

# **Wintergirls Study Guide**

**Wintergirls by Laurie Halse Anderson**

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# Plot Summary

Wintergirls is the story of eighteen-year-old Lia Overbrook, an anorexic cutter who loathes her body, her family, and her life. All these emotions are heightened when Lia's best friend Cassie, a bulimic, dies in a motel room after a long session of bingeing and purging. Before she died, Cassie called Lia 33 times for help, but Lia never picked up the phone. As the novel progresses, Lia spirals dangerously out of control and she must come to terms with her emotions if she wants to live.

As the novel opens, Lia learns that her ex-best friend has been found dead in a motel room. Lia knows that the night before, Cassie called her 33 times, but Lia never answered. She runs up to her room and listens to the messages, each becoming increasingly more desperate, begging Lia for help, begging her to pick up the phone. Lia doesn't let on that she knows anything about Cassie's death because her entire life is about control. Lia is anorexic, and has been sent to a rehabilitation/therapy center twice for hospitalization. Her main goal in life now is to stay out of the mental hospital while hiding her rapid weight loss from her family. Everything in Lia's life is about controlling something, most often food and exercise. This is clearly because Lia feels out of control emotionally. Lia's parents divorced when she was younger, and her father has remarried a nice woman named Jennifer with an eight-year-old daughter, Emma, whom Lia adores. Arguably, Emma is the only good thing going in Lia's life - she resents both her parents for forcing her into the hospital and refuses to have close relationships with them - but even her love for Emma cannot force Lia to eat.

In the days after Cassie's death, Lia is haunted by Cassie's ghost. At first, the ghost simply appears to Lia, letting her know that Cassie's spirit is still around and that she has unfinished business with Lia. Lia is sure that Cassie is haunting her because she refused to pick up the telephone that night. As the hauntings continue, however, Cassie begins to follow Lia around and even talk to her. In time, it becomes clear that Cassie is waiting for Lia to cross over too. As Lia's self-harming behaviors become more out of control, Cassie's hauntings become more frequent, her urging for Lia to "hurry up" sounds more like a demand. Lia doesn't understand why Cassie won't leave her alone or why Cassie's statements about Lia being fat, ugly, and mean, are so ruthless. She tries to restrict her diet even more, exercise harder, cut deeper. Finally, passed out in the same motel room where Cassie died, Lia, at her lowest weight yet, nearly overdoses on sleeping pills trying to shut out the voices that haunt her dreams. In her final vision, Cassie welcomes her to the other side, saying that she's so proud of her and that death is only a moment away. Something kicks inside Lia's chest. She wants to live. She claws her way away from Cassie and back to life. From that moment on, she knows she must change the way she views herself, her relationships, and her body if she wants to live. She enters the hospital and doesn't fight her treatment. For the first time in a long time, Lia actually wants to live.



# Pages 1 - 29

## Pages 1 - 29 Summary

At the opening of the novel, the protagonist, Lia, is eating breakfast with her stepmother Jennifer and Jennifer announces that Lia's best friend, Cassie, has been found dead in a motel room. Although Jennifer doesn't want to speak ill of the dead, she is glad that Lia hasn't been spending time with Cassie lately. She feels that Cassie was dragging Lia down. After delivering the news, Jennifer abruptly leaves for work, dragging her daughter, Emma, Lia's stepsister, along with her. She promises Lia that her father will speak to her when he gets home from his meetings, but she didn't want Lia finding out about Cassie at school. Before she leaves, Jennifer tries to get Lia to eat breakfast, and in her mind, Lia counts the calories of each of Jennifer's suggestions, secretly denying them. She leaves a note for Emma, thanking her for the delicious breakfast cereal, even though she doesn't eat it. Instead, she eats a few raisins, a few almonds, and a green pear, followed by a cocktail of vitamins and anti-depressants prescribed by her doctor. She hopes the pills will work quickly to quiet the voice of the dead girl in her head.

After breakfast, Lia obsesses over the phone calls Cassie made to her during the hours she must have been dying in the motel room. Before she died, Cassie called Lia 33 times, but Lia sent all the calls straight to voicemail. Now, she listens back to them and can hear Cassie desperation, her emotion increasing with each phone call. In the first few messages, she simply pleads with Lia to pick up the phone or call her back. Then, her voice becomes more slurred and she tells Lia that she's so sad, that she's lost, that she misses and loves Lia. Then the calls stop. Thinking about this makes Lia weep as she drives to school. She thinks about where Cassie's body is at this very moment: the morgue, and what the morgue workers are doing to her body: dissecting it in an autopsy. Lia can barely stay awake in her classes. Emotion and lack of food threaten to send her straight into the ground. She imagines the eyes of all her classmates as cameras, zooming in on her imperfections. Instead of heading to her next class, Lia makes a break for the nurses office, promising to drink a cup of orange juice if the nurse will just let her sleep for the next few hours. After school, Lia drives Emma to soccer practice. When she asks Emma if she can watch, Emma suddenly can't get out of the car fast enough. She admits that she told her coach that Lia had cancer to cover for her time in the hospital and her extreme weight loss. Lia nods and says that she understands. As she drives home, Lia thinks about her first stay in the mental institution and how she played by all the rules so that she could go home quickly. She was sent there after crashing her car, and she entered the hospital at a weight of 93-pounds. Suddenly, Lia is back at her house. She doesn't remember how she got home, she simply ended up in the driveway. Lia walks slowly around her car, inspecting it for damage, hoping that she won't find the body of a pedestrian she's plowed over on the drive home, oblivious to her surroundings.



## Pages 1 - 29 Analysis

In this opening section of the novel, it becomes immediately clear to the reader that Lia is suffering from an eating disorder, anorexia nervosa. Individuals suffering from this condition restrict their food intake to control their weight gain. Lia's obsession with weight loss has sent her to the hospital twice before and she is terrified that her family will send her there again. Although she is clearly hiding her self-destructive behaviors from her family, her condition affects every decision in her day, from what she eats for breakfast to the way she thinks her classmates perceive her at school. She exerts a large amount of energy trying to hide her starvation from her family, trying to convince them that she is healthy when she is clearly not. Lia's family had been concerned that her friend Cassie was dragging her down. Her family is also concerned that Cassie's death will cause Lia to relapse. The reader doesn't yet know how Cassie died, but it is safe to assume that she died in an unexpected, violent way. Even though her best friend has just died, all Lia can think about are the calories that she will consume at breakfast. Controlling her weight has absolutely taken over every aspect of Lia's life, making emotion that is not tied to her weight impossible to process.

Many of the themes of the novel are introduced in this opening section. The first theme is of winter, or cold, pervading Lia's life. When she opens the dishwasher on page 2, she says that, "the steam freezes when it touches my face." Often, when Lia thinks about Cassie, she is overcome with cold. To combat this, she turns the dishwasher to SCALD, or the car heater to ROAST, or her electric blanket to HIGH. Readers with a keen eye should make note of these repeated phrases throughout the text as they highlight Lia's emotional state. She, like Cassie, feels frozen in time because of her eating disorder. This affects her as she feels physically and emotionally frozen. Second, it becomes clear, even in this opening section, that although Lia tries to ignore her emotion about Cassie's death, it haunts her. Presently, all Lia experiences is the voice of Cassie in her head, but as the novel progresses, this haunting will also take a physical form.

Finally, it is clear that Lia has a strained relationship with her family. She has been living with her father since being released from New Seasons hospital six months ago, but she has yet to unpack her boxes. It is clear that she does not feel comfortable in his home, perhaps because she does not have full control of her situation. The only person that Lia truly loves is her younger stepsister, Emma. This is likely because Emma is a child with a pure heart. She does not have expectations or demands of Lia and loves her regardless of what she weighs. Still, Lia's condition affects Emma's life in that she has created lies to cover-up the truth about Lia's sickness. As the novel progresses, Lia's actions will have a much darker consequence in Emma's life.



## Pages 29 - 53

### Pages 29 - 53 Summary

Lia microwaves a plate of leftover Thanksgiving stuffing with extra ketchup to ensure that it splatters all over the oven. She immediately throws the stuffing down the dish disposal, but leaves her dirty plate on the counter and the microwave door open so the scent wafts through the house. When her family comes home, they'll be convinced that she's eaten something. As she completes this task, Lia wishes over and over that she could be a puker. She's tried many times but she simply can't do it. After dinner, Lia lies in her bedroom upstairs, contemplating the few items that she's bothered to unpack since moving in with her father. He comes upstairs and Lia pretends to be asleep so that she won't have to talk to him about Cassie. He sits on Lia's bed and strokes her hair.

