A Complicated Kindness

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MIRIAM TOEWS

Miriam Toews was born into highly conservative Mennonite community in rural Canada, much like the one her protagonist Nomi inhabits in *A Complicated Kindness*. At the age of eighteen, Toews left Steinbach to travel the world, working in London and Montreal for several years before moving to Winnipeg and pursuing a Film Studies degree at the University of Manitoba (she later earned a degree in journalism as well). Working on a radio documentary on low-income mothers inspired Toews to write her first novel, *Summer of My Amazing Luck*, a story of friendship between two young mothers in a Winnipeg housing project. Since then she has written several novels, many based on her family's departure from the Mennonite community and struggles with mental illness. She lives in Toronto with her partner and mother, and enjoys babysitting her two grandchildren.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Mennonites are members of a Protestant Christian sect, similar to Anabaptism, founded by Menno Simons in 16th-century Holland. Simons' beliefs included adult baptism (baptizing congregants as adults, rather than infants, so that they can fully understand the ritual) and formally shunning transgressive community members. A relatively small and radical group, Mennonites endured persecution from various repressive governments in Europe. Some Mennonites fled to more tolerant Prussian states, while others pursued freedom in colonial America. Centuries later, many Russian Mennonites (such as Nomi's ancestors) fled to America after Russia's Communist Revolution threatened their way of life. Today, Mennonites live and practice their faith in a variety of ways. While some conservative groups live in isolated towns, maintain traditional dress and eschew modern conveniences, others live in mainstream communities and use technology.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Miriam Toews is the author of seven novels, many of which address themes present in *A Complicated Kindness*, such as family relationships and religious doubt. *Swing Low: A Life* and *All My Puny Sorrows*, based on the events surrounding the suicide of Toews' father and sister, both portray families with serious misgivings about life in the Mennonite community, as well as close but tumultuous bonds between sisters. Her most recent novel, *Women Talking*, portrays sexual abuse within a Mennonite colony and is her most stringent indictment of religious fundamentalism; it's also a meditation on the shifting relationship between the two sisters at the story's core. Toew's themes related to the tenuous coexistence of religious tradition and modern life are echoed, in some ways, in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*, the story of a thoughtful preacher in the American heartland. Additionally, Wallace Stegner's essay collection *Mormon Country* provides a lyrical and nuanced history of Christian sects in North America.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *A Complicated Kindness*
- **When Written:** 2004
- **Where Written:** Winnipeg, Canada
- **When Published:** 2004
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Realistic fiction
- **Setting:** East Village, Canada
- **Climax:** Nomi's excommunication from the Mennonite church
- **Antagonist:** Religious conservatism, The Mouth
- **Point of View:** First-person

EXTRA CREDIT

Tangled Relations. Toews joked to the *New Yorker* that because her parents are second cousins, she is both her mother's daughter and her mother's second cousin once removed.

Her Name in Lights. Toews' novel *Irma Voth* is inspired by her own experience playing a Mennonite housewife in the 2007 film Silent Light. The film was shot in Plautdietsch, a dialect of German and Dutch spoken by many Mennonites. Toews, who is not fluent, took lessons with her mother in order to play her part.

PLOT SUMMARY

The novel's action occurs in two timeframes: during the childhood of the protagonist, Nomi Nickel, and during her adolescence in the late 1970s. Nomi is born into the conservative Mennonite community of East Village, Canada, where her parents, Ray and Trudie, have lived all their lives. A middle school teacher, Ray is a devout but mild-mannered Mennonite. He admires and adores Trudie, who is warm and spontaneous but often contravenes Mennonite norms in a way that makes him anxious. Nomi also has a bossy but kind older sister, Tash.

Nomi's life is largely controlled by the seemingly archaic rules that govern Mennonite society. She can only wear certain kinds of clothes, and she's not supposed to dance or hug people at school. When she asks permission to go to the movies, Trudie spends an afternoon deciding if it's appropriate. Yet Nomi characterizes her family life as happy and satisfying, remembering lake outings with her parents and Tash and the comforting feeling over going to sleep listening to her mother and sister playing cards. At school, she has a close friend named Lids, with whom she walks home every day.

Even as a young child, Nomi sees other members of her family questioning the norms of Mennonite society. Trudie passively resists conformity by refusing to do many of the things expected of Mennonite women, like performing chores at the church and sending supplies to missionaries. On Sundays, when Trudie is assigned to take care of babies during church services, she unplugs the speaker piping the sermon into her room and lets Tash play forbidden American radio stations instead. While Mennonite women are expected to be scrupulous housekeepers, Trudie is haphazard and untidy; she spends most of her time reading, an activity frowned upon in the community.

Tash is much more explicit in her rebellion: she carries her radio everywhere, wears clothes deemed inappropriate by the church, and "educates" Nomi on sex and sexuality, topics that no one else in the community discusses. She encourages Nomi to mock church elders, like Trudie's brother, the preacher, whom they impiously nickname The Mouth for his pompous sermons. However, as a child Nomi herself believes wholeheartedly in Mennonite principles. She loves participating in Sunday school games in which the class pretends to kick people out of Heaven for sinning, and she eagerly looks forward to an afterlife of eternal bliss with her family. One of her deepest fears is that Tash will be condemned to Hell for her various transgressions.

As Nomi grows up, Tash becomes more and more openly defiant of church norms. She refuses to attend church and spends most of her time in her room, burning incense and listening to records; she won't even talk and play with Nomi as she once did. More troublingly, Tash and her boyfriend Ian have started borrowing library books from the nearest city and are reading about philosophy and communism, activities that Nomi realizes are much more threatening than the clothes Tash wears. Hoping it's a phase, Trudie and Ray ignore Tash's behavior, but it's hard to do so when she starts staying out all night and The Mouth constantly chastises her for failing to conform. Eventually, Tash declares that she has become an atheist and is going to leave town with Ian. Trudie supports her in this decision, packing clothes and food for her journey. Tash finally becomes friendly to Nomi again, and bequeaths her record collection to her younger sister. But Ray, devastated and concerned, won't even say goodbye.

After Tash's departure Nomi's home life becomes erratic and unsettled. Ray and Trudie are both despondent and often cry in the middle of the day. Trudie starts wandering the town at night in her pajamas, and her behavior becomes more openly contrary to Mennonite norms. Nomi becomes obsessed with the idea of Tash's eternal damnation, and dreams that her sister is burning in Hell every night. One night, frustrated with these recurring nightmares, Trudie marches Nomi to The Mouth's house and demands that the preacher tell her that Tash will be "saved." Sticking to his dogma, The Mouth refuses to do so, and Trudie flies into a fury in front of his house, screaming profanities and throwing stones. Shortly after that, Trudie leaves the family as well, without saying goodbye to Nomi.

The story shifts into the future, when Nomi is sixteen and living with Ray in the family's bungalow. Shell-shocked by the departure of his wife and daughter, Ray has become extremely apathetic. He lets the house become decrepit and leaves Nomi to do laundry and cook to the best of her ability. Meanwhile, Nomi has lost confidence in her faith and taken up Tash's iconoclastic tendencies. She wears her sister's clothes and burns her incense; and like Tash, she feels both amused and oppressed by the inconsistencies and absurdities of life within a highly religious community.

Instead of participating in church-sanctioned activities, Nomi hangs out at a sewage pit where the town's rebellious teens gather to share beer and joints. It's here that Nomi meets Travis, a boy her own age who has dropped out of high school and works in the town's museum, role-playing as a Mennonite pioneer. Nomi and Travis immediately bond over their love of rock music, and start going out. Almost every night, Travis picks Nomi up in his truck and they drive around the town's outskirts, laying naked in the fields or going swimming or visiting the local drug dealer, The Comb, to buy weed. Travis wants to have sex and, although she's less certain, Nomi makes an appointment to get birth control from a doctor. However, Travis often tells Nomi what to do and they frequently quarrel, usually when Travis's behavior reveals him to be less committed to their relationship than Nomi wants. For example, he often talks about escaping to Montreal, but will never specify if he wants Nomi to come with him.

While Nomi's keen eye for humor shows her intelligence and creativity, she gets increasingly bad grades at school because of her refusal to parrot Mennonite dogma. In particular, she often quarrels with her English teacher, Mr. Quiring. Mr. Quiring demands that his students write formulaic stories that reinforce traditional ideas, while Nomi's rambling narratives often question them. He frequently throws her out of class, which she uses as an excuse to skip school entirely and walk around the town. Nomi's wanderings show her the bleaker parts of town, such as the billboards that threaten citizens with damnation if they don't follow the church. She also encounters people who have been "excommunicated" by the church and now live in the town even though everyone else is obliged to shun them. But the walks also build unlikely friendships: Nomi

is close to an elderly widow, Mrs. Peters, and spends time visiting her house and doing chores, and she always takes time to play charades and other games with the little neighbor girl who lives next to her.

She also frequently goes to the hospital, where Lids is now languishing because of an undiagnosed chronic illness. While Lids is a devout Mennonite, she listens uncritically and supportively as Nomi discusses her relationship with Travis and her plans to have sex. The nurses are often unsympathetic and neglectful, but Nomi takes over their duties, cheering Lids up and performing difficult chores like washing her hair. Nomi even throws a can of orange juice at a mean nurse who refuses to give Lids the special kind of food that she needs. The nurse retaliates by saying Nomi is as crazy as her mother. Allusions like this cause Nomi to reveal to the reader that Trudie left the community not randomly, but after being excommunicated by The Mouth, her own brother.

Although Ray is unhappy about Nomi's failure to attend school, he never reprimands her strongly. Instead, he helps her to prepare for her driving test. He himself is becoming more erratic, gradually selling off most of the furniture so that that the house lacks basic items like a sofa and a refrigerator. He also takes to driving around for hours every night. Nomi is worried about his well-being, especially since she can't move to Montreal with Travis if her father can't take care of himself.

After Nomi obtains birth control from a sympathetic doctor, she and Travis have sex. But it's far less romantic than Nomi expected: drunk and vulnerable, she wants Travis to ask her to move to Montreal and is upset when he fails to do so. In the following weeks, Nomi becomes dependent on intoxicants, spending most of her time trying to scrounge up money to buy marijuana.

Then, in one fateful night, Nomi's various problems come to a head. She finds out that Travis, has been cheating on her with his fake "wife" at the village museum, Adeline. In retaliation, Nomi finds Travis's truck parked outside a motel where he's having a tryst and sets it on fire. Then she goes to the hospital to seek consolation from Lids, only to find that her friend has been moved to a psychiatric facility to receive shock therapy. Distraught, Nomi makes her way to The Comb's trailer, where she gets drunk with the drug dealer. She blacks out and wakes up to find she's had sex with The Comb; it's never clear if the sex is consensual. Nomi takes a joint from him and drives to the town dump to smoke it. It's here that Ray finds her. He gives her a muffin and drives her home, but before she has time to clean up The Mouth arrives and announces that Nomi has been excommunicated for setting fires and disobeying the rules.

Barely reacting to The Mouth's pronouncement, Ray tells Nomi to go to bed. When she wakes up, she finds he has gone for good, leaving her the car. In a loving note, he instructs Nomi to sell the house and says they'll meet again in a few years. He closes with several beautiful Biblical verses about God's constant presence and the prospect of achieving joy in the future. As she packs up her few possessions. Nomi is deeply grateful to Ray for realizing that, in order for her to break free of the town, he must leave as well.

Nomi begins to address Mr. Quiring directly, telling him that she's submitting this narrative instead of her required final assignment. She reveals to the reader that she discovered, several months ago, several letters from Mr. Quiring in Trudie's dresser, which revealed that they had been having an affair before Trudie's departure. The first letters are romantic and passionate, but after Trudie ends the affair he writes letters threatening to expose her as an "adulteress" before the entire town. Nomi doesn't know if Trudie ended the affair because of her love for Ray or simply her desire to leave town, but Nomi doesn't care. Nomi's story ends with her sitting in her empty room, "wondering who I'll become if I leave this town."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Nomi Nickel – The novel's narrator and protagonist, a 17-year-old girl chafing at the restrictions of Mennonite life in the small town of East Village, Canada. Nomi is intelligent and precocious but doesn't like to play by her community's rules: she reads novels and philosophy in her spare time, but refuses to complete homework that she doesn't like and eventually stops attending school altogether. Nomi is doubtful of the existence of God and distrustful of religious dogma. She distances herself from her community by experimenting with drugs and alcohol and cultivating a transgressive relationship with her boyfriend, Travis. Despite her tough personality and iconoclastic tendencies, Nomi is deeply kind and empathetic. She is quick to help others who are vulnerable and overlooked, maintains friendships with people deeply committed to the Mennonite way of life, like the widow Mrs. Peters or her devout friend Lids, and she's often wistful for her childhood days of uncomplicated belief and happiness within the Mennonite community. Nomi's adolescence is shaped by the breakup of her family: her sister Tash has left the community with her boyfriend, and her mother Trudie has been cast out for adultery. As the novel progresses Nomi must decide whether to leave home for good, as her sister and mother did, or emulate her father Ray, who stays loyal to the Mennonite community despite religious doubts and grief for his missing wife and daughter. By the end of the novel, Nomi has both learned to appreciate her community and the ways in which it has shaped her positively, and developed the confidence and independence to build a new life.

Ray Nickel – Nomi's father, a mild-mannered teacher and devout Mennonite. Unlike many members of the community, Ray is highly educated, encouraging Nomi to read widely and

develop opinions on scientific and philosophical topics, and he's a fairly progressive man, deferring all decisions to his wife Trudie and rarely punishing or opposing his daughters even as they transgress community norms. Yet, characterized by his omnipresent suit and tie (traditional attire of Mennonite men), devotion to hard work, and humble demeanor, he's also deeply motivated by religious belief and committed to the Mennonite way of life. Nomi admires her father's simple faith, which shapes his sympathetic character and provides him with a sense of purpose, but he often frustrates her with his grief-stricken apathy and his refusal to challenge communal norms, even when those norms are responsible for the breakup of their family. Ray reacts to family catastrophe by simply refusing to acknowledge it, behavior that is reflected in his **house**'s slow decline as he stops caring for it. His behavior makes Nomi feel that she must stay home to care for Ray and protect his precarious mental health, despite her intense desire to leave. Ray understands this dynamic, and he eventually leaves town first and then encourages Nomi to do the same, ultimately allowing his daughter to build her own life without giving up on her family.

Trudie Nickel – Nomi's mother, absent for most of the novel but characterized through her daughter's abundant memories. Trudie is intelligent, warm, and spontaneous, making up exciting games and activities for her young daughters and enlivening the duller aspects of Mennonite life—for example, when she has to preside over the church daycare, she lets Nomi and Tash listen to forbidden pop radio stations. Her behavior often challenges Mennonite norms—she reads secular literature, owns sexy lingerie, and enjoys playing cards—and while her choices sometimes discomfort her more conventional husband, Ray, they also heighten his admiration and love for her, and he always supports his wife when she is chastised by church leaders like her brother, The Mouth. Above all, though, Trudie is enigmatic, characterized by mercurial mood swings that neither Nomi nor her father can understand or predict. In her narrative, Nomi reflects this opaqueness by withholding the real reason for her mother's departure: it's not until the end of the novel that the reader discovers Trudie has cheated on Ray with Mr. Quiring and been excommunicated, behavior that contrasts sharply with her overall demeanor as a loving wife and mother. Trudie is a less reliable parent than Ray, and Nomi is often baffled or angered by her attempts to "make sense" of her mother's behavior; but her characterization of Trudie as a vibrant and complex woman emerges as a spirited defense against the community's disapproval and condemnation. Ultimately, Trudie teaches Nomi the importance of acceptance: by the end of the novel, Nomi realizes that she doesn't need to understand her mother's actions to love her.

