? Give examples.

Analyze the influence of Danielle Westerman's philosophy on Reta's perspective of life.

Explore the similarities between Alicia, the fictional heroine of *My Thyme is Up*, and Reta's daughter, Norah.

Is Reta an assertive or a passive woman? Give evidence for your position.

Describe Reta's efforts to be good. Does she succeed or fail? Give reasons for your answer.

Why did Norah run away from her normal life and live on the streets of Toronto?

Discuss the relationship between Tom and Reta.

In the chapter titled "Instead " Reta claims that her body and her conscious thoughts are never separated from her daughters. Is this a true or false assertion? Use evidence from the novel to support your answer.

What is the nature of Christine's and Natalie's relationship with their older sister Norah? What are the differences between the sisters? Is it likely that Christine or Natalie will follow Norah in her decision to live on the street? Why or why not?

Discuss Reta's theory that life is just a series of unconnected events given coherence only by language. Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not?

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