As Lia lies in bed, she thinks about how she and Cassie first met: Cassie's family moved onto the block when the girls were in third grade. Lia walked over and helped Cassie unpack. The two girls bonded over shared paperbacks and favorite television series. On that first day, Cassie also showed Lia her see-glass, like sea-glass but more special because the beholder can use it to see into the future. In fifth grade, Cassie wasn't considered cool anymore because she got boobs way before everyone else. The boys picked on her, but Lia stood up for her. After some time passed, both Lia and Cassie were welcomed back to the popular table in the cafeteria. Now, Cassie's body is lying on an autopsy table being prepared for burial. When Lia thinks about this, the smell of dust, spiders, cloves, and burnt sugar fills her nose. In the dark of her bedroom, Lia sees the shape of Cassie's ghost taking form in the shadows. "Come with me," Cassie's ghost rasps (p. 44).

The next morning, Emma wakes Lia up to say that it's time for her weekly weigh-in. Lia rushes to the kitchen and fills her stomach with water until it threatens to tear open inside her. She puts on her ragged yellow robe, with the hidden quarters stitched into the pockets, and climbs onto the scale: 107 fake pounds. Jennifer notes that Lia's weight is dropping, but she's still out of the trouble zone. After everyone is gone for the day, Lia drags out her hidden scale, the one she hasn't tampered with, to properly weigh herself. This scale reads 99 pounds. Lia can barely contain her excitement seeing that she's reached her first milestone: getting under 100 pounds. Her next milestone is 95 pounds and then 90. In the mirror, Cassie's reflection stares back at Lia.

### Pages 29 - 53 Analysis

In this section, the reader meets Lia's father, whom she often calls Professor Overbrook in her narration. Calling her father by his formal title shows how Lia holds her family at a distance, refusing to hold them close, likely because she is afraid of hurting them with her actions. Despite this, it is clear that Lia's parents love her and want the best for her,



but it is also clear that Lia's father is in over his head. He doesn't understand what is happening in his daughter's life and he certainly doesn't know how to fix it. This conflict is highlighted again when Lia is sent upstairs for her weekly weigh-in with Jennifer. It is clear to Jennifer that Lia is not gaining weight (although she doesn't know that Lia is actually losing extreme amounts of weight) and she can see the physical change in Lia's body. She is exasperated that Lia is not sticking to her meal plan, but she does not know how to enforce the rules, particularly because Lia is eighteen-years-old, technically an adult. The problem is much bigger than what the family can handle on its own, but they have not yet realized it.

In this section, the reader also learns a bit more about Lia's friendship with Cassie. When she remembers this time in her life, Lia refers to it as the time "when I was a real girl." The fact that Lia is conscious of the way her eating disorder has affected her life is particularly disturbing. Lia does not think of herself as a real girl now, which begs the question, what does she think of herself as? It appears that Lia views herself as a medical specimen of some kind, or a machine that needs to perform one task: lose weight. Lia cannot afford to think of herself as human because then she would associate herself with human need: food, water, and love, the three things that she continually denies herself. This section also introduces the symbol of the spider. While she is lying in bed, Lia imagines that her stomach opens up and spiders spill out, quickly knitting a web that forever ties her to Cassie. Throughout the novel, Lia spends her spare time knitting, symbolic of the way that she paces through her life one meal, or one stitch, at a time. This is also the mentality that Cassie lived with. As long as Lia struggles with her eating disorder, she will be tied to, or knitted together with, Cassie.



## Pages 53 - 75

### Pages 53 - 75 Summary

After the weight-in, Lia plans to drive to school but a mysterious man from the motel where Cassie died calls, leaving a message for Lia, asking her to come down to the motel. Lia phones her school saying that she's scheduled an emergency meeting with her shrink and that she won't be coming in this morning, then drives to the Gateway Motel, where Cassie's body was found. The old man at the front desk immediately asks Lia if she wants to see the room where the girl died, and Lia can't help but nod yes. The old man, who is not the man from the answering machine, calls out to the young maintenance guy, asking him to show Lia to "the room". The maintenance guy, Elijah, says that he was the one who found Cassie's body. He tried to resuscitate her with CPR, but she was already dead. Lia turns away from him, immediately knowing that coming here was a mistake. When she tries to leave, Elijah asks for her name. Panicking, Lia says that her name is Emma. Elijah asks if she knows a girl named Lia and Lia lies, saying that she's never heard of her. Lia rushes away from the hotel and into the movie theatre. In the darkened room, she takes out a razor blade and slices three lines into the skin above her hip.

When Lia arrives home from the movie theatre, her family is sitting around the table waiting for her to start the meal. It is a long process for Lia to arrange the food on her plate as she carefully selects the smallest portions, cutting them up so they take up more room on her plate, giving the illusion that she's eating more than she truly is. Whenever her family looks away, she slides bites of food into her napkin to avoid actually eating anything. She only chews and swallows when it is absolutely necessary. Dinner is interrupted when Lia's mom, Chloe, arrives. Lia has a very strained relationship with her mother, and it shows. Jennifer disappears as soon as Chloe walks into the room, and Lia's father makes awkward conversation while Chloe sizes Lia up. She accuses Lia's father of not taking Lia's recovery seriously. Chloe insists that Lia is losing weight even though Jennifer has a notebook of numbers proving otherwise. Lia slips away from her parents as they launch into a massive argument, and her mother eventually leaves an hour later without bothering to come upstairs and say goodbye.

### Pages 53 - 75 Analysis

In this section, it becomes increasingly clear that Lia feels culpable in Cassie's death. On the surface, it seems that Lia feels guilty because she did not pick up the phone when Cassie called. Perhaps if she had, she could have saved her. As the novel progresses, however, the reader will learn of the deeper implications Lia's friendship had on Cassie's death. Although she has not admitted her guilt, it is clear that Cassie's death is deeply affecting her. This becomes particularly clear when Elijah says that he has a message for a girl named Lia. Lia cannot admit who she is, perhaps because she cannot face hearing Cassie's final message. Whatever the message is, it will be too





much for Lia to process. It will shatter the glass case she has entombed herself in, separating herself from the outside world. It is also interesting to note that the front deskman refers to Room 113, where Cassie died, as "the room." Clearly other guests have visited the hotel to see where the young girl died, which highlights human curiosity in the grotesque. Knowledge of this feeds into Lia's certainty that those around her are simply interested in her disease, not in her recovery.

At the movie theatre, Lia cuts her hips with a razorblade, another form of self-mutilation. Cutting is a different type of pain than starvation. It is immediate, and many cutters feel the need to self-harm when faced with extremely painful emotion. Because they cannot control the emotional pain, they feel the need to control their physical pain, creating a physical outlet for what is happening inside them. Clearly, this is what is happening with Lia. The visit to the motel had a profound emotional effect on her but she does not have the coping skills to deal with her grief. She is too controlled to cry or ask for help so her pain needs a different outlet: a physical one. It is also interesting to note that after she cuts, Lia narrates in a passive voice: "The car takes me away from the movie theatre, the drugstore and the motel that grinds up girls into bite-sized pieces" (p. 62). In a way, this screams out to the reader that Lia feels as if she has no control in her life, which fuels the control she is desperate to have over her body. The car drives her; the motel grinds her. Lia is drifting along, not quite alive and not quite dead. Because of this passivity, Lia isn't sure what is really happening in her life and what is imagined.



## Pages 76 - 102

### Pages 76 - 102 Summary

At school, Lia's teachers have organized a support group for friends of Cassie to discuss different ways they can honor her memory within the school walls. Lia is the only student who shows up that wasn't part of the soccer or drama teams, both of which Cassie was involved with. Immediately, Lia sizes herself up to everyone else in the room, whom she views not as names, but as body mass indexes and guesstimated weights: "I measure myself. I can't play soccer, and most of them have better grades than me. But I am the thinnest girl in the room, hands down" (p. 78). The meeting starts with a moment of silence, followed by the ground rules: they can talk about the legacy of Cassie's life, but not speculate about how she died or what happened to her in that motel room. A memorial page in the yearbook is organized, as well as a dedication in the next soccer game and a single red rose on the stage during tonight's production of the musical. Everyone turns to Lia and asks what she would like to do to honor Cassie's memory, but Lia doesn't have any ideas. She successfully diverts the attention away from herself by suggesting that they get Cassie's parents' opinion.

Later that day, Lia goes to the wake to view the coffin even though her parents have urged her against it, fearing that seeing Cassie's body will trigger a relapse. Cassie's ghost has continued to haunt Lia since her first sighting, popping up in images, smells, and memories that Lia can't shake. As soon as she walks into the wake, the heat is overwhelming. Lia feels as if she's going to pass out, but no one else seems fazed. When Lia looks in the coffin, she sees that Cassie's acne scars and nose piercing have been covered by makeup. People have dropped individual gifts into the coffin for Cassie, like a soccer ball signed by the entire team, and her class ring. Lia can't help but feel that she wants to peel off Cassie's dress and see if they've unzipped her stomach. She wants to look inside her friend's body to see if hidden monsters have stowed away inside her. She reaches into her pocket and finds the see-glass, then places it in Cassie's hand. Lia is sure she sees Cassie's hand curl around the glass. Cassie sits up in the coffin, turns toward Lia, and blinks. Lia closes her eyes, and when she opens them, Cassie is gone, not in her coffin, not anywhere. The organ music pounds and sweat pools on Lia's skin. Lia feels a hand on the small of her back, guiding her out of the wake. When she resurfaces from the heat, she is sitting in a diner sipping hot chocolate with Elijah, the guy from the motel where Cassie died.