Tash Nickel – Nomi's wild and fiercely independent older sister. Like their mother, Trudie, Tash is absent during the novel's present action, having left town with her boyfriend, Ian. As a child, Nomi is appalled by her sister's predilection for drugs and alcohol and her disobedience of Mennonite norms. But as Nomi becomes an adolescent herself she inherits her sister's clothes, taste in subversive music, and critical attitude towards her community. Nomi misses her sister and often imagines what advice Tash would give in tough situations. It's partly out of the desire to emulate her sister's trajectory that Nomi becomes so attached to the idea of leaving town with her own boyfriend, Travis. Yet this idea proves ill-advised and Nomi ultimately breaks up with Travis before setting out on her own. By the end of the novel, she realizes that in order to become her own person, she must break away not only from her community but from her imitations of her sister.

Travis – Nomi's boyfriend, a disaffected and rebellious Mennonite teenager. Like Nomi, Travis is intelligent, curious about life outside of their closed community, and given to disobeying the rules: together they cruise around the countryside at night, cobble together money for drugs, and share their first sexual experiences. Yet he's also self-centered and shallow, concerned above all else with acting like a "cool" and artistic teenager. He often criticizes Nomi's personality and behavior. Even though she's going through a family crisis, when she makes herself vulnerable to him he ignores or derides her. In this sense, Travis is a foil to Nomi's empathetic and outward-looking personality. Despite these character flaws, Nomi looks up to Travis and dreams of cementing their relationship by having sex and escaping town to Montreal. In fact, though, shortly after sleeping with him for the first time, she discovers that he's been cheating on her. While Nomi feels immensely betrayed by his actions, she soon leaves home without Travis's help. While she initially thought she needed her boyfriend to build a new life in the outside world, she eventually realizes that he was only holding her back.

The Mouth – Trudie's brother, Nomi's uncle, and the strict priest who governs life within the Mennonite town of East Village. In his younger days The Mouth was as rebellious as his nieces, even leaving town in hopes of finding success as a poet. But, disillusioned by his failure to thrive outside his Mennonite community, he returns home, adopts a highly conservative outlook, and becomes a cleric. The Mouth is known for long and pompous sermons (it's this tendency that inspires Nomi to refer to him by this irreverent nickname rather than his real name, which is Hans). His actions and decisions reflect the harshest aspects of Mennonite theology. He often dwells on sin and shame, and seems to take pleasure in punishing other people. The Mouth is determined to obey Mennonite dogma even when doing so has obvious negative consequences. For example, he excommunicates Trudie and Nomi knowing that he's contributing to the breakup of the Nickel family. In this sense he's an important foil to characters like Ray and Trudie, whose more positive conception of Christian faith inspires them to love, value, and advocate for family members, even

when doing so involves defying the church.

Mr. Quiring – Nomi's cantankerous English teacher. Nomi is constantly at odds with Mr. Quiring, who insists that she write formulaic essays that parrot Mennonite dogma while she wants to create inventive and intellectually complex stories. Mr. Quiring's constant belittling of Nomi and refusal to recognize her obvious talent demonstrates the difficulty of fitting in to a conservative community as a creative and independent-minded teenager. After discovering a series of letters between Mr. Quiring and Trudie, Nomi learns they had an affair which ended when Trudie returns to Ray and Mr. Quiring threatens to expose her as an adulteress to the town. Just as Mr. Quiring exerts control over Nomi's written narratives, he tries to determine the course of Trudie's life. But by leaving the community to forge their own paths, both women eventually thwart him.

Lids – Nomi's closest friend, a former classmate who is now hospitalized for a mysterious chronic illness. Lids is mild-mannered, obedient, and devoutly religious. In other words, she's everything Nomi isn't, but the two girls respect their differences and get along well. Lids demonstrates the positive aspects of strong religious faith and forms a stark contrast to religious characters like The Mouth, who feel entitled to impose their beliefs on others. At the end of the novel, Lids is moved to a mental facility to receive shock treatment, without getting to say goodbye to Nomi.

Mrs. Peters –An elderly woman in the Mennonite community. Mrs. Peters' son, Clayton, was in Nomi's class before drowning in a tragic accident. Mrs. Peters becomes fond of Nomi, who reminds her of her dead son, and uses the events of Nomi's life to imagine what her son might have been like had he lived. Nomi often visits Mrs. Peters or does small chores at her house. Their unlikely friendship shows Nomi's kindly nature and ability to accept and honor people who are very different from her.

The Comb – A drug dealer on whom Nomi and Travis rely for their supply of marijuana. The Comb is the only resident of East Village who manages to stay in the Mennonite community while flouting all its norms. For Nomi, his trailer is a kind of no-man's-land, where she can rebel against her traditional upbringing without leaving behind her familiar community. However, The Comb is also unscrupulous and predatory: he makes suggestive comments to Nomi throughout the novel and, when she breaks up with Travis and visits his trailer in a state of mental instability, has sex with her. Ultimately, Nomi's experiences with The Comb cause her to give up the drugs and alcohol on which she relies for much of the novel.

Nicodemus – Trudie's father and Nomi's grandfather. Trudie remembers Nicodemus as a loving parent, even though he has so many children he sometimes forgets their names. When Nicodemus dies, Nomi tries to write him a letter in Heaven, forcing Trudie to explain that it's impossible to communicate with deceased people. This episode helps Nomi realize the importance of appreciating the earthly world, rather than focusing on the afterlife.

Adeline – A Mennonite girl who works with Travis at the museum village. Travis and Adeline pretend to be a traditional Mennonite husband and wife, caring for a fake baby together. While Travis assures Nomi that he's not friends with Adeline in real life, in fact he cheats on Nomi with her.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Aunt Gonad – The Mouth's wife and Nomi's aunt, whose real name is unknown. Aunt Gonad supports her husband in whatever he says or does and never speaks for herself. She's an example of the marginalization of women's voices in conservative Mennonite culture.

Carson Enns – One of Nomi's neighbors. As a young girl, Nomi spends a memorable afternoon watching Carson slaughter chickens with his father, Mr. Enns.

Mr. Enns – Carson Enns' father and Nomi's neighbor, a gruff man who slaughters chickens in his backyard.

Neighbor Girl – Nomi's neighbor, a young unnamed child. The neighbor girl is plucky and inventive, often demanding that Nomi play charades or pretend with her. Nomi's patient and loving behavior towards the girl reveals her compassionate nature, which she tries to hide behind a tough exterior.

Clayton Peters – Nomi's preschool classmate, who dies in a tragic childhood accident. Nomi later becomes close with Clayton's mother, Mrs. Peters.

Ian – Tash's boyfriend who shares Tash's rebellious attitude and desire for knowledge outside the strict limits of their conservative, insular Mennonite community. He and Tash ultimately leave East Village together.

Eldon – The Comb's cousin and sidekick, a Mennonite misfit who lives in a trailer outside of the town.

Mrs. Klippenstein – An elderly woman whom Trudie cares for as part of her Mennonite community service. After Mrs. Klippenstein moves to a Mennonite nursing home, Trudie uses her empty house to have secret trysts with Mr. Quiring.

Sheridan Klippenstein – Mrs. Klippenstein's grandson and Nomi's classmate, with whom Nomi reminisces about the comparatively simple days of childhood.

Gloria – A classmate of Nomi's, who now works at the general store. Nomi often feels that she could develop a genuine friendship with Gloria, but the two girls never move beyond stilted small talk.

Mean Nurse – One of the nurses who cares for Lids at the hospital. The mean nurse thinks that Lids is faking her mysterious illness and consistently demeans and ignores her. This angers Nomi, who eventually throws a can of orange juice

at her in fit of frustration.

Nice Nurse – One of the nurses who cares for Lids at the hospital. She is much more attentive to Lids than the mean nurse, and allows Nomi to visit the hospital even after her explosive argument with the mean nurse.

Bert – A community member who has been excommunicated for alcoholism. Bert still lives in East Village, even though everyone there is obligated to shun him. Bert shows how harsh policies like shunning affect people who suffer from addiction or mental illness.

Grandmother – Trudie's and The Mouth's mother, and Nomi and Tash's grandmother. Grandmother is somewhat senile and addicted to vanilla extract, which she drinks instead of alcohol. Tash attributes her mental decline to worry and regret over The Mouth's development into a harsh and dogmatic preacher.

Mason – A counselor at a Christian summer camp, with whom Tash has a brief romance.

Jakie – One of Nomi's cousins, who is mentally handicapped.

Edwina – A government education inspector whom Ray befriends when she visits his school.

Travis's mother – A conventional Mennonite woman, who allows Travis to rebel against his community but seems to dislike Nomi.

Menno Simons – The founder of the Mennonite sect, a 16th century radical theologian. Nomi imagines Menno Simons as a mean-spirited, socially-awkward man who forces his followers to retreat from the world because he's scared of confronting it. Nomi's imagined Menno epitomizes everything she dislikes about Mennonite life.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

RELIGION AND DOGMA

Nomi, the teenage protagonist of *A Complicated Kindness*, has grown up in a remote village of Mennonites, a Christian sect that emphasizes austere ways of life and limited contact with modernity. However, as she comes of age and confronts the dissolution of her family, Nomi grows to doubt the strict religious principles that govern her life. Nomi endlessly mocks dogma she finds to be pointless and sharply criticizes teachers and clerics who use religion to exert control over others. At the same time, however, she also admires the sincere religious beliefs of humble and selfless people like her father, Ray. By contrasting these two approaches to Christianity, the novel levels a critique not at faith itself but rather at the use of dogma for personal gain.

Much of the novel's humor comes from Nomi's irreverent approach to religious principles that other people in her town take extremely seriously. For example, Nomi lampoons a pseudo-scientific church chart illustrating Satan's fall through "a complicated system of arrows and timelines." She also reminisces about being reprimanded by her Sunday school teacher for pretending that a Jesus figurine could "leap down from the cross and drop-kick all the bad guys."

In a particularly dramatic incident, Nomi reluctantly pretends to be a Christian pioneer at the town's living history museum. While subtly lighting a cigarette under her bonnet, she catches the garment on fire and runs around frantically, ruining the exhibit and angering the town's minister, whom she has nicknamed "The Mouth" for his pompous speeches. Nomi's ability to find the humor in these forms of religious dogma undermines the credibility of the adults around her who refuse to examine their own religious principles.

Meanwhile, the adults most invested in enforcing religious dogma are usually those who want to control or hurt others. The Mouth, who also happens to be Nomi's uncle, uses his adherence to religious dogma to increase his own authority and power, even when doing so verges on cruelty. For example, as a child Nomi is consumed with nightmares that her older sister Tash, who has recently run away with her boyfriend, will go to Hell for her transgressions. Her mother, Trudie, begs The Mouth to promise Nomi that this won't happen, but the minister refuses to do so. He won't relinquish his religious rigidity and the social power it confers upon him, even to comfort a child.

Similarly, Nomi is constantly at odds with her English teacher, Mr. Quiring, who punishes her for her irreverent and unorthodox views. But eventually Nomi discovers that Mr. Quiring has violated Mennonite principles by having an extramarital affair with Nomi's own mother; subsequently he blackmails Trudie by threatening to have her excommunicated. Again, Nomi's story shows an authority figure mobilizing religious strictures for his own personal benefit.

While the novel often makes fun of religious dogma and those who adhere to it, people of sincere faith nonetheless emerge as pillars of strength and inner tranquility. Nomi's father Ray is so devoted to the Mennonite lifestyle that he doesn't even take off his mandated suit and tie to exercise; she often envies his true belief in God, which helps to sustain him even when their family is falling apart. She also develops a friendship with an older woman, Mrs. Peters, whose serene faith in the afterlife helps her withstand her son Clayton's tragic death. In both these cases, faith is genuine and seems to be a profound source of strength in trying times.

Moreover, while purveyors of religious dogma often judge and condemn others, characters motivated by sincere faith practice acceptance and empathy. Despite Nomi's flagrant violation of Mennonite principles, Ray doesn't punish or admonish her; his faith reinforces his love for her, rather than compromising it. Similarly, Nomi's best friend Lids truly believes in Mennonite ideology but also serves as Nomi's confidant about her escapades and nascent sex life. Lids's faith motivates her to accept others' differences, rather than scorning them.

A Complicated Kindness is irreverent and often mocking in its portrayal of church dogma. However, the novel's sensitive portrayal of people like Ray and Lids—complex and sympathetic characters who are genuinely motivated by faith—keeps it from becoming a parody of Mennonite life. Rather, the novel restricts its critique to people who use religious principles to acquire power or harm others.

FAMILY AND HOME

In *A Complicated Kindness*, Nomi, a Mennonite teenager, grapples with the collapse of her home life after her mother and sister leave the family. Over the course of the novel, the physical breakdown of Nomi's **house** mirrors the dissolution of her family and the subsequent decline of her own mental health. At first Nomi confronts these challenges by preserving as much of her previous life as possible, even if doing so means ignoring uncomfortable realities. However, it's only at the end of the novel, as she sells the house and prepares to leave town completely alone, that Nomi regains her mental clarity and her confidence that she will one day be reunited with her family. Ultimately, Nomi learns that familial unity depends on acceptance, rather than sharing a home or adhering to a set of predetermined norms.

In Nomi's childhood recollections, her house is charming and tidy, and her family is relatively happy and committed to the Mennonite way of life. Nomi often dwells fondly on household scenes like her mother Trudie cooking pancakes in the kitchen or playing cards in the living room. She also gives evocative descriptions of her father Ray's devotion to caring for the house, for example describing his dedicated work in the garden. In this sense, the house represents the family's unity as well as their commitment to their town's way of life. By investing so much energy in their physical surroundings, Nomi's parents signal their rootedness in Mennonite culture and norms, such as hard work and domesticity.

In the wake of Tash and Trudie's disappearances, however, the house rapidly deteriorates, mirroring both the family's dissolution and Nomi's growing disillusionment with Mennonite culture. At one point an anonymous person throws a brick through the window; later on, a section of the roof collapses without warning. Neither Nomi nor Ray takes action to fix these problems, seeming content to live in increasingly dilapidated surroundings. Even more troublingly, Ray gradually sells off the family's furniture, getting rid of even basic appliances like the refrigerator and leaving the house eerily empty. These developments mirror Ray's grief: he can't stand to live among constant reminders of his former happiness, so he gradually dismantles them. They also parallel Nomi's declining mental health: too apathetic to take action about her surroundings, she resorts to skipping school and doing drugs.

The house also represents the family's growing disengagement with their community. When the minister, The Mouth, visits the Nickels' house, he comments disapprovingly on its shabby state, which he views as lazy and even sinful. His comments are harsh and unsympathetic, but he does point out that even Ray, the family's staunchest believer, no longer feels compelled to uphold Mennonite principles.

For much of the novel, Nomi dreams of bringing her family back together within its former domestic environment, but only once she learns to let go of her former life does she become confident that she really will reunite with her family someday. In contrast to the long and evocative descriptions she gives of her family's erstwhile happiness, Nomi reports on her house's decline brusquely and apathetically, implicitly demonstrating her unwillingness to acknowledge the breakdown that has occurred. By cooking meals—however abysmal—for her father and imagining her sister's presence during difficult moments, she attempts to ignore Tash and Trudie's actual absence and maintain the old patterns of her life.

Just as she downplays her physical home's problems, Nomi also withholds information about the breakdown of her family. For much of the novel, she seems to believe that Trudie or Tash might reappear at any moment and take up their old lives. Only at the novel's end does she reveal that Tash ran away with a boyfriend and Trudie was excommunicated for adultery, both actions that prevent them from living within the Mennonite community again.

In a twist at the end of the novel, Ray—who often seems even more apathetic and adrift than his daughter—surprises Nomi by leaving home himself and instructing her to sell the house and do the same. While Nomi is now more alone than ever before, she also regains the clarity of mind to build a new life, something she's lacked since her mother's departure. What's more, her father's encouraging letter leaves her confident they'll soon be reunited. Ultimately it's Nomi's departure from her home—not her mother or sister's return—that reawakens her sense of unity with her family.

In the novel's last paragraph, Nomi poignantly remembers the days of falling asleep "listening to the voices of my sister and mother talking…and the sounds of my dad poking around in the yard." This evocative sketch, centered in the home, demonstrates Nomi's strong ties to her family and the role of her house in representing that bond. Yet Nomi is also looking towards the future, wondering "who [she]'ll become" when she leaves town. It's only by acknowledging that she must move

onward that Nomi can enjoy her memories and feel confident in her family's unity, and so the novel argues that accepting change within a family is actually the best way to keep it strong.

COMMUNITY AND COMING OF AGE

Trapped in an isolated Mennonite village and plagued by turbulent family circumstances, teenager Nomi Nickel grows from a girl into an independent and resourceful young adult. At first, Nomi defines herself against her community, flouting its rules against sex, smoking, and drinking with her boyfriend, Travis. While Travis helps Nomi challenge the conventions of Mennonite society, he's also self-absorbed and shallow, ignoring Nomi's emotional needs and pressuring her to act like a "cool" girlfriend. In contrast, despite her professed loathing for her town Nomi cultivates friendships with many of its most vulnerable members, relationships which emphasize her own empathy and outlast her disastrous breakup with Travis. By the end of the novel, Nomi has discarded the trendy persona Travis encouraged her to adopt and relies instead on the positive attributes developed through other friendships. Through Nomi's example, the novel suggests that though coming-of-age may culminate in leaving one's hometown, one's identity is nevertheless shaped by the people within it.

Nomi's rejection of her Mennonite upbringing is epitomized by her relationship with her boyfriend Travis, which lasts for most of the novel. Mennonite youngsters are supposed to lead wholesome lives governed by hard work and Bible study, but Nomi dislikes this often joyless lifestyle. Instead, she spends much of her time with Travis at the Pits—a grimy gathering place for rebellious teenagers. Nomi clearly sees Travis as kind of escape route from Mennonite life. When he plans to move to Montreal, she daydreams about joining him. Eventually, she even decides to have sex with him—an enormous taboo in Mennonite culture. By being Nomi's partner in this "sin," Travis represents her attempt to define herself against Mennonite life.

However, although Travis helps Nomi distance herself from a way of life she finds stifling, he's hardly a perfect partner. He's preoccupied with turning her into a "cooler" version of herself, and even though Nomi is going through a familial crisis, he becomes annoyed if she shows sadness or vulnerability. Notably, while Nomi is initially unsure about the idea of having sex, Travis badgers her until she visits a gynecologist for birth control. The tough persona Nomi creates is a way to experiment with leaving her community, rather than a genuine reflection of her character.

In contrast, by developing friendships with vulnerable members of her community, Nomi develops a warmth and empathy that Travis completely lacks. For example, Nomi regularly visits an elderly Mennonite woman, Mrs. Peters, cutting her hair and doing small chores around her house. She patiently listens to Mrs. Peters' reminiscences about her son Clayton, who tragically drowned, and discusses the likelihood that they will meet in Heaven, showing tact and a deep consideration for the problems of others. Nomi also befriends a little neighbor girl whose overworked mother has little energy for her, always taking time to play with her and engage in her pretend games. Similarly, when she visits her chronically ill friend, Lids, in the hospital, Nomi lovingly performs tasks like washing her hair that the nurses are too inattentive to remember.

In each of these cases, Nomi willingly engages with a community and a set of beliefs that she supposedly loathes. Even though she thinks of her escapades with Travis as indicative of her "real" self, her most admirable attributes—respect and empathy for those different from her—develop outside their relationship and markedly contrast with his callousness.

While Nomi does leave her insular community at the end of the novel, by the time she does so she has dumped Travis and distanced herself from the persona he encouraged her to create. When Nomi and Travis finally have sex, Nomi interprets one of his remarks as an invitation to move with him to Montreal—an impression he quickly and rudely dispels. Not long afterward, she realizes he's been cheating on her and burns his car in retaliation. While Nomi thought of her relationship with Travis as a way to leave her community, she now viscerally realizes that he's hardly her ticket out of town.

When Nomi finally does leave town she does so under her own steam, and she marks her exit with visits to Mrs. Peters and Lids, and by bidding farewell to her young neighbor. Through these actions, she acknowledges the formative nature of these relationships. By the end of the novel, Nomi has transitioned from vocal opposition to every aspect of her community to an understanding of the ways in which it has shaped her positively. Ultimately, it's by accepting that her community has both limited her *and* fostered her growth that she gains the strength and independence to leave.

For Nomi, growing up means initially means daydreaming of escape from her town, rebelling against its conventions, and emulating her boyfriend's behavior. However, it's actually through her friendships with people more committed to Mennonite life that she develops the empathy and independence she will take into adulthood. Unexpectedly, it's people who are very much rooted in her community who prepare Nomi to leave.

NARRATIVE AND STORYTELLING

In *A Complicated Kindness*, teenager Nomi Nickel relates the complex tale of her family's departure from the Mennonite community. Interspersing present action and past memory, Nomi creates a circular narrative that prioritizes memory and emotion over facts and

chronology. This style clashes with her teacher Mr. Quiring's insistence that she write linear and well-organized reports and, more broadly, that she live in unquestioning devotion to the Mennonite Church and its leaders. In light of these demands, Nomi's narrative style is not just an aesthetic choice; rather, is it is an attempt to create a space for nuance and ambiguity within a society that practices a strict and reductive ideology.

With its rigid ideas of right and wrong, Nomi's Mennonite community values linear, clear-cut narratives that Nomi often finds reductive or meaningless. In one humorous incident, Nomi sarcastically describes a church handout detailing Satan's fall in chart form; by collapsing a complex Biblical tale into a series of bullet points, the chart has rendered the narrative trite and meaningless. More broadly, this tendency surfaces in Nomi's constant quarrels with her English teacher, Mr. Quiring. Mr. Quiring only values stories that include "a triggering point, a climax, and a resolution," and he constantly finds fault with Nomi because her work flouts these stylistic conventions. For him, rejection of these narrative rules amounts to a defiance of Mennonite norms.

Indeed, the preference for cut-and-dried narratives extends beyond the classroom to important Mennonite rites like excommunication, the ultimate punishment for sinful behavior. Once church leaders excommunicate someone, the entire community must "shun" them, including their own family. Practices like these place narrative simplicity—in this case, declaring a specific person good or bad—over moral complexity and family relationships.

However, Nomi's technique for telling her own story is far from linear. Rather than telling a single coherent story, Nomi relates a series of seemingly detached events. Constantly oscillating between the present day and childhood memories, she creates a confused sense of chronology, presenting the reader with a blurry impression of her life rather than a linear description. Notably, she also withholds important information from the reader. Even though Nomi's mother, Trudie, left the family years ago, the reader only discovers at the end of the novel that she was excommunicated and forced to leave, rather than leaving of her own volition. These techniques work to create a holistic vision of Nomi's thoughts and feelings, implicitly pointing out that the formats espoused by Mr. Quiring and the church don't capture the world's complexity.

But Nomi's choices in telling her story are not just aesthetic; they also represent an attempt to reclaim her family's narrative from the dominant social forces around her. At the end of the novel, Nomi reveals her discovery that prior to her excommunication, Trudie had an affair with Mr. Quiring, who then blackmailed her by threatening to portray her as sexually loose and demented to the town. He attempts to control her by presenting a narrative of her life that is reductive and inauthentic, and this attempt ultimately leads to her disappearance from Nomi's life.

In contrast, Nomi's narrative structure redeems her mother. By the time her transgression is revealed, the reader has already learned about her many positive attributes and family circumstances, and is thus able to understand her actions in the context of her difficult life. In the novel's last pages Nomi addresses Mr. Quiring directly, saying sarcastically: "You gave my family an end." In fact, she's rejecting his and her community's decision that her family must dissolve because of her mother's actions. Rather, she has developed a mode of storytelling that accepts and even embraces moral fallibility within human relationships.

To tell her life story, Nomi creates a diffuse, circular narrative that contrasts with her society's emphasis on circular and often reductive stories. Ultimately, this technique of portraying her life—and in particular, her mother's actions—helps Nomi reclaim her family's story from a community that devalues and condemns it.

CHRISTIAN SALVATION VS. EARTHLY JOY

As a child in the Mennonite community, Nomi has learned that in order to secure heavenly salvation, she must eschew most of the pleasures of life on earth, from smoking and sex to owning new appliances or listening to modern music. As she grows up, Nomi chafes against this austere worldview and starts to do drugs, hoard records, and have sex with her boyfriend Travis. But she also rebels in more subtle ways: the book is full of moments of natural beauty and unexpected ecstasy, which show Nomi's tendency to appreciate the world for its own merits, rather than simply as a prelude to a glorious afterlife. While Nomi ultimately loses her faith in the church, she gains a new kind of faith in the joys of everyday life.

In order to convince followers to devote their mental energy to God and the afterlife that awaits them, Mennonite philosophy stigmatizes most forms of worldly enjoyment. The church places strong prohibitions on drinking, smoking, and extramarital sex. Additionally, Mennonites are supposed to have limited contact with modern life; although Nomi grows up in a fairly modern household, some members of her community still view appliances, air conditioning, and even modern clothes as sinful. Nomi's parents, Ray and Trudie, refuse to even say the word "party" because to them, it connotes sin.

As a child, Nomi believes in the importance of these prohibitions so devoutly that they cause her serious anxiety. Observing the actions of her rebellious older sister Tash, Nomi constantly worries that they will be separated in the afterlife when her sister goes to Hell. After Tash runs away from the family, Nomi has nightmares for months imagining her eternal doom. However, when she becomes an adolescent herself, Nomi chafes at her restricted life just as her sister did, and she rebels in increasingly dramatic ways. Nomi spends much of her time sharing joints with other disillusioned teenagers or

cruising the countryside with her boyfriend, Travis. She wears clothes and makeup considered inappropriate by church leaders, and by the end of the novel she has stopped attending school.

While Nomi's penchant for mischief may seem like typical teenage behavior, she also rebels in more subtle ways. Nomi lingers on unexpected natural beauty or shared moments with others, like the beauty of a landfill she encounters on a nighttime drive with Ray. While swimming with Travis in a lake contaminated with gas, Nomi lights small fires in the water and evocatively describes "the rainbow pools of fire in the pits, the smell of smoking stubble, the hot wind, dying chickens, the night, my childhood." Even though these moments are hardly picturesque, they fill Nomi with an appreciation for the world that surrounds her. This pleasure itself is a form of rebellion, in that she values the beauty of this world more than the contemplation of the next one.

Nomi eventually becomes disillusioned with the Mennonite church not because it prohibits certain activities, but because it discourages people from cherishing everyday life. By the novel's end, Nomi has broken up with Travis and retreated from her hard-partying lifestyle, which she realizes is as self-destructive as it is fun. However, the moments of joy she experiences along the way stay with her.

As she prepares to leave town for good, Nomi relates a childhood memory in which, happening to be in a good mood, she tells her teacher that she wants to fly or dance; the teacher reprimands her, saying that "life was not a dream, and dancing was a sin." Nomi rejects the teacher's outlook entirely, saying that joyful moments like this should be appreciated and that "this world is good enough for you because it has to be." Although she has lost the religious belief that grounded her during her childhood, Nomi has gained new faith in the beauty and sanctity of everyday life.

For Nomi, losing her childhood confidence in Mennonite principles is a wrenching experience; her rebellious escapades stem in part from a desire to find meaning in a world where God is no longer certain. However, over the course of the novel Nomi learns to value the joys of everyday life, upon which her community places little value. This new outlook allows her to regain the sense of purpose that she originally found in religious belief.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

NOMI'S HOUSE

Nomi and her sister Tash grow up in a small bungalow in the remote town of East Village. In Nomi's childhood memories, the house is cozy and well-maintained. When she comes home from school Nomi always finds her mother, Trudie, reading on the couch; her father, Ray, takes pride in cultivating his garden outside. However, Nomi's relationship to her house changes after both Trudie and Tash leave the community and their family. Nomi tries to take over tasks like cooking and laundry, but she dislikes keeping house and, with no one to stop her, often defaces her room with markers or even blood. Meanwhile, Ray sells most of the furniture and, out of apathy, allows the house to fall into disrepair. Through these shifts, the house symbolizes the former happiness and current fractured state of the Nickel family.

By the end of the novel, the house is completely empty. Ray, who has left town, instructs Nomi to sell it before she departs as well. The house's sale is a concrete reminder that Nomi's entire family has given up on life within the Mennonite community. However, it's only at this point that Nomi starts to feel hopeful about reuniting with her family again, a feeling she demonstrates through her final, lyrical recollection of childhood nights falling asleep "listening to the voices of my sister and mother talking...and my dad poking around in the yard." It's only by relinquishing her family's former life, represented by the house, that Nomi is able to imagine a new future.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Counterpoint edition of *A Complicated Kindness* published in 2004.

Chapter One Quotes

❝ Mr. Quiring has told me that essays and stories generally come, organically, to a preordained ending that is quite out of the writer's control. He says we will know when it happens, the ending. I don't know about that I feel that there are so many to choose from.

Related Characters: Nomi Nickel (speaker), Mr. Quiring

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

As she begins to chronicle her own life and that of her family, Nomi questions the very function of narrative and a person's role within their own story. Mr. Quiring, Nomi's

English teacher, believes that writers don't have any control over their stories because they are "preordained" by God. In class, he uses this faith in divine power to justify his insistence that his students write canned, formulaic stories that unquestioningly parrot Mennonite theology. But in this scenario, it's Mr. Quiring himself who gains power and control, as he uses religious orthodoxy as an excuse to demean questioning students like Nomi and suppress their individuality. This early passage shows how narrative can be used to reinforce repressive social conventions and exert control over people. At the same time, Nomi's subtle contradiction foreshadows her own use of narrative for empowerment and freedom.

❝ There's an invisible force that exerts a steady pressure on our words like a hand to an open, spurting wound. The town office building has a giant filing cabinet full of death certificates that say choked to death of his own anger or suffocated from unexpressed feelings of unhappiness.

Related Characters: Nomi Nickel (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

In the novel's first chapter, Nomi gives an overview of her upbringing and the various problematic aspects of life in East Village. Nomi is being facetious, of course—it's unlikely that anyone is ruled have died "of his own anger." However, passages like this demonstrate that stories don't have to be literally factual in order to communicate existential truths—in this case that the Mennonite obsession with sin and shame creates an environment that is toxic to many people. Nomi goes on to mention several acquaintances—friend Sheridan's parents, among others—who go insane or even commit suicide because of their inability to simultaneously conform to Mennonite norms and be happy. This passage also adds tension to Nomi's deliberations over whether or not to leave town. The language of doom suggests that for Nomi, escaping home isn't just a personal choice, but a matter of protecting her mental health or even saving her life.

Chapter Two Quotes

❝ The only thing I needed to know was that we were all going to live forever, together, happily, in heaven and with God, and without pain and sadness and sin. And in my town that is the deal. It's taken for granted. We've been hand-picked. We're on a fast track, singled out, and saved.