Elijah seemed to realize that Lia was having some sort of breakdown in the funeral home and quickly removed her. At the diner, they pass a pleasant hour, and Lia feels normal for the first time in years. He convinces Lia to drink her entire mug of hot chocolate (400 calories) and eat 2 French fries (20 calories). On the drive home, Lia almost feels like a normal girl: "I went to a diner. I drank hot chocolate and ate French fries. Talked to a guy for a while. Laughed a couple of times. A little like ice-skating for the first time, wobbly, but I did it" (p. 97). Inside her bedroom, the evil thoughts fill her head and she sees Cassie's reflection in the mirror, asking snidely if she had a good



time. Lia hates herself for enjoying her life, however briefly, knowing that she didn't save Cassie. Cassie called 33 times, and Lia never picked up.

## Pages 76 - 102 Analysis

Even at the support group meeting at school, Lia cannot process what has happened to her friend. Even though Cassie was her best friend, Lia has no suggestions for ways in which Cassie could be remembered. When she looks around at her fellow classmates, Lia doesn't understand how they get up each day, eat their food, go to their classes. To Lia, going to school is like going to the cafeteria. Teachers inject them with information. Parents divide the day into "healthy ingredients" like sports, community service, art. In school, teachers control your day and grade you on your performance. Lia's metaphor for school is related back to food because this is how she exercises her own control. She hates school for the same reasons that she hates eating: it takes away the fierce control she has over every single aspect of her life. Because she is too busy controlling her own actions, Lia doesn't care about the actions of others, even when those actions relate to her best friend's memorial. Lia simply doesn't have enough energy.

At the wake, Lia has her first real hallucination. First, when she sees Cassie's body, she remarks that all of Cassie's flaws have been covered up. This is particularly interesting because in her own life, Lia imagines everyone's eyes as cameras, zooming in on her flaws in her own body. In a way, death is appealing to Lia because it means ultimate perfection: all your flaws are wiped clean. Although Lia had been smelling Cassie's ghost ever since her death, this is the first time that she sees Cassie's ghost move. The ghost moves when Lia places the see-glass in her hand. This seems to be the key between the two worlds, the world of the living and the world of the dead. Once Cassie swallows the see-glass, she is able to move and follow Lia. At the end of the novel, Lia will stop the haunting by stealing the see-glass from Cassie's mouth. It is also interesting to note that when Lia sees Cassie's body, she wants to unzip Cassie's stomach to see if the monsters are still hiding there. For many girls struggling with eating disorders, they often give their disorders, the voice inside their heads, a name. Lia wants to see if this voice, this monster, follows you into death. As the novel progresses, the voice in Lia's head takes on the persona of a ghost, Cassie's ghost. Cassie's ghost embodies not only Lia's hatred for her body, but also her guilt that she is alive while Cassie is dead. The reader first sees this when Lia returns home from her meal with Elijah. For the first time in a long time, Lia feels normal, healthy. As soon as she returns home, Cassie's ghost crushes her with guilt and Lia is overwhelmed with self hatred once again.



# Pages 102 - 124

## Pages 102 - 124 Summary

When Lia wakes up the next morning, she sees that her metabolism is slowing again and she is sure bubbles of fat are pooling beneath her skin. She knows the procedure doled out by her therapists to help her combat the negative emotions she feels toward herself, but instead, she lies on the floor for a few hundred crunches, and re-plans her diet, cutting her caloric intake each day to 800 (500 preferred). At lunch, the drama club invites Lia to sit with them at their table while they discuss the wake. Lia orders only an apple and a pot of yogurt, but notices that the kids around her order breaded mozzarella sticks, pizza, hamburgers, French fries, brownies, and other fatty foods. Looking around, Lia feels like she's in an aquarium. She sees Cassie's ghost in the corner, covered in algae and snails. The drama kids discuss how they're all going to the funeral together, to show a unified front for Cassie's parents. When Lia says she doesn't think she's going to go, one of the girls freaks out and starts screaming at Lia that she is a terrible friend. She blames Lia for messing up Cassie's life saying a real friend would never do that to her. Lia explodes, throws her yogurt at the girl and gets sent to detention.

After school, two detectives show up at Lia's house to ask her questions, but Lia claims she doesn't know anything. She lies to the police and says that she's lost her cell phone, which is why she never picked up when Cassie was calling: she had no idea Cassie needed her. As soon as the police are gone, Lia runs upstairs and reads entries in the whisperblog for girls with eating disorders. The anonymous entries offer moral support for girls to keep their weight off, give tips for how to lose excess weight quickly, and vent unhealthy negative emotions: "Wow, I am such a fat ass. You know it's true. I want to cut it all off" (p. 111). Later that night, when everyone else is asleep, Lia sneaks downstairs and works out on the stair-stepper for a few hours. The next day, Lia's parents insist that she visit her psychiatrist to ensure that she's not harboring any unhealthy emotions after Cassie's death. Cassie clearly despises her psychiatrist and spends the entire meeting thinking of ways to outwit her questions, giving her the least amount of true information as possible. In a way, it works because Dr. Parker gives her permission to go to Cassie's funeral as long as she doesn't go alone. Lia leaves her meeting and drives to Elijah's apartment. She brings him an entire pizza, which she refuses to share, and bribes him to escort her to the funeral.

## Pages 102 - 124 Analysis

In this section, it becomes clear that Lia's parents fears that seeing Cassie's body would trigger a relapse have been realized. While Lia been obsessing about her food intake since being released from New Seasons, it appears that her restrictive behavior suddenly increases after the funeral. Perhaps it was the image of Cassie's perfect body in the casket that makes Lia strive for perfection in herself, or perhaps it is the emotional



upheaval of physically seeing her friend's dead body. Either way, Lia begins secretly working out in the middle of the night and drastically cutting her caloric intake each day. Along with this drastic change, Lia is also beginning to lose control of her actions. In the cafeteria, she loses her temper and hurls a pot of yogurt at a girl who offends her. Typically, Lia would be careful to never draw attention to herself. This shows that Lia's tight grasp of control is starting to weaken. The reader can expect this loss of control to escalate as the novel, and the weight loss, progresses.



## Pages 124 - 145

### Pages 124 - 145 Summary

When Lia returns home from Elijah's house, she tells her parents that she's been studying at a friend's house, spending the evening gossiping and eating pizza. Her dad beams, so proud. Jennifer continues to ask Lia to call her mother, Chloe, saying that Chloe is desperate for Lia to spend the night at her house, just one night. Lia agrees to call her mother just to get Jennifer to shut up. Late that night, Lia creeps out of bed for a sleeping pill and overhears her father and Jennifer discussing her. Jennifer admits that Chloe wants Lia to move back in with her because she fears that Lia's behavior is out of control again, that she's not truly recovering in her father's house. Although Lia knows it's true, the thought of her mother plotting for her return outrages her. Lia returns to the whisperblog and reads entry upon entry. Afterward, she cuts three neat lines on her right hip so that it will match her left. Tomorrow is Cassie's burial.

The next day, Lia intends to tell Elijah the truth about her name - he is still calling her Emma - but during the entire drive to the cemetery, she never musters up the courage. At the cemetery, it is practically freezing, and Elijah gives Lia his coat to keep her warm. Lia gets as close to the grave opening as she can, just to ensure that Cassie's coffin is properly buried, that the dirt is thrown in and that Cassie won't be able to crawl out and continue haunting her. Watching the handfuls of dirt thrown down into the grave reminds Lia of the funeral service she put on for Cassie's pet mouse, Pinky, in the fourth grade. Lost in her memories, Lia is startled back to reality when her mother calls her name. Lia isn't supposed to be at the funeral, and she tries to hide from her mother's sight but it's too late. Lia is forced into a conversation with her mother, and Elijah inadvertently learns the truth: her name is not Emma, but Lia. She is the girl Cassie tried to call 33 times before she died. Afterward, Lia isn't sure that she'll ever see Elijah again.