Related Characters: Nomi Nickel (speaker), Trudie Nickel, Ray Nickel, Tash Nickel

Related Themes:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

Nomi opens her narrative as a disaffected teenager who has rejected Mennonite principles and feels ambivalent about God's existence. Yet her recurring flashbacks, which begin here, paint a different picture of her younger years. In part because she's only exposed to extremely conservative religious ideas, Nomi starts out life certain about the righteousness of Mennonite principles and committed to living her life according to them. This ideology provides Nomi with comfort and security, as it reinforces her love for her family and assures her that they will share a blissful afterlife together. At the same time, it also fosters deep anxiety: Nomi's slightly manic tone suggests that the prospect of heaven carries with it a constant prospect of sin. Moreover, the religious faith Nomi once had, and has now lost, makes the uncertainties of adolescence even harder to bear. Ultimately, Nomi feels ambivalent about the uncomplicated faith of her childhood. Although she has rejected it and mocks others who refuse to question the church, she's also deeply nostalgic for the naïve yet secure outlook it once provided.

Chapter Six Quotes

❝ But there is kindness here, a complicated kindness. You can see it sometimes in the eyes of people when they look at you and don't know what to say. When they ask me how my dad is, for instance, and mean how am I managing without my mother.

Related Characters: Nomi Nickel (speaker), Trudie Nickel

Related Themes:

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage—which, of course, gives the novel its name—Nomi meditates on her complex relationship to her insular Mennonite community. She's just described the subtle kindness with which people treat one woman who has been excommunicated but still lives in town—although they are obliged to shun her, other community members often give her food and other presents. Nomi compares this kindness to the way people often check in on her, even though they're too shy to reference her mother's abrupt departure. One of Nomi's gifts is her ability to recognize the unique virtues of East Village in tandem with her criticisms. Her evocative descriptions of the patterns of town life add tension to her desire to leave, imbuing this decision with a sense of loss even though it's necessary to her own development.

However, it's also clear from this passage that the townspeople are unable or unwilling to stand up to a system that they recognize, at least implicitly, to be unjust. Everyone feels bad for the excommunicated woman, but no one will defy the church on her behalf. Similarly, although Nomi hasn't revealed this yet, her own mother Trudie has been excommunicated as well; others in the town feel bad for Nomi, but no one will question the church to advocate against her family's breakup. In this single passage, the novel captures both the town's virtues and its deepest flaws.

Chapter Seven Quotes

❝ Americans come here to observe our simple ways. Here, life is so refreshingly uncomplicated. The tourists are encouraged to buy a bag of unbleached flour at the windmill and to wander the dirt lane of the museum village that is set up on the edge of town, depicting the ways in which we used to live. It's right next to the real town, this one, which is not really real.

Related Characters: Nomi Nickel (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Nomi uses the museum village—a moneymaking scheme in which tourists visit recreations of traditional Mennonite life—to meditate on her town's tense relationship to the outside world. Mennonites are supposed to have limited contact with modern life. But, understandably, young people like Nomi have no desire to live like pioneers—instead, they listen to pop music, wear revealing clothing, and smoke cigarettes. They're as different from "traditional" Mennonites as the tourists are. Because of this, the museum represents the wide gap between the principles the church tries to enforce and the actual lives and desires of the people in East Village.

At the same time, the tourists' patronizing attitudes alienate Nomi. Their belief that East Village is "refreshingly uncomplicated" is laughably false; in fact, this is a subtle reference to the title and the complex nature of nearly every aspect of Mennonite life. Just by possessing this understanding of the people around her, knowledge which those from the outside world lack, Nomi establishes herself as fundamentally different from the tourists. They reaffirm to her that, whether she likes it or not, she's deeply rooted in her community.

❝ I ended up saying stupid stuff like I just want to be myself, I just want to do things without wandering if they're a sin or not. I want to be free. I want to know what it's like to be forgiven by another human being (I was stoned, obviously) and not have to wait around all my life anxiously wondering if I'm an okay person or not and having to die to find out.

Related Characters: Nomi Nickel (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Nomi shows how her own developing existential philosophy clashes with the principles imposed upon her at school. In this passage, a slightly-stoned Nomi tries to tell her teacher about what could be gained by leaving the Mennonite community. He accuses her of seeking only shallow pleasures, like "writhing on a dance floor." Nomi deprecates her own response by calling it "stupid stuff," but in fact she articulates some of the most basic human desires: the need to experience freedom, contentment, and a sense of self-worth. It's deeply disturbing for Nomi to realize that she can't meet these needs within the Mennonite framework of sin, shame, and punishment—especially when powerful adults like her teacher constantly tell her this is the only path to living a virtuous life. At the same time, by expounding on her desires here, Nomi imagines a new kind of life for herself, and using narrative to describe what she wants empowers her to eventually achieve it.

A tourist once came up to me and took a picture and said to her husband, now here's a priceless juxtaposition of old and new. They debated the idea of giving me some money, then concluded: no.

Related Characters: Nomi Nickel (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Nomi is sitting aimlessly on the street when she overhears some tourists having a conversation about her and deciding whether to give her money. While Nomi feels that she's different from others in her community and often imagines herself living a hip lifestyle in New York City, moments like this remind her that, in the eyes of the world, she's as backward and conservative of the people she herself mocks. The tourists' total insensitivity shows that intolerance and ignorance are not unique to fundamentalist communities—rather, these traits often exist among secular and supposedly open-minded people.

This passage is also an implicit meditation on the ethics of art. The tourist snaps a photo of Nomi simply to illustrate an aesthetic point, the "juxtaposition of old and new." Acting without consent, she essentially views Nomi as an object and doesn't consider how it makes her feel to be discussed in this way. With the story she's constructing through her narrative, Nomi is also making art that involves and implicates others around her. But while she's sharp in her indictments of those she considers unethical, her narrative's portraits of most people around her are warm, respectful, and empathetic. This contrast shows the standards to which art should aspire in depicting real life.

Chapter Eight Quotes

Did he get stitches, I asked.

Yes, she said, right here. She touched her temple.

How many, I asked. She loved to answer questions about Clayton.

Related Characters: Nomi Nickel (speaker), Clayton Peters, Mrs. Peters

Related Themes:

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

During this exchange, Nomi is in the midst of a visit to Mrs. Peters. Mrs. Peters is an elderly widow whose son Clayton, once Nomi's classmate, drowned in a tragic accident. Now, she likes to hear about Nomi's life so that she can imagine what Clayton might have done if he'd lived. Being compared to a dead classmate by his grieving mother is an uncomfortable situation, but Nomi handles it with grace. Rather than avoiding Mrs. Clayton, she frequently visits her house to do chores and trim her hair. In moments like this, she astutely asks questions about Clayton to indulge Mrs. Peters' desire to talk about her son. This is a very tender moment in which Nomi demonstrates empathy and tact far beyond her years, traits that contrast with the tough and aloof persona she adopts to impress characters like Travis. It also shows that even though she decries her community's flaws, she's absorbed some of its more noble values, like the importance of serving others. Characters like Mrs. Peters allow Nomi to see the positive ways in which she's rooted in her community.

Chapter Ten Quotes

She once asked me and the other girls in our class if we were gymnasts, but really fat ones, would we think we could just go out and win an Olympic medal one day? No? Well, that's what Christianity is all about, she said.

Related Characters: Nomi Nickel (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 84

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Nomi remembers a bizarre lesson from her days at Sunday school. The teacher (who also happens to be The Mouth's daughter, and Nomi's cousin), explains miracles to the class by suggesting that God is powerful enough to make a "fat" gymnast win a gold medal. The Sunday school teacher is a pious woman, completely dedicated to the Mennonite way of life, but by describing miracles as kind of magic trick she cheapens ideas of faith and divinity.

In contrast, although Nomi actively questions Mennonite principles, her habit of finding beauty in unexpected places—like the trash dump or the sewage pits where her friends hang out—is also a kind of miracle. Nomi believes that her habit of concentrating on worldly beauty instead of religious matters transgresses Mennonite ideals. But by doing so, she compensates for her loss of religious certainty by carving out a new kind of faith, one grounded not in overt displays of God's power, but in an appreciation of everyday

life.

Chapter Twelve Quotes

Travis had suggested I broaden my horizons and attempt to finish my thoughts. He said I should make a list of ways to improve. Oh that'll help, I thought.

Related Characters: Nomi Nickel (speaker), Travis

Related Themes:

Page Number: 99

Explanation and Analysis

One of Nomi's central relationships in the novel is with her boyfriend, Travis. In some way, he's a good companion: he keeps her company when she's neglected by Ray and friendless at school, and he helps her experiment with abandoning Mennonite norms. At the same time, he can be shallow, pretentious, and controlling. His unwillingness to support Nomi during moments of emotional vulnerability contrasts with Nomi's empathy for others, and his pseudo-intellectual pronouncements highlight Nomi's own humble introspection.

Despite the fact that Nomi is obviously a more mature and sympathetic character, she often feels dependent on and inferior to Travis. Her willingness to follow his suggestion that she "make a list of ways to improve" herself shows a distressing lack of self-confidence. While Nomi associates her rebellious boyfriend with the ability to leave the community and begin a new life, it's only when she becomes cognizant of her own character strengths and his flaws that she'll be able to do so.

Chapter Eighteen Quotes

I didn't know why she was crying, until I heard my mom say honey, what is it? What's wrong? And Tash said: I think I'll go crazy. I can't stand it. It's all a fucking lie. It's killing me! Mom, it really is! And then something happened that took me completely by surprise, I heard my mom say, I know honey, I know it is.

Related Characters: Nomi Nickel (speaker), Trudie Nickel, Tash Nickel

Related Themes:

Page Number: 146

Explanation and Analysis

In this flashback, Nomi remembers the tumultuous days just before Tash runs away from home. Nomi, a child who finds it hard to understand the adult conflicts taking place around her, is listening to Tash sobbing in bed after staying out all night. Worrying that her sister will go to hell for her sins, Nomi herself starts to cry. It's unsurprising to hear the rebellious Tash say that she's disaffected with Mennonite principles, but Nomi is shocked to hear Trudie concur with Tash's description of their life as a "fucking lie." While Trudie is unwilling to openly rebel against the church, her commiseration with Tash reveals how deeply disillusioned she herself is. Furthermore, even though Trudie is supposed to be imparting Mennonite values to her children, her own doubts contrast with Nomi's staunch faith at this point in time.

For Tash, Nomi, and Trudie, this is a moment of intense revelation and a loss of certainty, as they contemplate the inadequacy of the religious principles by which they've lived for so long. Trudie and Tash experience a rare moment of understanding in their relationship, and Nomi later draws on this memory as she grapples with her teenage crisis of faith. In this sense, the passage suggests that family unity and solidarity can compensate for the loss of other guiding principles.

My mom put some blankets and pillows into a garbage bag and carried it out to Ian's truck. She put bread and fruit and the fresh ham she'd bought that day into a box and Ian carried that out.

I remembered my mom telling us about the Mennonites in Russia fleeing in the middle of the night, scrambling madly to find a place, any place, where they'd be free. All they needed, she said, was for people to tolerate their unique *apartness*.

Related Characters: Nomi Nickel (speaker), Ian, Trudie Nickel, Tash Nickel

Related Themes:

Page Number: 148

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Nomi remembers watching Tash prepare to leave home for good with her boyfriend, Ian. Even though Trudie is distraught to see Tash leave, she gives her

provisions for the road. According to the norms of the Mennonite community, Tash's choice is deeply transgressive. However, by comparing it to the earlier Mennonite flight from Russia, Nomi imbues her sister's choice with purpose and legitimacy, and argues that pursuing secular fulfillment is just as valid as chasing religious freedom. It's ironic that although Mennonites fled intolerance in Europe, their descendants have created repressive conditions that force others out of the community.

At the same time, by portraying Tash's action as a repetition of her ancestors' lives, Nomi suggests that her sister is still deeply rooted in her Mennonite upbringing. Similarly, Nomi will feel especially connected to her community as she prepares to leave it. In this sense, Nomi and Tash aren't rejecting their origins by leaving home, but merely altering their relationship to the community.

❝ And even though tears in my throat were starting to suffocate me, in the nick of time I remembered Travis telling me once that I was boring when I was offended, and to be boring was the ultimate crime, and I put my head back and made a laughing sound.

Related Characters: Nomi Nickel (speaker), Travis

Related Themes:

Page Number: 150

Explanation and Analysis

After one of their habitual nighttime drives, Nomi and Travis are listening to a song about an old woman who wanders the streets of her town singing about her lost youth. Travis jokes that this might be Nomi in the future. That Nomi is so upset by this joke reveals the depths of her anxiety about the future, and her sense that if she doesn't leave home, she will end up wasting her life. The fact that Travis makes the joke in the first place reveals how oblivious he is to her emotional state.

It's also important that Nomi knows she must conceal emotional vulnerability in order to avoid annoying or alienating Travis. His lack of patience for other people's feelings contrast with the empathy Nomi extends even to people she doesn't like, showing that although she idealizes Travis, she's far more mature than he is.

Chapter Twenty-One Quotes

❝ Ask her to forgive you, Trudie said. You've scared the shit out of her, Hans. Tell her you're sorry. Tell her! Tell her it's not true. Tell her they are stories. You know nothing about love, nothing. You know nothing about anything at all and I hate you so much.

Related Characters: Trudie Nickel (speaker), The Mouth, Nomi Nickel

Related Themes:

Page Number: 171

Explanation and Analysis

In the weeks after Tash's disappearance, Nomi begins to have terrible nightmares in which her older sister is condemned to hell for her sins. Fed up after many sleepless nights, Trudie drags Nomi to The Mouth's house and demands that, as a church leader, he assure Nomi that Tash's future in the afterlife is safe. Her desperation and desire for the wellbeing of both her daughters contrasts with The Mouth's rigid adherence to religious dogma—in the end, he refuses his sister's request. This passage thus argues that prioritizing religious rules above all else inevitably takes a toll on human relationships.

This passage is also interesting given that Trudie has always equivocated when Nomi asks if Tash is going to hell. In a way, she's demanding a "promise" from The Mouth not just for Nomi's comfort, but her own. Trudie has always felt ambivalent about Mennonite principles, yet here, she's reaching out to the church for comfort in a time of crisis. But that church, represented by The Mouth, completely rejects her because of her unwillingness to sacrifice her family to the religion's principles.

Chapter Twenty-Two Quotes

❝ I turned the paper over and studied a chart titled "Satan Cast Down." There were different categories linked together with arrows and verses. Rapture, saved dead, unsaved dead, millennium, bottomless pit, lake of fire, beast and false prophet, new heaven, new earth. I tried to follow the complicated system of arrows and timelines.

Related Characters: Nomi Nickel (speaker), Mr. Quiring, The Mouth, Ray Nickel

Related Themes:

Page Number: 184

Explanation and Analysis

One morning in her kitchen, Nomi stumbles across a religious chart Ray has brought home from church. The chart explains the biblical story of Satan's fall through a complex system of "arrows and verses." The Bible is a complex and beautiful narrative; Nomi, who will later be moved by the verses Ray cites in a letter to her, certainly recognizes that. But in order to "prove" God's power and the Devil's destruction, The Mouth has reduced this narrative to a handful of buzzwords and symbols, making it not only unintelligible but laughable. Nomi thus uses this moment to critique powerful adults around her and to point out the illogic of religious jargon. It's also an example of the church suppressing complicated stories in order to elevate simplistic principles, much in the same way that Mr. Quiring insists upon reductive storytelling in class. These examples form an implicit contrast to Nomi's narrative, which refuses to make judgments and leaves room for many perspectives.

Chapter Twenty-Three Quotes

❝ I asked him why he was getting rid of the furniture and he said he liked empty spaces because you could imagine what might go in them someday.

We were quiet for a long, long time. Then I told him I wasn't going anywhere. That I'd never leave him.