### Pages 124 - 145 Analysis

Lia realizes that she is losing control of her life when she learns that her mother wants her to move back in with her. Chloe Marrigan is a doctor, so it will be much harder for Lia to hide the truth about her health from her mother. This news, compiled with the knowledge that Cassie's body will be buried tomorrow leave Lia feeling emotionally vulnerable, and as the reader expects, the only way she can process this fear is through cutting. She takes some pleasure in the fact that now, her body is symmetrical, orderly. The next morning, the compass in Lia's car spins and twirls, refusing to settle on a direction. This highlights the fact that Lia's life is out of control, directionless. Lia's car, a huge machine, is often used as a symbol for Lia's body. Just as a car needs certain materials to run properly (gas, oil, etc), so too does a body need certain materials to run. While Lia restricts the food for her body, she also neglects to refill her car's oil. At the end of the section, the red lights on her dashboard flash off and on, warning her of a breakdown.



# Pages 145 - 180

## Pages 145 - 180 Summary

Lia drives to her mother's house for the evening, even though she has no desire to be in the neighborhood where she and Cassie grew up. As she drives past Cassie's house, she remembers the first time she saw Cassie vomit in the bushes. They were eleven-years-old and Cassie had eaten an entire tray of brownies. Cassie had been away at summer camp and learned all about binging, purging, laxatives, and diuretics from the other girls there. Now, she obsessed constantly about her weight and how she could eat more while gaining less. By the time they were in eighth grade, Cassie had perfected the skill of color-coating her purges, Doritos orange or berry blue so she would know when everything had been vomited from her system. Lia's mother pulls into the driveway, but Lia sits a few moments in the driveway before following her inside. In the house, Lia cannot find her mother anywhere. Finally, she checks the bathroom, opening the door just a crack, and sees her mother sitting on the floor, bawling like a little girl. To distract her mother, Lia makes coffee, pours orange juice, and fries up an omelet. When her mother emerges from the bathroom, she is visibly startled to see Lia in the kitchen. She eats her breakfast and the two talk cordially, which neither of them was expecting. Typically, they are fighting, at each other's throats with accusations. But today, Lia feels like she is in control.

As they discuss Cassie, Lia asks to know what happened to her. How she died. Lia's mother performed the autopsy, but she refuses to share the details with Lia, fearing that it will send her into a relapse. Lia begs and pleads; she needs to know the truth. Finally, her mother agrees: if Lia will eat a plate of scrambled eggs and a muffin, she will tell her the truth about Lia. It takes an hour for Lia to gag down the food, but she manages. Although she wanted to know the truth about Cassie, Lia isn't fully prepared for it. When Cassie died, she had liver damage, her salivary glands were a wreck, and her stomach had stretched to over three times its natural size. Her stomach walls had thinned and her inner organs were showing signs of necrosis. Cassie had been in a terrible fight with her parents and had rented a motel room where she could drink, binge, and purge in private. She did this for two full days before she died. Moments before she died, Cassie's esophagus ruptured from the forceful vomiting. She died purging into the toilet. Lia stops her mother from continuing. She doesn't want to hear any of this. She wants an anesthetic to stop her from feeling all this pain, but she cannot starve herself or cut herself in her mother's presence.

The next morning, Lia and her mother eat an awkward breakfast during which Lia can feel a fight brewing, but she doesn't know what is causing it. Now that she knows the truth about Cassie, Lia has nothing left to discuss with her mother. She is not expecting the bombshell that her mother drops: she wants Lia to move back in with her. She fears that Lia isn't making the right progress living with her father. Lia is outraged; she'll never leave Emma, but her mother is insistent. Lia locks herself in the computer room, Googling Cassie's name. She remembers a New Year's Eve when they were younger,





and they made a New Year's resolution to always stay skinnier than each other. They bet each other, raced to see who could be the skinniest girl in school. Lia spends the next few hours reading entries on the whisperblog, and then she steals a knife from her mother's collection and drives back to her father's house.

## Pages 145 - 180 Analysis

When Lia enters her mother's neighborhood, it is interesting to note how perfectly manicured all the yards are. All of the yards on Lia's streets are well manicured, with perfect picket fences and cars armed with ringing alarms when people get too close. It is interesting to note how perfect the setting around Lia is, particularly when discussing the emotional upheaval and mental instability Lia is dealing with on a daily basis. As soon as Lia pulls into the neighborhood, she is flooded with memories of the times when she first witnessed Cassie bingeing and purging. Cassie first purged into a rose garden, which is symbolic because roses are fragile flowers, much as the girls are fragile creatures. Yet roses are covered in thorns, just as the girls with eating disorders use various tools to hold others, whom they view as enemies, at bay. The reader sees this over and over in Lia's relationships with her parents. It is also interesting to note that Dr. Marrigan deals with death almost every day in her job, yet she is able to cope with the grief through a normal method: crying. When Lia witnesses her mother crying in the shower, she feels extremely uncomfortable because she knows she is unable to deal with emotion the same way. Crying feels like a loss of control and it makes Lia feel sick inside to consider it.

While Lia is staying with her mother, many important events occur. First, Lia experiences "zombieland" for the first time in the narrative. Zombieland occurs when Lia blacks out and has no memory of what has transpired. She experiences this frequently due to her lack of calories. Her body simply has no energy to process what is happening around her so it shuts down momentarily to recharge. As this continues, Lia will begin passing out completely, which will highlight her descent toward death. Eventually, her body will shut down altogether. Also, Lia's mother finally tells her the truth about how Cassie died, as a direct result of her eating disorder. Cassie's death is horrifying. Lia's parents hope that the truth about Cassie's death will scare Lia straight, but it doesn't. Instead, it fuels Lia's desire to lose weight. She needs to control her life, she needs to be perfect, because she knows she is responsible for Cassie's death. Not because she didn't answer Cassie's call, but because she encouraged Cassie's obsession with weight loss: "We held hands when we walked down the gingerbread path into the forest, blood dripping from our fingers. We danced with witches and kissed monsters. We turned us into wintergirls, and when she tried to leave, I pulled her back into the snow because I was afraid to be alone" (p. 99).





## Pages 180 - 203

### Pages 180 - 203 Summary

Lia's life continues. Her car engine seizes up and she is forced to take the bus to school from now on. Instead, she walks to burn extra calories. At night, she cannot sleep because Cassie haunts her bedroom, tearing open Lia's skin and pulling out the wiring underneath. Instead of taking sleeping pills, Lia sneaks down into the basement and works out on the elliptical machine until she is so tired she falls asleep instantly. Or she stays up all night knitting a blanket that she hopes will one day be large enough to keep her warm. Other nights, she wakes up in pitch-blackness standing with the refrigerator door open, her hand full of butter or cream cheese. For the next three pages (p.185-187), the sentence "Must. Not. Eat." is repeated over and over again as the only text on the pages. To keep her parents happy, Lia is eating more at the dinner table, or at least making it look like she is eating more. She does not want to stay with her mother because her mother, a doctor, will immediately be able to see that she is rigging the scale and that she is faking her weight. Five hundred calories a day seems to be working for Lia who, in truth, weighs only 94 pounds. Now that she has surpassed her goal of 95 pounds, she is aiming for 85. 85 pounds was her weight the last time she was admitted into the hospital. She considers this weight to be "dangerland" because she knows that once she reaches 85, it will make her want 75 even more.

Lia's obsession with her food and weight is forgotten only when Emma is taken home from a basketball game with a broken arm. Jennifer asks Lia to drive to the drug store to pick up some medication, but Lia feels too woozy to drive. Jennifer snaps that not everything has to be about Lia, and forces her to eat a cookie to give her enough strength to drive. At the drug store, Lia is confused and disoriented. She doesn't understand why there is snow swirling around inside the store. Instead of picking up the medicine for Emma, Lia searches for laxatives to help her get rid of the cookie she's just eaten. Cassie appears in the aisle and points to the laxatives on the shelf. Lia tells Cassie to leave her alone, to quit haunting her, but Cassie refuses to leave. She says that she misses her friend, that she wants to hang out, and that she's waiting for Lia to join her. She encourages Lia to keep going, she's almost there, she's almost dead: "You're not dead, but you're not alive, either. You're a wintergirl, Lia-Lia, caught in between the worlds. You're a ghost with a beating heart. Soon you'll cross the border and be with me. I'm so stoked. I miss you wicked" (p. 196).

The next day is Emma's band concert. Lia volunteers to work the bake sale so that Jennifer can watch the concert. In truth, Lia doesn't want to sit still, she can't sit still or Cassie will come back to her, urging her to keep going, to die. Lia is surrounded by every imaginable cupcake, brownie, cookie, and cake, yet she takes pride in the fact that none of this tempts her, even as the other mothers shove baked goods under her nose, urging her to try a bite. Because she feels completely in control, she tells the other mothers to go watch the concert, she'll watch over the money tin. When the room is empty, Lia decides to reward herself with six pomegranate seeds from the top of a



cupcake. Before she even understands what is happening, she has eaten the entire tray of cupcakes. She sprints to the bathroom and tries to throw up, but no matter how far she thrusts her fingers down her throat, her body refuses to give up the food.