Related Characters: Nomi Nickel (speaker), Ray Nickel

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 193

Explanation and Analysis

Nomi and Ray often seem to go days without seeing each other, but one morning she wakes up to find him sitting by her bed, and they have an unexpectedly frank conversation. For a long time, Nomi has been frustrated by Ray's habit of selling essential pieces of furniture, and now she asks him the reason for this strange behavior. Ray's plaintive answer reveals his grief in the wake of Trudie and Tash's disappearances: he needs to think about the house's "future" because dwelling on its past is too painful. Thus, this passage makes an explicit symbolic connection between the house's physical degeneration and the family's breakup.

At the same time, Ray's confidence that the house *will* have a new and better future shows a certain optimism, and argues that sometimes destruction and loss are necessary to achieve a new beginning. Nomi doesn't yet realize this—promising to "never leave" Ray, she's fixated on preserving the patterns of her old life as much as possible. However, when Ray himself leaves home at the end of the novel, he shows Nomi by example how to embrace change and uncertainty.

❝ I'm pretty sure she left town for his sake. It would have killed him to choose between her or the church. The only decision he'd ever made without her help was to wear a suit and tie every day of his life. How could he stand up and publicly denounce a woman he loved more than anything in the world. And how could he turn away from the church that could, someday, forgive his wife and secure their future together in paradise, for all time.

Related Characters: Nomi Nickel (speaker), Trudie Nickel, Ray Nickel

Related Themes:

Page Number: 194

Explanation and Analysis

After finally confessing that Trudie has actually been excommunicated from the Mennonite church, Nomi meditates on this underlying reason for Trudie's departure from the community. This passage explicitly casts the church as the enemy of familial unity and happiness, showing the serious human cost of adhering unquestioningly to religious dogma. However, at the same time that she condemns the church's impersonal cruelty, Nomi validates the viewpoints of people like Ray who are still committed to Mennonite principles and hesitant to defy the church openly. Her capacity for acceptance contrasts with the intolerance of the church.

Additionally, this passage shows how Nomi uses nonlinear narrative to illuminate hidden perspectives. The Mouth and other church elders intend Trudie's excommunication as a mark of shame and dishonor. But by focusing on Trudie's reaction to this crisis and the sacrifice she makes for her family, Nomi turns this event into a demonstration of her mother's capacity for love and loyalty.

Chapter Twenty-Four Quotes

Heaven is always calm, with no wind. She said other stuff but I didn't really understand it. I understood there was no wind in heaven. That's partly why I love the wind that blows around in this town. It makes me feel like I'm in the world.

Related Characters: Nomi Nickel (speaker), Nicodemus, Trudie Nickel

Related Themes:

Page Number: 198

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Nomi recalls her reaction to the death of her grandfather, Nicodemus. Nomi is four when Nicodemus passes away, and she decides to write him a letter in Heaven. Trudie covertly writes a fake letter in return, but eventually Nomi discovers the ruse, and Trudie must confess that it's impossible to contact people in Heaven. In a community as focused on religion as Nomi's is, this revelation of the inaccessibility of the divine should be disheartening. But Trudie's description of Heaven's tranquility actually comforts Nomi by reminding her of the beauty that comes from change and instability , which only exists on Earth. This moment becomes the foundation of Nomi's appreciation of worldly pleasures—but while Trudie's words steer Nomi away from her community's ascetic focus on the afterlife, it's important that they don't rule out or negate the prospect of Heaven's existence. This shows that Nomi's increasingly humanist perspective is not necessarily at odds with religious faith.

We drove to the pits and rinsed the purple gas off in the water which made it beautiful and we floated around in gassy rainbows for hours talking about stuff and lighting the gas with Travis's lighter so it was like we were in hell. Rainbow pools of fire in the pits, the smell of smoking stubble, the hot wind, dying chickens, the night, my childhood.

Related Characters: Nomi Nickel (speaker), Travis

Related Themes:

Page Number: 200

Explanation and Analysis

Nomi and Travis have been out all night making mischief: painting a barn and each's other bodies, then covering each other in gas from a tank outside The Comb's trailer and going swimming. The scene that Nomi describes isn't beautiful or romantic in the traditional sense: after all, she's swimming in a lake contaminated with oil, and this night foretells her looming breakup with Travis. However, Nomi's blissful tone show her ability to appreciate the beauty of everyday life—a trait that sets her at odds with her ascetic community but ultimately helps her cultivate inner calm and contentment. Moments of beauty like this one often function as touchstones: rather than feeling mired in the confusing events of her life, Nomi conceives of the events of her childhood from a stable distance. In that sense, this passage demonstrates the link between appreciating everyday beauty and forming thoughtful narratives.

And we counted cars with American plates—twenty-seven. On their way to watch The Mouth read Revelations by candlelight in the fake church while the people of the real town sat in a field of dirt cheering on collisions.

Related Characters: Nomi Nickel (speaker), The Mouth, Ray Nickel

Related Themes:

Page Number: 206

Explanation and Analysis

In a rare spontaneous gesture, Ray has taken Nomi to a demolition derby in a nearby town, and father and daughter watch as cars wreck each other in the dirt. The image Nomi paints of Ray watching the spectacle in his suit and tie embodies the tension between past and present that characterizes Mennonite communities. The Mouth considers this reality shameful; by performing for tourists in the "fake church" and ignoring the real desires of his congregants, he attempts to suppress and ignore it. However, just as Nomi finds beauty in the peripheral wastelands of her town, she derives more meaning from this complex narrative than The Mouth's reductive one.

Nomi feels alienated both from The Mouth, who represents the community of her birth, and the credulous tourists, symbolic of the outside world she wants to join. These feelings show that she can't simply disown the Mennonite community to gain fulfillment—rather, she must carve out a new space that accepts and understands all aspects of her identity.

Chapter Twenty-Five Quotes

When I got to school I told my teacher I was on cloud nine. I told her I was so happy I thought I could fly. I told her I felt so great I wanted to dance like Fred Astaire.

She said life was not a dream. And dancing was a sin. Now get off it and sit back down. It was the first time in my life I had been aware of my own existence.

Related Characters: Nomi Nickel (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 209

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Nomi remembers one morning during her childhood when she goes on a long walk before school, enjoying her independence and solitude so much that she becomes ecstatic, a feeling she communicates to her teacher by saying she's on "cloud nine." With no grounding in religion, Nomi's happiness is at odds with her community's norms, as the teacher communicates by telling her that her desires are sinful. This is a harsh response, but it's also a humorous illustration of the absurdity of Mennonite life: Nomi is trying to explain an abstract state of mind, but the teacher is so enmeshed in dogma that she can only understand the words' most literal meaning. Paradoxically, the teacher empowers Nomi by showing her that she will have to deviate from the religious principles she learns at school in order to attain fulfillment. Reflecting on this moment, Nomi says the encounter taught her that "the world was good enough because it had to be." Although she doesn't know it at the child, this episode will become foundational in her rejection of religious asceticism and her embrace of everyday joys.

Chapter Twenty-Eight Quotes

Love is everything. It is the greatest of these. And I think that we all use whatever is in our power, whatever is in our reach, to attempt to keep alive the love we've felt. So, in a way, the only difference between you and me is that you reached out and used the church—there it was as it always has been, what a tradition—and I stayed at home, in bed, and closed my eyes.

Related Characters: Nomi Nickel (speaker), Trudie Nickel, Mr. Quiring

Related Themes:

Page Number: 244

Explanation and Analysis

In the novel's final pages, Nomi reveals two things: that Trudie and Mr. Quiring had an affair that ended badly, and that she's addressing her entire narrative to her dogmatic English teacher. In part, she empathizes with Mr. Quiring, suggesting that his nasty threats to expose Trudie stemmed from a sense of disappointed love. Yet she also points out how he has manipulated church dogma—in this case, stigma about female sexuality—in an attempt to control Trudie's actions and the narrative of her life.

Saying that love "is the greatest of these," Nomi references a well-known Bible passage (I Corinthians 13:13) about the grace and beauty of faith. In doing so, she refutes Mr. Quiring's belief that his actions are justified by Mennonite principles, instead marshaling biblical text behind her own emerging creed of acceptance and love. This passage makes a powerful distinction between people who use dogma to oppress others and people who use sincere faith to achieve tranquility and peace.

Truthfully, this story ends with me still sitting on the floor of my room wondering who I'll become if I leave this town and remembering when I was little kid and loved to fall asleep in my bed [...] listening to the voices of my sister and my mother talking and laughing in the kitchen and the sounds of my dad poking around in the yard, making things beautiful right outside my bedroom window.

Related Characters: Nomi Nickel (speaker), Tash Nickel, Ray Nickel, Trudie Nickel

Related Themes:

Page Number: 246

Explanation and Analysis

Just before this passage, Nomi told Mr. Quiring that she's packed up her things and is driving away from town forever. Now she reverses course, admitting that she has yet to take this drastic step. This is a typical narrative technique for Nomi, in that she tells her story in a nonlinear way and uses an episode that isn't factual to communicate a broader truth: her bittersweet feelings at the thought of leaving home. Nomi creates a meaningful and complex narrative by prioritizing feelings and imagination, implicitly countering Mr. Quiring's "factual" but reductive approach to storytelling. Meanwhile, Nomi's positive memories about

her family have often made her feel depressed or pessimistic about the future. However, in this passage, remembering her past empowers her to forge a new future and allows her to feel confident in an eventual reunion with her family. Only after Nomi accepts fundamental changes in her family life does family again become a source of strength for her.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER ONE

Nomi Nickel lives with her father, Ray, in a small **bungalow** near the highway. Ever since her mother, Trudie, and sister, Tash, left town, life has seemed to stand still; every day, she and Ray "move through our various activities until it's time to go to bed." Sometimes they watch the Northern Lights, a phenomenon Nomi has studied with her teacher Mr. Quiring. Mr. Quiring has also taught Nomi that all stories come to "a preordained ending that is quite out of the writer's control." Nomi isn't sure about this, as it often to her that each story could have so many endings. However, it seems that there's only one path ahead of her when she graduates high school in a few months: working in a local chicken slaughterhouse, alongside many other kids from her class.

At the start of the novel, the passivity with which Nomi and Ray move through their daily lives seems to reinforce Mr. Quiring's beliefs about human lack of agency. At the same time, by starting her story abruptly and bombarding the reader with so much seemingly unconnected information, Nomi is implicitly challenging her teacher's belief that stories must proceed according to a logical and "preordained" course. In addition, Nomi's casual mention of the slaughterhouse communicates the lack of possibilities available to her in the community.

The chicken factory makes Nomi recall a long-ago memory of her mother, Trudie. Nomi is eight years old and standing with Trudie in a farmyard. A farmer, Mr. Enns, is efficiently slaughtering chickens and trying to teach his young son, Carson, to do the same, although the boy is clearly frightened and reluctant. When Carson finally manages to kill a chicken, Nomi's mother compares the spray of blood to a Jackson Pollock painting and says, "who knew it could be so easy." Nomi doesn't know if she's talking about killing a chicken, dying, or making art.

Here, Trudie references a secular artist, implicitly violating Mennonite prohibitions against contact with non-religious, modern culture. Nomi's curiosity about the outside world prevents her from fitting in. Like Nomi, Trudie has a habit of finding beauty in the most seemingly disturbing of scenes.

Nomi explains that Trudie doesn't live at home any more, having left soon after Tash ran away. Nomi and Ray have no idea where they are. Ray tells Nomi that the two of them are "having a good time and getting by," but Nomi doesn't feel this way. She thinks that things would be better if they could leave town, but they both feel they must wait for Trudie and Tash to return. Nomi adds that her period started the day after Trudie left.

From the beginning of the novel, Nomi recognizes that she must leave home in order to thrive. Yet her conception of family is so tied to her community that, for her, leaving means giving up on her hope of her loved ones reuniting.

Nomi's town is oppressively silent, and it often feels that people are simply waiting to die. She feels that her Mennonite community is "the most embarrassing sub-sect of people to belong to if you're a teenager." Her ancestors fled persecution in European countries and settled in this remote region of Canada; ironically, her town is named East Village just like the New York neighborhood where she dreams of living. Mennonites turn their backs on everything enjoyable, from "temperate climates" to "having sex for fun," and are supposed to spend their time contemplating the afterlife. Nomi feels that the founder of her sect, Menno Simons, must have had a troubled childhood.

A core tenet of Mennonite theology is turning away from worldly pleasures in order to secure salvation in the afterlife. Nomi shows how living by this principle can make life on Earth almost unbearable. Throughout the novel, adults will see Nomi as "troubled" for her failure to conform to Mennonite norms; yet she turns the tables, suggesting that Menno Simons himself must have been "troubled" to originate these principles in the first place.

Nomi remembers that, although Trudie's eyes are green, she listed them as hazel on her passport. Nomi wonders if Trudie has used her passport to travel to some exotic locale; she might be like the Mennonite missionaries who occasionally go to Africa and convince witch doctors to "smile for the camera while holding up a copy of the New Testament which means, praise the Lord, he's been saved." It's easier to imagine Trudie deep-sea diving or visiting Paris.

Nomi's sharp mockery of her community's more absurd practices—like foisting their religion on people in other countries—provides much-needed comic relief in what is often a dark narrative. It also encourages readers to question the adults in the community, who refuse to see the humor in these situations.

Trudie has always loved to read mysteries and always aspired to visit the Holy Land, which intrigues her because of the many kinds of people living there; it's unlike their own town, where everyone looks the same. Trudie would read books from the time Nomi and Tash departed for school to when they returned home in the afternoon. She always seemed surprised to see them, but in an hour she'd be "warm and untroubled" again as she made dinner. Nomi says it's hard to paint a complete picture of Trudie because "there was something seething away inside of her, something fierce and unpredictable." She's a stark contrast to Ray, who is happy in the company of his two daughters and "fun-loving wife."

Nomi paints a picture of Trudie as warm and loving, but also enigmatic and discontented. The sight of her reading on the couch is comforting to Nomi, but it's also a sign that Trudie is chafing against her restricted life, and that the daily routine of domestic life isn't enough to satisfy her. It's important that while Trudie defies many ideas of what a "good" mother should be, Nomi never judges her; rather, she points out that Trudie's unpredictability is one of the things her family loves best about her.

Despite reading about far-off places, Trudie spent much of her time in the church basement, where the Mennonite women have to sew clothing and care for children if they don't want to go to hell. Expectations are especially high for Trudie because her brother, whom Nomi nicknames The Mouth, is the town minister; but she often neglected to help out, and once threw a romance novel into a charity box as a prank. Ray seems to love Trudie whether she's breaking the rules or upholding them, but Nomi thinks both these personalities are just "poses" concealing a more complex character. The problem with her town is its intolerance for this kind of complexity: in East Village, people are either "very good or very bad."

Trudie's obligations as The Mouth's sister will often clash with her desire to ensure her daughters' well-being. Nomi astutely realizes that by emphasizing stark differences between good and evil, the community forces people to adopt "good" and "bad" personas that don't represent their actual character. In contrast, Nomi's narrative aims to capture her mother's full complexity—and to represent her own.

CHAPTER TWO

Tourists often come to East Village to gawk at Mennonite life, but Trudie never acknowledges their presence because she doesn't want to acknowledge that she lives in "the world's most non-progressive community." One time the Queen visits, but Trudie refuses to attend the parade; instead, she watches from the roof with a bunch of teenage boys. Ray and Nomi can't decide if she's "crazy in a cool, fun way," or in a more disturbing sense. Trudie hoards records, prohibited in the community, in the basement. One time Tash and her friends prank call The Mouth and pretend to be worried about the "temptation" of the secular music; a child at the time, Nomi is terrified, thinking that her sister is "so earmarked for damnation it wasn't even funny."

While Nomi often feels like an outsider in her community, visiting tourists remind her how much she has been shaped by her isolated life, especially in the eyes of the outside world. It's interesting that Trudie vacillates between "fun" and disturbing craziness—in this sense, she's similar to Nomi, whose idiosyncrasies are endearing but sometimes reveal her underlying emotional instability. Nomi's religious devotion as a child contrasts with her skeptical attitude in the present day, prompting the reader to wonder how she has lost her faith.

Nomi's life is marked by so many rules and prohibitions that seem to have no grounding in logic. She remembers having a long argument with her mother about going to see a secular movie, since normally Mennonite children are only allowed to watch religious propaganda films. Trudie worries about the request—and about other Mennonites seeing her at the movie theater—all afternoon before she finally allows Nomi to go. It's impossible to predict what is allowed (Billy Joel and wholesome game shows) and what isn't (movies and sitcoms). Nomi isn't allowed to watch TV shows that include magic, but Tash points out the whole Bible is like a magic trick. Trudie scolds her briefly, but she never disciplines her daughters.

Even though Trudie herself is often skeptical of Mennonite norms and interested in secular culture, she's reluctant to openly defy the community—both from fear of social repercussions and her genuine (if sometimes ambivalent) religious faith. Trudie's uncertainty shows how hard it can be to break free from such a structured community, even when one is already chafing against it.

Nomi spends much of her childhood worrying that Tash will go to hell. She even hides Tash's "I'm With Jesus" t-shirt to save her from the sin of "wearing it insincerely." Tash likes to play pranks like substituting John Lennon for Jesus during call-and-response prayers at church, and she often argues with her parents about her refusal to conform. Nomi doesn't understand the fights, and she only cares about knowing for sure that "we were all going to live forever, together, happily, in Heaven with God." She's annoyed with Tash for jeopardizing the family's chances at eternal salvation.

Religion provides Nomi with structure and confidence during her childhood—but it also causes her serious anxiety about her family's fate in the afterlife. By the end of the novel, Nomi will learn to differentiate between her parents' positive, loving faith and the dogmatic, harsh Christianity practiced by the church elders in her community.

Nomi remembers other small facts about Trudie, like her ability to predict the weather or her unique way of folding towels. While Trudie and Ray love each other fiercely, it often seems like they have nothing to say. One time, Trudie decides to learn to ride her cousin's motorcycle, but she accelerates too fast and falls over almost as soon as the motorcycle starts. Nomi likes to remember her flying through the air. Recently, while putting away Ray's laundry, Nomi found Trudie's passport in a bureau drawer. She wishes her mother had taken it with her.

Nomi's depiction of her parents evokes both deep love and contrasting approaches to life, since Trudie and Ray's differences result in a lack of communication between them. The image of Trudie flying through the air illustrates both the beauty and the dangerous unpredictability that Nomi loves and distrusts in her mother. While Nomi wants to believe that her mother is having adventures in exotic places, the fact that she leaves behind all documentation raises the disturbing possibility that she left home with the intention of harming herself or committing suicide.

CHAPTER THREE

Nomi has been dating her boyfriend, Travis, for five months. She met him at a New Year's Eve party; the town's more rebellious teenagers gathered on a hill to drink around a fire. Nomi shared a joint with Travis and they started talking about music, eventually discovierng that they share the same taste. Nomi reminded herself to be mysterious; since Tash and Trudie left, she'd been perfecting a "tragic and romantic" persona.

It's clear that Nomi's mother and sister are hardly the only rebels in the community—the fact that teenagers regularly gather to drink and smoke shows how religious principles clash with people's actual culture and lifestyle. Throughout the novel, Nomi struggles to make sense of the contractions between the theoretical principles of her religion versus the factual reality of the community, and how this dissonance also manifests within herself.

At the gathering, Nomi and Travis began to talk casually. Nomi told him a story she made up, about a girl who really likes an older and cooler guy and happens to run into him on the street, only to find that she can't talk to him when he's actually there. Travis asked if Nomi prefers people she loves to be absent when she talks to them. Hearing the noise of the midnight countdown, Nomi and Travis returned to the fire. Another girl offered Nomi a hash pipe, but while she's smoking, some roughhousing boys accidentally kicked her and the pipe cut the inside of her mouth. Not noticing, Travis leaned over to kiss her, but Nomi passed out. She woke up in the back of Travis's pickup truck and began to fall in love with him.

It's important that Nomi chooses to express her feelings for Travis through storytelling—for her, stories are markers of authenticity and truthfulness. This contrasts with the attitude of Mr. Quiring, who uses stories to reinforce abstract dogma. Nomi's sudden injury—and her brusque manner of describing it—shows the downside of her rebellious attitude and resistance toward familial restrictions, which is that she frequently exposes herself to danger and mayhem for the sake of freedom.

Nomi remembers that, during church services, Trudie used to take care of the congregation's babies in the "crying room." Nomi and Tash often join her, and the three of them unplug the speaker broadcasting the weekly sermon and turn on the radio instead. Through the doorway they can see Ray, periodically falling asleep during the sermon; he's "toeing the line" between his wife and his faith. Just a few weeks ago, Nomi heard her father respond to a everyday greeting from The Mouth by saying that he's "living quietly with [his] disappointments."

Even though the Mennonite community emphasizes the importance of nuclear families, Nomi's strongest family memories often involve defying the church. This suggests that, even though she currently believes she must stay home in order to eventually reunite with her mother and sister, the only way the family can thrive is to escape the church's domain.

CHAPTER FOUR

Ray always wears large glasses, which make him look a bit confused and as if as if he's about to do some welding. Nomi always washes and folds his laundry, a chore she enjoys because she sometimes finds interesting things in his pockets. Today, Ray is sitting outside when she gets home. He tells Nomi he wants to have a talk about her future but doesn't say anything else, so she pats his head and goes inside.

Ray's mild-mannered, almost deferential demeanor contrasts with patriarchal expectations for Mennonite men, and is one of his most endearing qualities. Yet the apathy into which he sinks after his wife's departure means he can't provide Nomi with the guidance she desperately needs.

Nomi remembers that a few weeks after Trudie left home, Ray began to build a new garbage hutch—something that Trudie always wanted him to do—while she sat upstairs listening to Led Zeppelin. Both Nomi and Ray responded to their grief calmly, unlike Nomi's grandmother, who broke down in public places after her husband died. One day, Ray set up the finished garbage hutch at the end of the driveway; he and Nomi waited for the garbage men to arrive and be amazed. However, they thought that the hutch was garbage and threw it into the truck while Ray and Nomi watched.

For Nomi, the physical objects of the house are often representative of her family's breakdown. By building the garbage hutch, Ray tries to create a domestic scene to which his wife might return and find satisfaction. Its destruction by the garbage men symbolically implies that the family's days of contentment and conformity within the Mennonite community are over.

Lately Nomi has been experimenting with vegetarian meals, but she's not a very good cook, so they don't always work out well. When Ray looks skeptically at tonight's dinner of vegetables and pear nectar, she responds defensively that she can't cook meat. Ray says this is "A-OK," which drives Nomi crazy; she knows he's just using slang in order to sound laid-back for her. She wonders if Ray might have preferred to have a son.

By taking over Trudie's habitual tasks, Nomi is trying to postpone reckoning with her mother's disappearance, in the same way that Ray will ignore household tasks in order to avoid facing his own grief. It's clear that this evasiveness threatens not only their daily routines, but their mental stability.

Today Nomi has visited the hospital to see her friend Lids, who has a mysterious chronic illness. Lids asks about the outside world and Nomi tells her about the weather and her part-time job at the carwash, which she sees as preparation for the "rigid schedule of killing" at the slaughterhouse. Lydia also asks if Nomi and Travis have "done it yet." Lydia is such a devout Mennonite that she once dressed up as "a brown paper package tied up with string, from *The Sound of Music*" for a Halloween party, while all the other girls "dressed up like [...] hooker[s]." But she never judges Nomi; she always asks thoughtful questions about her life and listens to the answers.

Lids and Nomi have vastly different outlooks on life, but they both understand and respect each other. Nomi provides the news of the outside world that Lids craves, while Lids listens to Nomi's relationship troubles as no one else does. Interestingly, Lids's serene faith allows her to accept the different attitudes of others, whereas the dogmatic religious beliefs of many other people in the town cause them to develop harsh and intolerant attitudes.

Nomi offers to come her hair or moisturize her face, but Lids said it would hurt too much. A mean nurse comes in and says disapprovingly that Lids should be outside playing, clearly believing she's not really sick. Nomi fantasizes about killing the nurse. On her way out, Lids gives her a poem she's written about two girls playing.

Contrasting with the nurse's inattentiveness, Nomi's ability and willingness to provide physical care shows that she possesses a sense of compassion that many people in her community lack.

CHAPTER FIVE

After supper, Nomi and Travis go for a drive and meet their friends at the pits, a drainage ditch and gathering place outside the town. For a while they sit in companionable silence but then Travis says he's been thinking about "consciousness" and "fucking." Nomi, a little taken aback since they've never had sex, responds that she's been thinking about "getting a small horse I can ride but not be scared of." Travis feels she is making fun of him and storms out of the car to buy weed from The Golden Comb, their local dealer.

While Travis makes frequent (if often incoherent) philosophical pronouncements, Nomi tends to downplay to the value of her own thoughts, as she does here. This displays a humility that Travis lacks, but also a lack of confidence in herself, which makes it easy for Travis to intimidate her and dictate her behavior.

Annoyed, Nomi gets out of the car and runs into Sheridan Klippenstein. Trudie used to care for his grandmother, old Mrs. Klippenstein. Nomi once wrote a short story about Mrs. Klippenstein's house, only for her English teacher, Mr. Quiring, to correct some detail about the interior. Sheridan tells Nomi that his father has left home to play in a cover band, and Nomi commiserates with him and asks what he's been doing. Sheridan says he's dropped out of school and works at a public park near a lake where his mother drowned herself years ago. Nomi remembers Sheridan's mother fondly; she wore highlights in her hair and always let Nomi draw on her basement walls.

Like Nomi's life, Sheridan's has also been upended by his parents' inability to conform to communal norms. In a sense, his situation shows what could happen to her, and is justifiably anxiety-inducing. Mr. Quiring's familiarity with the inside of Mrs. Klippenstein's house seems like a small-town quirk, but will take on greater significance later in the novel.

Nomi and Sheridan reminisce about playing together as children, yelling goodbye at each other in lots of different languages. A few years later, Sheridan's father was excommunicated for an unknown crime but chose to live in the town like a ghost even though everyone, including his family, was obligated to shun him. Shortly afterward, Sheridan's mother went insane and killed herself; Trudie attributed this to the pain of having to pretend her husband is dead. In the present day, Nomi and Sheridan smoke a cigarette together, and Nomi suggests that they meet at the pits every five years to catch up.

This is the first mention of excommunication, a practice in which transgressive church members are cast out of the community, and even their family members are obliged to "shun" them. Nomi presents this not as neutral religious practice, but in terms of its cruel, potentially disastrous human cost.

CHAPTER SIX

Nomi remembers that during her childhood, she and Tash used to sit in their grandmother's house and listen to obituaries on the radio. Their elders believe that this activity is healthier for children than listening to the Beatles or playing pretend, which Nomi still sometimes secretly does. However, at Sunday school they are allowed to play certain kinds of pretend games: the teacher pretends to different kinds people who can't "get on the heaven train," from "Professor Knuf" to "Rockin' Rhonda" to "Slugger Sam." Only "Farmer Fred" can go to Heaven because he loves Jesus. Nomi enjoys drawing pictures of Farmer Fred sailing into Heaven and leaving the others crying at the gate, although she can never figure out why the professor is denied entry.

Mennonite culture is so centered around the afterlife that people prefer contemplating death to interacting with potentially sinful culture. At the same time, rigid ideas of right and wrong provide Nomi with a secure outlook. She clearly has mixed feelings about her religion—her mocking description of the propaganda to which she's exposed as a child evidences both a distrust of religious dogma and a reluctant nostalgia for the days when that dogma guided her life.

One afternoon, young Nomi is standing in her grandmother's field, pretending to be a scarecrow, when she sees two dresses fly off a clothesline and dance through the air "in this crazy, free, beautiful way" until one falls onto the barn roof and the other falls to the ground in front of her. Nomi doesn't touch the dresses, and for all she knows the dress on the roof might still be there.

While Nomi feels ambivalent about the afterlife, she's often awed by moments of beauty in her daily life. This lyrical scene suggests the importance of recognizing the value of earthly life, rather than turning away from it.

In the present day, Nomi has just returned home from a drive with Travis. Sometimes they race farm dogs or tape notes on cows; today they have found a tree and taken turns jumping out of the branches. Then they drive to Nomi's grandmother's house so she can see if the dress is still there. Predictably, it has vanished and Nomi feels tired and upset. Travis tells her not to be sad; after all, she shouldn't have expected anything different.

Travis enjoys Nomi's company when she's feeling whimsical and adventurous. But when she's sad or upset—understandable feelings in the wake of family trauma—he's dismissive and impatient, showing his underlying shallow nature and lack of genuine care for her.

Nomi remembers that, on their first date, Ray and Trudie walked to church together. Once they reached the door, Ray didn't know whether to go inside immediately, but Trudie plunged ahead. That day, the church elders voted to excommunicate three community members. Tash was appalled when she found out that Ray and Trudie met at a shunning, but Nomi loved hearing about it because it reinforces her "belief system of right and wrong." She always made Trudie tell her about excommunicated people who "lived like ghosts in their own town," and the sadness of their families. However, Trudie would point out the possibility of forgiveness and tell stories about evading the rules. For example, a husband and his shunned wife might eat dinner at separate but adjacent tables in order to obey the prohibition against sharing a table.

The fact that Trudie and Ray met at a shunning demonstrates how positive aspects of life in their Mennonite community coexist uneasily with its most glaring flaws. It's interesting how Nomi's childhood outlook contrasts with Tash's, as this difference underscores the radical transformation that Nomi undergoes after her sister's departure. Trudie's stories about people evading the rules of shunning shows her emphasis on the importance of family, even when family is pitted against the rules of the church.

There is one woman who has been shunned for adultery but still lives in Nomi's town. Sometimes she faints in the street and people leave food by her side, but no one can actually talk to her. Trudie explains that the blackouts are caused by stress, something that fascinates Nomi. Sometimes Trudie herself will talk under her breath to invisible people, only to deny doing so when Nomi asks her about it. Nomi compares the community's "complicated kindness" to the shunned woman to people's habit of asking after her welfare or praying for her without specifically mentioning her own mother's departure.

That the community shuns an obviously mentally ill woman shows the fundamental flaws in its ideology, but the fact that people find subtle ways to help her suggests a general recognition that no one can live in complete accordance with the religion's strict rules. This tension between ideology and actual life is oppressive to Nomi, but also comfortingly familiar, giving her a framework to interact with other people in the town.

CHAPTER SEVEN

At one end of East Village's Main Street is a water tower with a painting of Jesus holding out his arms "like he's saying how the hell would I know? I'm just a carpenter." At the other end is a billboard saying "Satan is real. Choose now." Americans often visit the town to observe its "simple ways," touring windmill and museum village that lie at the end of the town. Nomi says that her town is like a "bunker" where people are killing time until the Rapture occurs and they ascend to Heaven. She has no idea what Heaven will be like, except maybe that you can get punched in the stomach and not feel pain, something that would be fun "for one afternoon."

The stark dichotomy between Jesus and Satan is at odds with the actual complexity of life in East Village that Nomi has just described. But paradoxically, Nomi's understanding of this tension is what makes her feel most at home in her town, and most alienated from the tourists who come to visit it. In her simplistic view of Heaven, Nomi astutely points out that a painless afterlife would be boring compared to life in the unstable but poignantly beautiful world.