## Pages 180 - 203 Analysis

The parallels between Lia's body and her car continue as Lia's car finally dies due to its lack of oil. The reader can expect that Lia's body, too, will soon give out. At night, Cassie's ghost pulls wires from Lia's stomach, perpetuating the symbol of a body as a machine. Alongside this, Lia continues obsessively knitting, which is symbolic of the way that she feels compulsively tied to Cassie through their eating disorders. The more control Lia takes over her food intake, the closer she is tied to Cassie and the closer she is tied to death. The theme of winter returns when Lia states that one day, she hopes the blanket she is knitting will be large enough to keep her warm. It is also interesting to note that Lia truly doesn't understand how starvation is affecting her body. She knows that she is losing weight, but she also feels like a superhuman: "Adrenaline kicks in when you're starving. That's what nobody understands ... I feel like I can do anything" (Page 189). Because Lia feels like she is invincible, she feels like she can attain any weight and still function as a human being. The only downside to weighing 85-pounds is that her family is more likely to send her to the hospital for recovery. At the bake sale, however, it becomes clear that Lia is not control of her body. She blacks out and eats and entire tray of cupcakes. Subconsciously, her body is fighting for survival.

In this section, Lia's hallucinations about Cassie also reach a climax. In the drugstore, Lia thinks she sees snow swirling around the aisles. In this imagery, the full meaning of the novel's title is realized: "You're not dead, but you're not alive, either. You're a wintergirl, Lia-Lia, caught in between the worlds. You're a ghost with a beating heart. Soon you'll cross the border and be with me. I'm so stoked. I miss you wicked" (p. 196). In a way, the girls are frozen in time, and this is reflected in the presence of winter in the novel. Physically, Lia is always cold. The main reason for this is her lack of body fat, but it also echoes back to the theme of winter. Symbolically, winter represents thin trees with bare branches, similar to the skeletal frame of Lia's body.



## Pages 204 - 226

### Pages 204 - 226 Summary

In the middle of the night, Lia wakes screaming in pain. Her body cannot process the sudden influx of sugar and bread from the cupcakes and is revolting. Lia convinces herself that her body hates her for being so weak, for being so fat, for being so gluttonous. She sits, weeping, on the toilet waiting for the handful of laxatives that she's taken to kick in. Emma enters the bathroom, tears streaming down her face, asking if Lia is going to die. The pills kick in and Lia starts sweating, her pulse racing. She knows she should to go the hospital, but it's too dangerous for her there. They'll weigh her and find out the truth, then they'll send her to the nuthouse. The next day, Lia's father sits with her while she rests from the diarrhea and cramping. She watches as he eats two peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, absentmindedly, barely paying attention to the food he chews. She can't remember the last time she was able to eat like that, and she hates him for his comfort around food. As they talk, Mrs. Parrish, Cassie's mom, calls and leaves a message begging Lia to call her. Then Lia's dad tells her that he's been discussing her weight with her mother and everyone has agreed that Lia should go in for a quick physical, just to make sure that she's progressing well. Lia is absolutely furious and starts screaming at her father, accusing him of not really caring about her, of being too preoccupied with work and of having an affair.

Lia runs up to her room and forces herself through 500 crunches even though her stomach is still in excruciating pain. She swallows a handful of antidepressants and calls the motel to speak with Elijah. She forces him to speak with her even though he clearly wants to hang up. He tells her that he's moving to Mississippi, and that before Cassie died, she asked him to relay a message to Lia, which is why he was trying to call her before the funeral: "Tell Lia she won. I lost and she won" (p. 219). Elijah has no idea what this message means, but Lia does. When she hangs up the phone, Lia brushes her teeth until her gums bleed. She weighs herself, then throws her scale out the window. She takes the knife she's smuggled out of her mother's house and starts cutting into her skin, desperate to release the pain mounting inside her. She slices evenly between her ribs, then between the next two, and the next. Blood pools on the countertop and drips down her skin, pooling in her hollow hips. She feels like a bird, beating its wings wildly for freedom. Then she passes out. The bathroom door swings open and Emma is standing there, screaming. These screams wake Lia from the blackness.

### Pages 204 - 226 Analysis

When Lia speaks with her father in the kitchen, he gets too close to the truth about what is happening in Lia's life, so, like a rose that sprouts thorns to keep its enemies away, Lia sprouts thorns of her own, verbally lashing out at her father to keep him at a safe distance. She accuses him of hating her, of having an affair, of valuing his work over his



family, anything to get him thinking about his own flaws rather than her own. The fear of losing control of her life, of handing that control back over to the doctors, is too much for Lia to take. This fear reaches its boiling point, however, when Elijah calls to deliver Cassie's final message: Lia has won. It can be denied no longer. Lia is culpable, on a certain level, for Cassie's death. Just as the whisperblog is responsible for perpetuating the unhealthy habits of anorexic girls, so is Lia responsible for daring and encouraging Cassie to lose more weight. Her guilt is undeniable now, and Lia simply cannot process her inner pain. She cuts deeper than she has ever cut before, causing her to black out and be sent to the hospital. It is interesting to note that right before she passes out, when Lia feels the sweet release of control, she feels warm for the first time in months. Also, when Emma finds Lia's body, it is the first that Lia's destructive behaviors have seriously impacted the life of someone that she loves in a way that she can understand. While it's clear that Lia's parents have been profoundly impacted by her eating disorder, she never associates pain with her parent's emotions. She only sees a desire to control her. With Emma, however, it is different. Lia recognizes that Emma does not deserve to see the violence of her actions, and this may be a turning point for Lia's character.



# Pages 226 - 251

## Pages 226 - 251 Summary

Lia is in and out of consciousness in the emergency room, listening to the doctors call out stats about her body. She feels like Sleeping Beauty, locked in a glass coffin. Two days later, Lia is judged stable enough to leave the hospital and head home, two days before Christmas. Lia can't help but find it humorous that she's failed at everything in life: eating, not cutting herself, friendship, sisterhood, daughterhood, etc. Yet the medical professionals consider her stable. She has been given 33 stitches, an ironic number. Lia's dad picks her up from the hospital to take her home, but Lia is startled when he takes an odd turn, away from his house. He tells Lia that she won't be coming home with him today. She's moving in with her mother, whether she likes it or not. She will not be allowed to see Emma until she is better. When they arrive at Lia's mother's house, her two parents discuss her condition as if she isn't even there. Lia's mother has hired a nurse to watch Lia whenever she can't be there. They will monitor every bite of food she eats, every sip of water she drinks, as well as every trip to the bathroom and what she produces. Lia's mother has also arranged to hear updates from Lia's psychiatrist. Normally, this would be an invasion of doctor-patient confidentiality, but Lia has been ruled a danger to herself by the courts, so this right to confidentiality has been waived. Lia is so angry she can barely breathe.

The next day, Lia starts into her new routine with her mother and the hired nurse. Jennifer drives her to her appointment with the psychiatrist but doesn't look at her for the entire journey. Just as Lia is about to exit the car, Jennifer grabs her arm and tells her that she won't let Lia ruin Emma's life. She tells her that Emma is devastated by what she saw in the bathroom and has constant nightmares about the blood. She says that if Lia truly loves Emma, she will go in there and tell the doctor the truth. That she will stop fighting everyone who is trying to help her. That she will get better, once and for all. In the waiting room, Cassie appears once more, chiding Lia for not using a bigger knife to make the cuts. She's so close, why can't she just finish herself off? When Dr. Parker opens the office door, Lia starts spewing all the secrets she's held onto since Cassie's death. She says that Cassie haunts her, that she's urging her to kill herself. She says that she's starving herself and that Cassie is trying to kill her, and that she feels completely out of control. Dr. Parker nods sympathetically and tells Lia that she thinks the best place for her right now is the psychiatric ward of the hospital: the nuthouse.

## Pages 226 - 251 Analysis

Lia's fears are finally realized when, after being released from the hospital, she is forced to move in with her mother and relinquish all control over her body. Her mother will be monitoring every input and output, charting them, grading her. It is too much for Lia to bear. Lia's actions have finally taken away the last thing she truly cared about: Emma. If



she wants to get back to her life, and get back to her sister's unconditional love, she has to fight for it. In the hospital, Lia's body immediately rebounded to the treatment, proving to her parents that she is a fighter, that she does want to live. Now Lia just has to prove it to herself. She momentarily tries to embrace her therapy by telling Dr. Parker everything she's been experiencing. She tells Dr. Parker about the haunting, and how Cassie is trying to kill her. In Lia's mind, this is a massive step forward, and she is crushed when Dr. Parker suggests that perhaps she needs to spend some time in a psychiatric ward. Lia had embraced her therapy in the hope of avoiding hospitalization again and so this suggestion must feel like a betrayal. The reader can expect an enormous backlash.



## Pages 251 - 277

### Pages 251 - 277 Summary

Lia is stunned and terrified when she walks back out the waiting room of Dr. Parker's office. Cassie is gone, and Jennifer has not yet arrived to pick her up. Lia sits, watching the snow in the parking lot for nearly an hour, but there is no sign of Jennifer. Lia calls a cab and pays him extra to drive her to the pizza place and then to the motel where Elijah works. She begs Elijah to let her inside, and he finally relents. She tells him everything: she's been kicked out of her father's house, her mother is crazy, she's being haunted by Cassie's ghost, and her doctor wants to lock her up in the nuthouse. She's just emptied out her bank account and she wants to runaway with him to Mississippi. As she's ranting to him, she passes out. When she wakes up, Elijah has laid her in his bed and is staring at her, terrified. He demands to know what is really going on. Lia lifts up her shirt and shows him her scars. Elijah is horrified and says that there's no way he can take her with him. He can't end up with another dead girl on his hands. When Lia starts weeping, Elijah says that she can stay with him under two conditions: she call her parents and tell them that she's safe, and that she eats enough to stay conscious. Lia agrees. That night, they watch television and Lia nibbles on pizza crusts. Lia takes two sleeping pills to help her fall asleep. She wakes up, drowsy, at 1:30 and sees Elijah sitting at the table, playing cards. The monster tattoo on his arm seems to glow under the lights of the motel room, growing and stretching until Elijah is the monster. The second time she wakes up, Elijah is gone. The two sleeping pills have made Lia groggy, and she's in and out of sleep for the next few hours. Elijah does not return. Finally, at 2:00 p.m. in the afternoon, Lia forces herself out of bed. She spots Elijah's note immediately. He has stolen her money and left without her. She can hardly blame him. She's too much of a liability. He urges her to turn back to her parents for help, they love her.

It takes hours for Lia to drag herself out of Elijah's motel room and into the room where Cassie died. The motel is entirely empty: no one rents rooms for Christmas. She turns her head to a strange sound, like air bubbling through water. She realizes that it is her own breathing. She peeks inside room 113. Cassie is sitting cross-legged on the bed, waiting. She is elated to see that Cassie is finally here: "OK, listen. The next couple of minutes are totally going to suck. There's no way around that, sorry. I'd make it easier if I could" (Page 269). Lia is dying, and Cassie is there to help her cross over. The starvation and dehydration and exhaustion mixed with the almost-overdose of the sleeping pills have finally done Lia in. Her kidneys shut down hours ago, now her lungs are filling with fluid. It should be only a few more minutes. Something kicks in Lia's chest and she realizes, for the first time, that she wants to live. She wrestles away from Cassie and slowly, painfully, crawls to the office to call her mother. She tells her mother to hurry. The ambulance is there in minutes and restart Lia's heart.

Lia's third visit to New Season's hospital is the longest one yet, but Lia does not resist the treatment. She eats all the food. She answers all the questions. She cherishes the



letters from her family and promises them that she will get well. She knows that there is no magic cure to give her her life back, but for the first time, she knows she has something worth fighting for. If she was a wintergirl caught between two worlds, now, she is beginning to thaw.

## Pages 251 - 277 Analysis

Although she seemed momentarily invested in her therapy, the thought of being sent to a psychiatric ward is far too scary for Lia. She knows that if she wants to keep hold of what little control she has in her life, she must runaway. Running away is not a scary option because she has already had everything she cares about taken away. In Lia's mind, she has nothing left to lose. Because Lia has almost completely isolate herself from the outside world, she has no one to help aid her escape. No one except Elijah. She bribes Elijah for help with food and convinces him to take her with him to Mississippi. Biblically, Elijah is a character known for raising the dead, so keen readers will have high expectations for this novel's Elijah. It is unexpected, then, when Lia awakens from sleep to find that Elijah has stolen her money and abandoned her. In a way, it appears that Elijah has not lived up to his namesake, and that he has betrayed his friendship to Lia. When the reader truly considers what friendship is, however, they may reconsider their reaction to Elijah's actions. Friendship should mean one individual wanting the best for another. If Elijah had taken Lia with him to Mississippi, he would have been enabling her disease. By forcing her to ask her family for help, Elijah truly is doing what is best for her. At the end of the novel, Lia does reach out to her family and she eventually gets the help she needs. In a way, this novel's Elijah has fulfilled his role or raising the dead.





# Characters

## Lia Overbrook

Lia Overbrook is the eighteen-year-old protagonist of the novel. Ever since Lia was in middle school, around the time that her parents divorced, leaving Lia to feel lonely and abandoned, she has been starving herself. It started as a bet with her best friend, Cassie, to see who could become the skinniest girl in school. As time passed, being thin became Lia's obsession and the perfect way for her to control what was happening in her life. While she couldn't control her parents' fighting, their divorce, their own preoccupations with their jobs, she could control what she ate every day. After a while, simply starving herself wasn't enough. She had so much pain building inside her that she needed another outlet. That is when she began cutting herself, controlling the physical pain as an outlet for her emotional pain. She has been hospitalized for her anorexia twice, but always refused treatment. Both times, she gained just enough weight to be released from the hospital so she could go back home and continue starving herself. Lia's destruction reached a boiling point when her best friend, Cassie, died purging in a motel room. Before she died, she called Lia 33 times but Lia never picked up the phone. Now, Lia is forced to deal with the grief of losing her best friend as well as the guilt of knowing that she could have saved her. The only way Lia can process emotion like this is through self-mutilation, both through cutting and starving. Her methods don't work, and Cassie's ghost haunts Lia, urging her to finish herself off. Lia spirals completely out of control and begins slashing wildly into her skin, desperate for release. Her body is found by her eight-year-old step-sister, the only person in the world Lia truly loves. Still, this is not enough to make Lia change her ways. When she learns that she is going to be sent to the psychiatric ward of the hospital, the "nuthouse," Lia runs away from home and nearly overdoses on sleeping pills. In one final vision, Cassie welcomes Lia to the other side. She's finally done it. She's finally died. At this moment, Lia realizes that she doesn't want to die: she wants to live. She fights her way back to life and, at the end of the novel, enters rehabilitation to get her life back.

## Cassie Parrish

Cassie Parrish is Lia's ex-best friend. At the age of eighteen and at the opening of the novel, Cassie dies, alone in a motel room. Before she died, Cassie tried to call Lia 33 times, but Lia never picked up the phone. Throughout the novel, Cassie is a ghost, haunting Lia, urging her to finish herself off and join her on the other side. Cassie died after two days of bingeing and purging in a motel room, when her esophagus ripped open from forced vomiting. Cassie had been bulimic since she learned how to make herself vomit while at drama camp in middle school. By the eighth grade, Cassie had perfected the art of color coating her purges, Doritos orange or berry blue, so that she would know exactly when all the food was out of her system. When the girls were in sixth grade, Lia saw Cassie purposefully vomit for the first time. She didn't understand



why Cassie would eat all that food if she didn't want to get fat. As time passed, Lia learned how to monitor her weight too, and the girls encouraged each other to lose as much weight as possible, daring each other to become the skinniest girls in school. After Cassie died, Lia knew that she was partly responsible: "We held hands when we walked down the gingerbread path into the forest, blood dripping from our fingers. We danced with witches and kissed monsters. We turned us into wintergirls, and when she tried to leave, I pulled her back into the snow because I was afraid to be alone" (Page 99). Cassie's haunting of Lia symbolizes the way their eating disorders ruled their lives, and in a way, ruled their deaths. It wasn't until Lia decided that she wanted to live, that Cassie could truly cross over to the other side. She had been waiting for Lia to come with her, but when Lia refused, Cassie was able to transition on her own.

## Professor Overbrook

Professor Overbrook is Lia's father. In her narrative, she sometimes refers to him as "Dad" and sometimes refers to him as "Professor Overbrook." These transitions occur based on the state of their relationship at the time. When he makes an effort to talk to Lia, she refers to him as Dad, but when he is busy with work or arguing with her mother, Lia refers to him as Professor. Although he does his best to deal with his daughter's extreme emotional issues, it is clear that Professor Overbrook is in over his head and in denial about how serious the situation with Lia truly is.

## Jennifer

Jennifer is Lia's stepmother and the mother of eight-year-old Emma. Since coming into Lia's family, Jennifer has been very loving and caring toward Lia, treating her like her own daughter. Since Lia was released from New Seasons the second time, Jennifer has been in charge of monitoring Lia's weight.

## Emma

Emma is Lia's eight-year-old stepsister, and the one person in the world that Lia truly cares about. Emma is a vivacious, energetic, and love-filled child. She adores Lia, but has told her friends that Lia is suffering from cancer, which is why she's so thin and why she's been in and out of the hospital. Emma is one of the main reasons that Lia wants to get better after she almost dies. Her family says that she won't be able to see Emma until she's well again, and this is enough incentive for Lia to choose to get better.