At school, when Nomi shares her distrust of the Mennonite principle of eschewing worldly pleasures, her typing teacher accuses her of wanting to do drugs or "writhe on a dance floor." Having difficulty articulating her thoughts, Nomi says that she just wants to go about her life without wondering if her actions are sinful, and she wants to think about goodness "outside of any religious framework." She tells her typing teacher that eternal life seems "creepy" and that it's very risky to "bet everything we had in this world on the possibility of another world." The teacher leads the class in a prayer for Nomi's soul and throws her out.

Instead of broadening her horizons, Nomi's education encourages her to repress any thoughts or impulses that don't align with Mennonite theology. The rigid atmosphere at school contrasts with the fluid, nonlinear nature of the narrative Nomi creates for the reader. This dichotomy characterizes storytelling as a potential mechanism for both oppressing others and for challenging that oppression.

Nomi says that the town minister, The Mouth, is obsessed with shame and "traffics the shit like a schoolground pusher." Even in childhood pictures he looks stiff and serious. However, everyone in the town knows that as a young man, The Mouth left the community to live as an artist in the outside world. However, he found he couldn't write poetry or make friends, and the girl he loved ditched him, so he returned to the community of his youth with "a fresh loathing of the world" and new determination that no one be allowed to enjoy themselves.

It's interesting that The Mouth's loathing of the outside world seems to stem from his inability to fit in there. Nomi characterizes church elders like The Mouth, and even the long-dead Menno Simons, as motivated by fear and insecurity. In this sense, The Mouth is a notable foil to Ray, whose religious faith is based in love and acceptance.

Once, while walking back from Travis's house at night, Nomi passes The Mouth's house and watches him eat a pint of ice cream in the kitchen in his bathrobe. After he finishes, he leans his had against the wall "like a guy completely defeated by life." A few weeks later, Nomi notices Trudie leaning against the window, watching the neighbor's dog, in just the same way. She tells Nomi that she envies the dog's "freedom and obliviousness."

Nomi's nighttime glimpse of The Mouth, and subsequent comparison of him to Trudie, opens the possibility that the preacher has religious doubts and a complex inner life. However, unlike Trudie, he never lets his feelings or uncertainty override his adherence to dogma.

Nomi remembers standing in The Mouth's office, reciting Bible verses. She always gets in trouble for saying "In the beginning there was the world" instead of "in the beginning there was the word." She wishes she lived in New York. On the other hand, Ray never misses a church service. Nomi used to be embarrassed of him, but now she imagines him as the "noble captain of a sinking ship."

Though presumably a random fluke, Nomi's slip-up also reveals the difference between her outlook and The Mouth's: he wants to emphasize the superiority of the "word" of God, but Nomi implicitly argues the importance of the beautiful, tangible world around her.

Even the Americans who visit the town as tourists are often disturbed by the reality of teenagers smoking cigarettes and wearing tube tops in the street. Once, a tourist takes a picture of Nomi on the curb and remarks to her husband, "here's a priceless juxtaposition of old and new." They debate giving her some money until Nomi tells them she speaks English and they walk away.

Even though Nomi constantly dreams of escaping to New York, people who actually live in the modern world treat her as a curiosity and make her feel like an outsider. This moment is a reminder that intolerance is not endemic to religious communities, but rather can be found anywhere.

It often seems impossible to leave, but if Tash and Trudie escaped, it can't be that hard. Nomi likes to imagine different exotic possibilities for her mother's whereabouts; it troubles her to know that Trudie hasn't taken her passport or packed any warm clothes. Nomi prefers to imagine that her mother and sister are both alive and well, and that her family will all be together again soon. She doesn't want the sobering facts surrounding Trudie's disappearance to govern her story. After all, she points out, Jesus seemed to die and came to life again three days later.

Trudie's lack of preparation forces Nomi to acknowledge the possibility that her mother didn't plan any future life outside the community. Nomi's reference to Jesus is partly a joke about her waning religious faith, but it also suggests a lingering wish that biblical stories could still guide her and provide her with security in uncertain times.

CHAPTER EIGHT

At night, Nomi likes to ride her bike to the American border. She watches trains rush by, covered in graffiti from kids in other cities. She also goes to the fairground to look at the things that teenagers write on the walls. Sometimes she rides along the highways and hangs on to RVs to catch a ride. Once a little girl sees her from the back window and holds up each of her stuffed animals for Nomi to see.

Nomi's nighttime escapades demonstrate her curious spirit. But they also hint at her loneliness—she's rarely accompanied by a friend—and her recklessness, which goes unchecked by any parental guidance.

Today, Nomi decides to go around town and say goodbye to everyone, even though she has no plans to leave. First she visits the general store and tells her classmate Gloria that she's going to the city. Gloria gives Nomi a free Coke; she is recently engaged to a boy who used to chase Nomi and hit her with sticks. Gloria mentions a new picture of Nomi hanging in the village museum. Nomi had been reluctantly volunteering as a pretend pioneer, churning fake butter and surreptitiously smoking, when her cigarette lit up her bonnet. In the photograph, she is running to a barrel to dunk her burning head. Gloria says it's too bad that their stoner phases didn't coincide.

In a sense, Nomi is rehearsing to leave town, performing a pretend version of the choice that she's not yet ready to make. The photograph of Nomi in period dress with her head on fire is extremely evocative. It shows, in both a symbolic and literal way, how living in the past and refusing to acknowledge the present is ultimately self-destructive. Nomi is completely cognizant of this fact when it comes to her religious community, but less so when it comes to her refusal to reckon with the changes in her family.

Nomi leaves the general store and walks to Mrs. Peters's house. Mrs. Peters gives Nomi homemade popcorn and reminisces about her son, Clayton, who was Nomi's age but tragically drowned as a child. All her appliances are white, because she thinks colored furniture is sinful. Nomi cuts Mrs. Peters's bangs and changes a light bulb. She asks lots of questions about Clayton, because she knows Mrs. Peters likes to answer them, and they speculate on what he might have done after graduating high school. Mrs. Peters says that she can't wait to see Clayton in Heaven. Nomi asks Mrs. Peters whether, if she had remarried after her husband's death, she would live with the first or second husband in Heaven, but Mrs. Peters avoids the question.

Providing comfort to a widow and acting as a stand-in for her dead son is a task requiring empathy, tact, and strength, but Nomi interacts with Mrs. Peters as though it's easy. Although she likes to pose as a rebellious, carefree teenager, moments like this show that she possesses a maturity and strength of character far beyond her years—and far beyond Travis, who becomes uncomfortable at any display of emotion or vulnerability.

After leaving Mrs. Peters, Nomi visits Lids in the hospital. She carefully removes a pile of homework that the mean nurse has dropped on Lids's stomach. Lids has lost her voice, so Nomi updates her on the outside world, amusing her with the news of Gloria's engagement. The nurse arrives and says that if Lids is laughing she must not really be sick. Nomi says that the nurse should be kinder and make sure Lids gets softer food. The nurse responds dismissively that Nomi is full of lies, and Nomi throws a container of apple juice at her. The nurse says that Nomi is as crazy as her mother.

Nomi's impulsive behavior here contrasts with her earlier display of maturity, but neither incident cancels the other out. By showing the contradictory traits in many characters, including herself, Nomi establishes her narrative as a protest against rigid paradigms of good and evil. The nurse's comment about Trudie foreshadows Nomi's eventual revelation about what drove Trudie out East Village, and shows that Nomi's conception of her mother is much different than the town's.

A nice nurse comes into the room and tells Nomi to leave and come back in a little while. She says that if something like this happens again, Nomi should see her personally to find a solution. Nomi feels overwhelmed by her kindness.

That Nomi is so moved by this one instance of empathy implicitly suggests how often she feels alone and unprotected in the wake of her mother's disappearance.

CHAPTER NINE

Travis, "who likes to teach [Nomi] things," is showing her how to drive. At night, they drive to buy liquor in nearby French villages. Nomi relates that during WWII, when the French men were away in the army, Mennonites who had been exempted from the army because of their religion bought up much of the land from the soldiers' impoverished families. Nomi has learned about this history by riding her bike into neighboring villages and asking the inhabitants what they think of Mennonites. She tried to write a report for school, but her teacher said it was "wicked."

Nomi's inquisitive spirit leads her to question not only religious dogmas, but historical "certainties." Again, this habit causes reproach from her teachers at school. Instances like this establish Nomi's own narrative as an illustration of the consequences of rigid worldviews on a personal level.

Now, Nomi and Travis try to make amends by buying their booze in the French villages. Wealthier Mennonites go on vacations to places like Hawaii when they want to drink without incurring social disapproval. Nomi says that the most embarrassing possibility for Mennonites is "to meet other wealthy Mennonites at the swim-up bar at the Honolulu Holiday Inn."

Nomi's joke implicitly illustrates the impossibility of living according to strict Mennonite dogma at all times. It also shows that people who are wealthy and powerful can disobey norms without incurring consequences to which those lower on the social ladder are vulnerable.

Travis and Nomi return to Travis's basement to drink and listen to records. He shows her the scars from an operation on his ears, but to Nomi he so "perfect" that she can hardly believe she's actually talking to him. Travis plays James Taylor songs on his guitar while Nomi smokes and thinks about Tash.

Travis is obviously not perfect, so Nomi's worshipful attitude of him suggests her lack of self-esteem. She's essentially chosen Travis to replace religion and family as the center of her life, but she doesn't apply the same questioning attitude to him as she does to the Mennonite community. Her devotion to him suggests that she, too, is vulnerable to being controlled by something (or someone) other than herself.

Nomi recalls that after running away, Tash called home a few times before falling out of contact. In the 1970s, lots of teenagers ran away from home to live on communes and have lots of babies, but Nomi doesn't believe Tash would do this—it's too similar to the way they live at home. She always used to complain to her parents that Mennonites are regarded as a joke in the outside world. Now all Nomi has left of her is her magazine collection and her razor blades. Nomi and Ray used to get excited every time the phone rang, but now they hardly notice it.

Nomi astutely points out that the Mennonite community actually has some attributes in common with the hippie cults of the 70s, whose values the church opposes. Tash's complaints to her parents signal her sense of belonging in her community, but this sense of being rooted is something she wants to get away from, not embrace.

After Trudie and Tash leave the family, The Mouth comes over to pray with Ray and Nomi. He tells them bracingly that they can't "live in crisis forever." Ray evades further confrontation by going to check on the softener salt in his water tank. Nomi says that this probably isn't even a trick; even in normal times, Ray is the kind of person who checks on household appliances several times a day. Often, when seeing Nomi, he expresses surprise that she's still here, which disconcerts her.

The Mouth's dismissive attitude reflects his broader conviction that family relationships are less important than adherence to religious dogma. In contrast, Ray's emphasis on household chores, even when he doesn't actually complete them, reflects his devotion to the family (which is represented by the house) above all else.

Nomi is sitting on her driveway pushing fake seashells into the melting asphalt when Ray pulls into the driveway on his bicycle. He gives her some chalk from the school where he works and points out that the little neighbor girl has a new bicycle. When Nomi doesn't say anything, he salutes her and goes inside; she feels bad for being an unenthusiastic daughter.

Both Ray and Nomi are trying to connect with each other, but without Trudie to mediate their relationship, they can't quite figure it out. Ray's reference to the neighbor girl is a nod to the simpler quality of their life when Nomi was a young child.

Nomi uses the chalk to write a Gauguin quote on the driveway: "Life being what it is, on dreams of revenge." Her neighbor, an "unhappy housewife," walks out to look at it. She complains about living in a house filled with primary colors, and then points at **Nomi's house**, which is painted wild shades of pink and blue, and asks if her family is crazy. Nomi says she's never thought about it.

Nomi is certainly eccentric—her neighbor's comment (and the mean nurse's insult in the previous chapter) suggest that the town perceives her as crazy. But the behavior of other people (like the neighbor here) is often no less strange. By contrast, Nomi is willing to question the dogmatic attitudes of those around her, and to accept other people's quirks rather than othering them.

As it gets dark, Nomi walks to Abe's Hill to watch the lights in the city come on. When she gets home, she finds that Ray has left a copy of *The Screwtape Letters* on her desk. Nomi puts on one of Tash's records and lies in bed thinking about Travis and looking at her poster of *Christina's World*.

Christina's World *is an Andrew Wyeth portrait of a woman sitting in a field, gazing at a farmhouse yet fundamentally separate from it. The woman seems to be simultaneously drawn to the farmhouse and alienated from it, a duality that reflects Nomi's own ambivalent feelings, both toward her own community and the city in which she eventually hopes to live.*

CHAPTER TEN

Nomi and Travis are sitting in the truck waiting to meet The Comb, a local drug dealer, and buy marijuana. They are arguing about whether Ray and Trudie ever had chemistry; Nomi says that they once did, but Travis argues that Ray is like a boy "with his finger in the dike," trying to save everyone but looking kind of goofy in the process. He puts Nomi's hand on his groin and tells her that this is chemistry. Nomi is offended and says that Travis shouldn't insult Ray and then come on to her. Travis says she should relax.

By insulting Nomi's father, destabilizing her already fragile confidence in her family, and then making a sexual gesture, Travis is being a remarkably untactful partner. Yet by telling Nomi to "relax," he makes it seem like she's in the wrong. By the end of the novel, Nomi will learn that her thoughts and feelings have value, and that she must distance herself from those who dismiss them.

The Comb comes outside from his trailer. He once worked at the chicken plant, and could kill four chickens at once. Nomi gives him some money and the Comb throws her a bag of weed. He asks if Nomi has seen Tash lately and grabs his crotch. Nomi doesn't respond; she's a little scared of The Comb and doesn't want to annoy him. He's one of the only people who can live in the town yet completely ignore all its rules. Nomi says he's kind of like Menno Simons; both men share an "obsession with escaping from the world."

The Comb's efficiency as a chicken-slaughterer, and his sexual gesture about Tash, imply a lewdness and potential for violence in his character that will become significant later. It's interesting that Nomi compares him, a social misfit, to Menno Simons, the originator of the community. In doing so, she suggests that both The Comb's lawless existence and Menno's asceticism stem from the same inability to face the real world.

Later, Nomi sits outside the bakery drawing with her chalk and watching a man named Bert drive up and down the street. He's wearing a jean jacket with Led Zeppelin written on the back, except that the last two letters don't fit on the jacket. Nomi reflects that there are many simple ways to look less like an idiot. She remembers that one time Bert picked her up in his truck and told her about the deaths of his parents and his life with his grandmother. He's been excommunicated from the church for his alcoholism. Now he dates a French girl, and they often drive up and down Main Street together. Once, Nomi dreamt that Bert and his girlfriend start dancing in the supermarket parking lot, and it was so beautiful that everyone watching started to cry.

Bert's jacket reflects both an earnest desire to keep in step with modern times, and the total inability to do so from within their isolated and traditional community. Bert seems like an unstable character, but he's unable to act otherwise given his family history and the church's decision to punish, rather than help, him. In a way, Nomi's dream evokes a world in which the religious community can appreciate the beauty and value of flawed people, rather than simply casting them out.

Travis picks Nomi up on Main Street, and they go for a drive. Nomi wants him to play more songs on his guitar, but she also gets anxious thinking about what to say in between songs. However, Travis is mostly interested in running around naked in the fields, and Nomi likes doing that too. When they get tired, they lie down next to each other. Travis says that they shouldn't talk so they can "synchronize." Nomi falls asleep and when she wakes up, it's raining and Travis is sitting in his truck. Nom asks why he didn't wake her up, and he doesn't answer. She points out a clump of horses in the field, who have gathered together to protect each other from the elements.

It's becoming increasingly clear that Nomi's relationship is entirely centered around Travis's preferences and his desire to show off. His affected philosophical attitude contrasts with Nomi's thoughtful and probing exploration of life's dilemmas in her own narrative. Yet she's unable to translate her competence and talent as a storyteller into confidence in her relationships with others.