## Dr. Marrigan

Dr. Marrigan is Lia's mother and a cardiologist with an extremely busy workload. Lia resents her mother for being too invested in her work life and not having enough time to properly parent Lia. Although she is busy, it is clear that Dr. Marrigan loves her daughter



and will do anything to help her get well. At the end of the novel, Lia is forced to move in with her mother because she isn't making enough progress at her father's house.

## **Elijah**

Elijah is the motel worker that found Cassie's dead body. Before Cassie died, she gave Elijah a message to pass on to Lia, saying that Lia had won. Elijah didn't understand what the message meant, but it sounded important enough for him to track Lia down to deliver it. Elijah is a somewhat strange figure in Lia's life, and the reader is never quite sure about the nature of their relationship. In the beginning, it appears that Elijah is romantically interested in Lia, but at the end of the novel, he steals Lia's money and urges her to call her family for help.

## **Dr. Parker**

Dr. Parker is Lia's psychiatrist. Ever since Lia was assigned to Dr. Parker's study, Lia has refused to speak openly about her emotions and insecurities. Dr. Parker has patiently waited for Lia to open up, and when she does, Dr. Parker suggests that Lia be sent to the psychiatric ward of the hospital, which causes Lia to spiral out of control.



## Objects/Places

### Amoskeag High

Amoskeag High is the high school where Lia is a senior. Lia does just enough work in school to keep the teachers off her back, but in reality, she thinks about nothing but her weight. After Cassie dies, everyone in Amoskeag High attempts to honor her memory throughout the school.

### Richland Park

Richland Park is the field where Emma plays soccer. It is here that she tells Lia that everyone on her soccer team thinks she has cancer, because Emma needed to explain why Lia is so thin and why she's been in and out of the hospital so often.

### New Seasons

New Seasons is the hospital where Lia is sent during her rehabilitation. At the opening of the novel, she had been sent to New Seasons twice, and been released twice. Each time she is there, Lia carefully plays by the rules so that she can be released quickly, gaining just enough weight to be deemed healthy. She knows that the sooner she is released, the sooner she can return home to control her life, her way, once again. The third time Lia enters New Seasons, at the end of the novel, she fully embraces the therapy and starts to get well.

### See-Glass

See-Glass was one of the first things Cassie showed Lia when she was unpacking her boxes at her new house. The see-glass is green, birthed from the belly of a volcano, like sea-glass, but with the ability to see into the future. When Cassie dies, Lia slips the see-glass into her casket. At the end of the novel, when Cassie tells Lia that she is dying, Lia grabs the see-glass and looks into the future, seeing that she has a choice. She can live if she fights for it.

### The Blubber-O-Meter 3000

The Blubber-O-Meter 3000 is the scale that Jennifer uses every Tuesday to weigh Lia. Lia has fiddled with the scale so that it shows a few extra pounds of weight without the alteration being noticed by the outside viewer. This is one of the many ways Lia hides her shrinking body from her parents.



## The Gateway Motel

The Gateway Motel is the motel where Cassie died. She died in room 113 after her esophagus split open during a purge. The Gateway Motel is also where Elijah lives and where Lia nearly overdoses.

## Knitting

Knitting is the one activity Lia does that has nothing to do with her weight. In a way, knitting is a symbol for the way Lia struggles to keep her life together. The scarf she has been working on is full of pulls and dropped stitches, imperfections visible to the outside world.

## Zombieland

Zombieland is the name Lia has for the times that she blacks out from lack of food and has no idea what she has been doing. Lia often enters zombieland when she is driving, and she has no idea how she got home or if she got in any accidents on the way.

## The Whisperblog

The Whisperblog is a collection of voices of young girls with eating disorders. They write their innermost thoughts, fears, and even encouragements to an audience of girls suffering from their same condition. The whisperblog is extremely unhealthy as most of the girls encourage the rest to continue losing weight and to stay strong against the outside world.

## Nana Marrigan's Knife

Nana Marrigan's knife is an antique, bone-handled knife that Lia steals when she stays at her mother's house for the evening. This is the knife Lia uses to slice between her ribs, sending her to the hospital for the last time.

## Dangerland

Dangerland is reaching 85 pounds. 85 pounds was the weight of Lia's body the last time her parents forced her into the hospital. Lia knows that the closer she creeps to that weight, the higher the risk that her parents will realize something is wrong and will return her to the hospital, thus 85 pounds is known as Dangerland.

## **Boerhaver's Syndrome**

Boerhaver's Syndrome is the condition Cassie died from. The syndrome occurs when an individual's esophagus rips open, sending that person into shock and eventually, into death. This syndrome is most commonly seen in alcoholics who vomit after ingesting too much alcohol, but it is also seen in bulimics like Cassie.

## **Pomegranate Cupcakes**

Pomegranate cupcakes are the items at the bake sale that send Lia over the edge. She intends to eat just a handful of pomegranate seeds, but before she knows it, she has blacked out and eaten the entire tray of cupcakes.



# Themes

## Winter

The main theme in the novel is that of winter, the symbol for the perpetual state of frozenness the girls are in. Lia and Cassie are stuck in between worlds, not truly living and not truly alive: "You're not dead, but you're not alive, either. You're a wintergirl, Lia-Lia, caught in between the worlds. You're a ghost with a beating heart. Soon you'll cross the border and be with me. I'm so stoked. I miss you wicked" (p. 196). In a way, the girls are frozen in time and this is reflected in the presence of winter in the novel. Physically, Lia is always cold. The main reason for this is her lack of body fat, but it also echoes back to the theme of winter. On the surface, the novel takes place in the months of October - December, the beginning of winter. Symbolically, winter represents thin trees with bare branches, similar to the skeletal frame of Lia's body. It should also be noted that in many of the key scenes in the novel, snow is present. For example, when Cassie confronts Lia at the drug store, Lia thinks she sees snow swirling around the store, but of course this is all in her imagination. Also, when Lia is admitted into the hospital, she realizes that it snowed while she was unconscious. The white of the snow reflecting off the hospital equipment nearly blinds her. It isn't until Lia realizes that she wants to live that she feels, for the first time, as if she is beginning to thaw.

## Control

The main fear Lia has throughout the novel is the fear of losing control in her life. The basis of Lia's eating disorder is control. Growing up, Lia felt that her life was out of control. There were so many things she had no say in, and therefore no control over: her mother's dedication to her work, her father's affairs, her parents' divorce. When Lia discovered the pleasure of starving herself, she also discovered the joy of having a sense of control. This pleasure soon turned into an obsession as her eating disorder took over her life. Soon, it became a battle between Lia and Cassie, not only to see who could lose the most weight the fastest, but in a way, who could have the strongest sense of control over their actions. The reader sees Lia struggling with this control time and time again, particularly when her weight drops closer to "the dangerzone." Lia wakes up in the middle of the night with the refrigerator door open, a block of butter or cream cheese in her hand. In moments like this, it appears that Lia's body, not her brain, is going to control her actions. Lia revolts from this by having extra control during her daily life, no matter how desperately her body screams for food, Lia refuses it. She loses control, however, at the bake sale, when she seems to black out even though she is awake, her body swallowing cupcake after cupcake. After that, Lia is desperate to gain control back again. The main exterior conflict in the novel surrounds Lia's determination to keep control of her actions away from her parents. Her parents want to control Lia's surroundings so that she can get well, but Lia is adamant against this.



## Friendship

Because Lia has closed herself off from the outside world, she has very few friends. The two friends that she has in the novel, Cassie and Elijah, both leave the reader questioning whether they were true friends to Lia or not. Lia and Cassie have been friends since they were in third grade, but when they were in sixth grade, that relationship started to change: Cassie began vomiting after eating and Lia began covering it up. As the years passed, both girls became obsessed with their eating disorders, dragging each other down into the dark depths of their depravity. Because their relationship surrounded damaging their bodies together, the reader questions whether Cassie and Lia were true friends, wouldn't true friends want the best for each other, not the worst? Lia acknowledges this when she says, "We held hands when we walked down the gingerbread path into the forest, blood dripping from our fingers. We danced with witches and kissed monsters. We turned us into wintergirls, and when she tried to leave, I pulled her back into the snow because I was afraid to be alone" (Page 99). At the end of Cassie's life, Lia couldn't even be bothered to pick up the phone, no matter how desperately she knew Cassie needed her. When it comes to Elijah, he is the first person outside of Lia's family who seems concerned with Lia's health and with her gaining weight. He clearly wants what is best for her and refuses to let her runaway with him. When he leaves, however, he abandons her in the motel room where her best friend died a month earlier, and he steals all her money. It is likely that Anderson is referencing the fact that one cannot truly be loved by others until they are able to love themselves. Lia could not truly have friends until she could first be a friend to herself.





# Style

## Point of View

Wintergirls is told in the first-person and limited omniscience point of view of Lia Overbrook. Although the narration of the novel is completely reliable, it takes the reader through the seemingly endless twists and turns of Lia's fragile emotional state as she comes to grips with Cassie's death and her own eating disorder. Through this point of view, the reader is given access into Lia's thoughts, fears, insecurities, and eventually, hope. Because the novel is told in present-tense narration, all emotional and physical action has a strong sense of urgency as Lia does not take the time to reflect on past events before moving onto the next. This propelling narration also mimics Lia's emotional state, particularly when she is in the act of self-mutilation. During these times, Lia only considers the exact moment, not the past and not the future. She is completely in the moment, and so is the reader. This point of view is important to the novel since one of the most important themes in the novel is Lia's emotional growth, particularly in her relationship with her parents. There could not be the dramatic impact of this growth if not for the reader's peek into Lia's thoughts and emotions. It is interesting to note that there are moments of past reflection in Lia's narration and also moments of stark honesty, but many of these moments are crossed out from the text, with controlled edits taking their place.

## Setting

This novel is set in the small town of Amoskeag, New Hampshire. Lia has grown up in an ideal neighborhood with two successful parents in the upper-middle class of society. All of the yards on Lia's streets are well manicured, with perfect picket fences and cars armed with ringing alarms when people get too close. It is interesting to note how perfect the setting around Lia is, particularly when discussing the emotional upheaval and mental instability Lia is dealing with on a daily basis. There is a strong influence of the small-town mentality, in which everyone knows everything about everyone else's lives. This has a strong impact on Lia, who not only wants to control her weight because she thinks she's disgusting, she also wants to control her weight so others don't think she's disgusting. This also fuels Emma's lies about Lia, in which she says that Lia has cancer instead of an eating disorder because she knows everyone is gossiping about her. Despite this interesting setting, the majority of the novel actually takes place in the world Lia has created inside her head. The reader is given details about the "real world" outside, but they are filtered through the deluded hallucinations fueled by Lia's eating disorder. The world inside Lia's head is dark and violent, and much of what she sees around her has been imagined. Lia cannot filter reality from imagination, which creates a vivid and wild world for the reader.



## Language and Meaning

As the novel is written for teenage readers, the language tends to be very conversational and easy to follow. The novel is clearly geared toward modern teenagers and is written in modern teen-speak. There are also moments when place-based vernacular is used. The characters are from the east coast, and use words like "wicked" to describe an intense emotion. Adult readers may be confused by some of the teenaged vernacular, but are given ample contextual clues to understand its meaning. The sentences are constructed in a way that is not only easy to follow, but also gains momentum as the reader reads on. The sentences are constructed to entice the reader to turn the next page, and often this structure works. The structure of the novel not only entices readers to carry on to the next chapter by utilizing cliffhanger phrases, each paragraph propels the reader on with its present-tense action written with the sense of urgency that matches Lia's emotional intensity. This novel is told mostly through exposition, with the exception of Lia's rare scenes of dialogue with her parents. This highlight the isolation Lia feels in the world due to her eating disorder, and how Lia has completely closed herself off to the outside world, forcing herself into reclusive isolation. Because of this, the reader's only insight into the world is through Lia's thoughts and emotions. Absolutely everything Lia sees in the world is somehow related back to her own weight and her weight loss goals, and this is reflected in the language of the text.

## Structure

This novel is arranged in 65 short chapters ranging in length from two sentences long to eight pages long. Each chapter is numbered in the same way that Lia numbers her weight: 001.00 - 065.00. This system reflects Lia's obsession with her weight on the scale and how everything around her is viewed through the lens of weight loss. It is interesting to note that there are two systems of narration at work in the novel although the story is narrated in its entirety by Lia. Throughout the novel, there are words and phrases printed but crossed out, as if Lia is editing her thoughts as they come to her. Most of what Lia crosses out are thoughts about food, her desperate desire to eat uncontrollably. The fact that Lia crosses these thoughts are show the reader how tightly Lia clings to the control in her life. She cannot even think about food freely or she fears that she will not stop it from entering her body. Lia's exorcism of food in her life reaches every single body part, even her brain. There are also sections of italics that relate to a time in the past when Lia thought of herself as "a real girl." These moments of italics are seemingly random, but upon closer inspection, highlight the moments in which Lia is thinking most clearly about the truth of her situation. She knows that she is somewhere between a human and a ghost, and the italics represent what she has lost in her obsession. There are also many repeated phrases cast to the left margin of the text. These phrases are usually derivations of the initial facts of Cassie's death: she died alone in a motel room after calling Lia 33 times. The left-flush of this text represents how these thoughts are always on Lia's mind. She tries to push them aside but cannot. Between pages 223 - 226, there are two full blank pages during which time Lia is

passed out, unconscious. These blank pages also represent the turning point in Lia's life.



## Quotes

"Yesterday's dirt and mistakes have moved through me. I am shiny and pink inside, clean. Empty is good. Empty is strong" (p. 7).

"Who wants to recover? It took me years to get that tiny. I wasn't sick; I was strong" (p. 28).

"This body has a different metabolism. This body hates dragging around the chains they wrap around it. Proof? At 099.00 I think clearer, look better, feel stronger. When I reach the next goal, it will be all that, and more" (p. 52).

"I measure myself. I can't play soccer, and most of them have better grades than me. But I am the thinnest girl in the room, hands down" (p. 78).

"I knew what he wanted to hear. He couldn't stand me being sick. Nobody can. They only want to hear that you're healing, you're in recovery, taking it one day at a time. If you're locked into sick, you should stop wasting their time and just get dead" (p. 83).

"We held hands when we walked down the gingerbread path into the forest, blood dripping from our fingers. We danced with witches and kissed monsters. We turned us into wintergirls, and when she tried to leave, I pulled her back into the snow because I was afraid to be alone" (p. 99).

"She has charts to prove everything I do is wrong, and that my only hope is to allow them to insert her stem cells in my marrow so she can grown a new her dressed in my skin" (p. 148).

"Listen to the whispers that curl into your head at night, calling you ugly and fat and stupid and bitch and whore and worst of all "a disappointment." Puke and starve and cut and drink because you don't want to feel any of this. Puke and starve and cut and drink because you need an anesthetic and it works...It is rotting you and you can't stop" (p. 161).

"Cutting pain was a different flavor of hurt. It made it easier not to think about having my body and my family and my life stolen, made it easier not to care" (p. 166).

"The blogs and chat rooms are always filled with the buzzing of tiny wings, flies beating themselves against the inside of the monitor, not knowing why they're trying to escape. It will never change" (p. 176).

"You're not dead, but you're not alive, either. You're a wintergirl, Lia-Lia, caught in between the worlds. You're a ghost with a beating heart. Soon you'll cross the border and be with me. I'm so stoked. I miss you wicked" (p. 196).



"I could say I'm excited, but that would be a lie. The number doesn't matter...The only number that would ever be enough is 0. Zero pounds, zero life, size zero, double-zero, zero point. Zero in tennis is love. I finally get it" (p. 220).

"Yes, I believe in ghosts, but we create them. We haunt ourselves, and sometimes we do such a good job, we lost track of reality" (p. 250).

"When you're alive, people can hurt you. It's easier to crawl into a bone cage or a snowdrift of confusion. It's easier to lock everybody out. But it's a lie" (p. 275).



## Topics for Discussion

Describe the style of the novel's narrative. Why are there so many crossed out words and phrases? What does this style reveal about Lia's character? Why can't Lia think or say certain things? What is she afraid might happen if she speaks the truth, without editing it? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

What does the term "wintergirls" mean? How was this term coined in the novel? In what ways are Cassie and Lia frozen? How does the theme of winter affect the plot of the novel? How does it give you insight into Lia's fears and emotions? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

In Lia's narrative, there are two distinct periods of time. The present, and the time before; the time when Lia was "a real girl." In Lia's mind, when was the turning point in her life? When did she stop being real? Based on this, do you think Lia will ever be "real" again? Why or why not? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Compare / contrast the friendships that Lia has with Cassie and Elijah. Are either of these characters truly Lia's friend? How can you tell? In your opinion, what does friendship mean? What elements of true friendship are missing from Lia's relationships with both Cassie and Elijah? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Describe the relationships Lia has with her parents, including her stepmother Jennifer. Why does Lia have different names for her family members for different circumstances? For example, why does Lia sometimes refer to her father as Dad and sometimes as Professor Overbrook? As a team, do you think Lia's parents are doing enough to ensure her success? Why or why not? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Why does Cassie haunt Lia after her death? Do you think it has to do with the phone calls, or is it something deeper? Do you think Lia would have seen Cassie's ghost if she were not struggling with an eating disorder? Why or why not? Do you think Cassie's ghost was real or a figment of Lia's imagination? Why? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

In what ways did Lia's eating disorder rule her life? What did she gain from losing weight? What did she lose? In what ways does Lia use her body to communicate with the outside world in ways that her words cannot? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.