When Nomi gets home, Ray is on the roof cleaning out the gutters. Nomi asks him to come down, but he refuses. She wonders if he has purposely waited for a thunderstorm to handle this chore.

It's easy to see that Nomi likely derives her own self-destructive tendencies from her father's behavior, demonstrating the extent to which an individual's family can impact the way they view themselves.

Armed with Tash's Valium and some cigarettes, Nomi prepares to walk to Abe's Hill. Outside her **house**, she sees the little neighbor girl playing. Nomi stops to pick her up and spin her around until they both fall down. The girl shows Nomi the contents of her purse: lipstick and a fake gun. She tells Nomi that Jesus used to drink wine, and Nomi makes funny faces to make her laugh.

Nomi always pays attention to the little girl, demonstrating her empathy for members of society whom others simply ignore. With her awareness of the contradictions in Mennonite life (like Jesus's consumption of a now-forbidden substance), the little girl mirrors Nomi's own curious attitude.

On the way to the hill, Nomi passes The Mouth and his wife, whom she has privately nicknamed Aunt Gonad. The Mouth greets Nomi in the Mennonite language Plautdietsch, which he wants everyone to speak, but she refuses to respond. The Mouth has a daughter, currently living in Germany, who used to be Nomi's Sunday school teacher. Nomi remembers her trying to illustrate the miracle of Christianity by describing the "impossible" things that can happen with God's help, such as very fat gymnasts winning Olympic medals. The Mouth also has a son with whom Nomi was close as a child. They played a game called "Bus Driver and Lost Girl," in which Nomi pretended to be lost and had to let the bus driver kiss her before taking her home.

The Mouth's daughter takes a patently ridiculous approach to explaining Christian theology, depicting miracles as acts of magic or overt depictions of God's power. In contrast, Nomi's parents, especially Ray, conceive of faith as a force that exists within and gives value to everyday life, even when no "miracles" are occurring. By making fun of the Sunday school teacher, Nomi doesn't dismiss Christianity completely—rather, she draws attention to a different form of faith that she finds more worthwhile.

Nomi isn't strong enough to ride her bike up the hill, so she leaves it at the bottom. She knows she should stop smoking, but she would feel lost without her cigarettes. She's even loyal to her brand, Sweet Caps; it comforts her to buy the same pack of cigarettes every time, just as it comforts Ray to watch *Hymn Sing* on TV every night. Nomi plans to quit when she's 40, after she's worked at the chicken plant for 23 years.

Invoking the chicken plant, Nomi implies that it's not worth taking care of her body because she won't be doing anything interesting with her life. Just as she doesn't assert her own value to Travis, it seems she has trouble believing that she deserves to leave her community and find a place where she can thrive.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Nomi stays at the hill for a long time. In the dirt she practices the new signature that Travis helped her design. Once Nomi was called Naomi, but young Tash couldn't pronounce her name, so it was shortened. Nomi remembers Tash, as a young girl, planning to go to Kazakhstan, liberate the Mennonite children exiled there by Stalin, and take them to live in Prague and have Czech lovers. On her way home, Nomi passes her English teacher, Mr. Quiring, in the street, but he doesn't notice her. She remembers that Trudie used to take her for long walks at night. Ray is sitting in his lawn chair when she gets home. Nomi thinks that Travis might be right after all: Ray is goofy.

Nomi's new signature, dictated by Travis, shows how much she's letting him control her life. At the same time, her recollection of Tash shortening her name is a reminder of how much her sister's example shaped her character. While Nomi's emulation of Tash is somewhat healthier than her worship of Travis, Nomi will eventually learn that she doesn't have to follow in the footsteps of her sister or her boyfriend.


Ray comes inside to "have a staring contest with the kitchen table." Nomi puts on a record and lies in bed. She looks at a bloodstain on her wall and remembers how it got there years ago. Tash had sent her on an emergency run for sanitary pads, and while biking furiously home Nomi lost control of her bike and flies into someone's driveway. She gave Tash the pads and then retreated to the room to pick gravel out of her nose, smearing the blood from her face onto the wall. Every time she looks at the bloodstain now, she's reminded that she's not currently bleeding from her face, something she finds empowering.

Clearly, Nomi's standards of what constitutes an empowering moment are pretty low. Just as at the beginning of the novel, when Nomi brusquely describes her accident with Travis's vape, she downplays the harm she incurs here out of an unwillingness to address the dysfunction in her life.

Nomi thinks about her mother. Living in East Village, Trudie has Ray, her children, and books to keep her occupied, and everyone in the town knows who she is and where she belongs. She grew up in a big house with 13 siblings and a father, Nicodemus, who wrote all their names down—sometimes spelled wrong—in the family Bible. Nomi thinks that Trudie often misses Nicodemus, who taught her to love long car rides.

Nomi is rationalizing up all the positive aspects of life in East Village in an attempt to "prove" that Trudie should have stayed. Yet these things also apply to her, and she, too, is restless to get out of town. In a way, she's thinking about how she herself may someday, like Trudie, leave behind the things she loves if it means having a chance at a new life.

In church, Trudie enjoys hymns and always sings loudly. During Communion, she and the other women wash each other's feet without removing their nylons. But Trudie doesn't like to hang around and shake hands after the service; while Ray lingers, she takes Nomi and Tash to sit in the car. Nomi knows she's a disappointment to Menno Simons, but thinks maybe he'd be pleased to know of her new faith—she believes firmly that her family will be together one day in New York City, where they'll live with Lou Reed and play in Central Park all day.

Trudie's participation in this small, humble ritual suggests that even though she's skeptical of Mennonite life, she retains a sense of religious devotion. For her, true faith is separate from a community centered around dogma, which is represented by the handshaking after church that Trudie always eschews.

Trudie often talks about her happy childhood in East Village, and when Tash complains that the town is fake, Trudie reminds her that if the Mennonites had stayed in Europe they would have been persecuted and killed. Trudie tells stories of her family, who fled Russia with hardly any possessions or money.

Just as the family's ancestors fled a Russian society where they weren't tolerated, Trudie and Tash have left a community that refuses to accept them. This parallel suggests that despite the harsh dogma that presently exists in the Mennonite church, it was paradoxically founded upon a desire for freedom from judgment and persecution.

Nomi's grandmother often reprimands Trudie for letting the **house** get messy. When the Rapture occurs, she tells Trudie, Jesus will be able to tell his people apart by the cleanliness of their houses. Trudie always nods at these speeches, but the house never becomes more orderly. Ray doesn't pay attention, preferring to focus on science and isotopes. He likes to talk to Nomi about the laws of thermodynamics.

Again, Trudie shows that one doesn't have to adhere to religious dogma (like fulfilling patriarchal expectations of women in the name of obedience to Jesus) in order to have a genuine faith in God.

Trudie loves to play Dutch Blitz, an Amish card game. She often keeps Nomi up late at night to play with her; it's only years later that Nomi realizes Trudie was trying to keep herself awake until Tash came home from hanging out with her friends.

While Nomi wishes she could return to the happy days of her childhood, as she grows up she starts to see how these years were stressful and unhappy for her parents. This shift in perspective signals Nomi's maturation, as well as suggesting that families are often not as harmonious as they seem on the surface.

Nomi remembers one day when The Mouth comes over and asks to speak to Trudie privately. From the window, Tash and Nomi watched as The Mouth lectured, and Trudie threw up her hands. Tash said that The Mouth was trying to get Trudie to do something. Trudie turned to smile at the girls, but it looked like she was crying. When Trudie came inside, Nomi pestered her about the conversation, but Trudie would only say that The Mouth wanted her to work at the church library. She smiled a "big, fake spooky smile" at Nomi.

This is a seemingly ordinary incident, but for Nomi it takes on larger proportions because it shows The Mouth's ability and willingness to control or harm Trudie. In turn, the repressive atmosphere under which Nomi lives is also responsible for Trudie's strained, obviously manufactured happiness.

CHAPTER TWELVE

When Nomi is 11, Tash and Trudie go away to a Christian camp for two weeks. Tash is excited because there will be boys there. Nomi is supposed to take care of Ray, and she comes up with an "alphabet routine," cooking a food from a different letter of the alphabet every night. When Tash comes home, she tells Nomi about her romance with a counselor named Mason. When she and Trudie left the camp by boat, she says, Mason dove into the water and swam after them. But Mason doesn't write Tash as he had promised to do. Knowing he plays basketball, Tash starts attending all the regional games in hopes of running into him and trying not to cry. Nomi only learns about her disappointment and shame by reading her diary.

Nomi's formative memories of Tash often involve boys and romance. While Tash shows Nomi how to question her community and religion, she also sets an example of becoming very invested in unhealthy relationships, and of keeping quiet about the "shame and disappointment" she experiences—two behaviors Nomi emulates in her relationship with Travis. Moreover, the fact that Tash leaves town with Ian makes Nomi think that she must escape alongside Travis. Eventually, Nomi will learn that she can love and respect her sister without treating her as a role model in every area of life.

While going through Tash's bureau drawers, Nomi finds a card from Trudie expressing her love and wish that the Lord will always guide Tash's actions. Nomi wonders if Trudie had foreseen Tash's departure, or if Trudie was thinking about leaving herself. If so, Nomi wonders why Trudie didn't leave her a card.

In many ways, Tash and Trudie have more in common with each other than with Nomi. Nomi's discovery of the card makes her feel isolated and shut out from her mother and sister's relationship, and casts doubt on her happy memories of familial unity.

Travis tells Nomi that she should get on the Pill. Nomi thinks he's probably right. Travis has recently quit school to work with his father, and Nomi makes fun of Mr. Quiring for a while so that Travis won't miss school. After leaving Travis, she goes on a field trip to a farm with her class. A crop duster flies overhead and everybody chokes on pesticides. Nomi finds a handwritten note in the field, but it's torn in half so she only read a few phrases. When she gets back to school, the principal announces that he's cancelled a planned musical performance because many parents have called in worrying that it's sinful.

By pressuring Nomi to take the birth control pill, Travis is dictating the terms of his and Nomi's future sexual relationship. While she complies with his prodding, it's never clear if she herself wants to start taking birth control. The adult decisions she has to make in her relationship with Travis contrast with innocent teenage school activities like field trips. It's also ironic that the principal and parents are busy censoring school performances, when their real concern should be that children like Nomi are spending their free time doing drugs and having sex.

After going home and taking a nap, Nomi wakes up with bite marks on her arm and realizes she's been biting herself in her sleep. She starts making a list of things to improve about herself, because Travis has suggested she "broaden [her] horizons and attempt to finish [her] thoughts." She resolves to read Camus and Freud, form opinions on world news, learn more about existentialism, and become funny. Then she kneels by her bed and tries to pray, feeling stupid. She remembers that Tash once told her that "God is music." Nomi falls asleep.

Nomi's bizarre biting habit is a visceral reflection of the fact that living in this community is very self-destructive. It's interesting that Nomi tells herself she has to be funnier, given that humor is one of her most obvious talents. Her attempt to pray is reminiscent of Trudie, who tries to hold on to rituals of faith even while experiencing serious religious doubts. In this sense, Nomi is still connected to her mother in spite of their physical separation.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Nomi remembers when Aunt Gonad discovered her and Trudie listening to music while taking care of the children during church. As punishment, The Mouth made Trudie take all the young girls to sing hymns at a Mennonite nursing home. With their gas tanks, hunchbacks, and habit of grabbing the girls' hands and refusing to let go, the old people were scary. An old woman told Nomi to go to hell. Nomi and Tash begged Trudie to stop taking them there, and eventually Trudie got a job as the church librarian. She was very good at helping people find books they liked.

Even though Mennonites are supposed to look forward to death, aging and dying are clearly not pleasant experiences, no matter what The Mouth wants to pretend. Nomi's loss of faith in religious certainties helps her both to appreciate the world's beauty and confront its most difficult realities.

Nomi and Tash sometimes skipped church to help Trudie shelve books. They read books about Christian children and books about "staying quiet and clean when your husband comes home." Sometimes they pretended to be German spies and left notes for each other in the books. Sometimes parents used the library to discipline children who were misbehaving during service. Ray built new shelves for the library; he was always happy to be with Trudie, no matter where she was.

There's a strong contrast between Trudie, who lets her girls skip church and play imaginative games, and parents who discipline their children for failing to behave like adults. Meanwhile, Ray's adoration for his wife is one of his most endearing qualities, even when it foreshadows his desperation after her departure.

While Trudie was working dutifully in the church library, Tash rebelled more and more, piercing her ears and listening to the radio nonstop. She started going out with a boy named Ian, who would grab her bottom while they walked around town together. Trudie marveled at how much Tash was growing, as if overnight; Nomi admired Tash and looked up to her. Tash took good care of her teeth and understood what fascism was. Nomi loved to watch her sister put on sexy lingerie before school while listening Ray shaving and Trudie cooking downstairs. Thinking about Tash and listening to the neighbor girls screaming in her yard, Nomi misses her sister so much she thinks she's going to die. Then the feeling goes away.

While Trudie and Ray are taken aback by Tash's new, rebellious persona, Nomi is fascinated and admiring. However, it's important to note that she's able to approve of Tash's behavior because it still fits into her overall conception of her family's happiness. Her depiction of watching Tash put on her underwear while listening to her parents going about their chores shows that young Nomi has no idea how ultimately disruptive Tash's coming of age will be.

Travis tells Nomi that the novelist Günter Grass mocks Mennonites in his writing, because in Germany they used to burn down mills that didn't belong to them. Nomi says that she wishes her last name was Grass, but when Travis tells her to change it she says she's joking. Travis says that she never means anything she says. Nomi and Travis start making out. Nomi thinks that she could never really change her name, because then Tash and Trudie couldn't find her.

Travis is somewhat right when he accuses Nomi of never meaning what she says—Nomi's nonchalant, unfazed demeanor covers up her inner vulnerability and confusion. However, Travis never makes the effort to gain Nomi's full trust and be completely open with her.

Nomi asks Travis to play his guitar so she can relax. She says that she'll sketch him while he plays, but she ends up drawing a picture of her family instead. Travis is annoyed, but Nomi kisses him, and he says that she's hot. Nomi thinks that he's a little bit mean, but she doesn't say so. Travis imitates pop stars to make her laugh.

Implicitly, Nomi is suggesting that her family is more important and formative than her relationship with Travis—a normal and understandable feeling, but one which he resents.

Nomi worries that Mr. Quiring thinks she's crazy. He knows her whole embarrassing family history—but then again, so does the entire town. Nomi actually enjoys her school assignments, which help her "focus and organize my thoughts." But Mr. Quiring's suspicious attitude still bothers her. One day in class, he tells her that he's seen Ray mowing the lawn on Sunday, which is against the rules.

Mr. Quiring's attitude towards Nomi's writing echoes to his broader critical and limiting outlook. Thus, Nomi's circular narrative style isn't just a persona choice, but a protest against the social circumstances and censorship to which she objects.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

With Trudie working in the library and Tash happy in her romance with Ian, it seemed like everyone should have been happy; but Nomi felt that something was wrong in her **house**, even though she was too young to understand exactly what it was. One day, she overheard Ray telling Trudie that the good times of today will simply be painful memories later on. Tash started staying out very late with Ian, and The Mouth often visited for dinner. Nomi wanted to laugh at his hairless legs with Tash, but her sister kept her bedroom door closed.

One of the first things to go wrong in Nomi's family is her friendship with Tash. While she and her sister used to do everything together, now Tash is shutting Nomi out. This break contributes to the sense of mystery present in Nomi's memories; she can never explain the rationale for her sister's behavior because she was excluded from Tash's thought process.

One day, Nomi woke up from a nightmare in which Jesus was about to smash her head in for telling lies at school. She ran into her parents' room and fell asleep under her bed. When she wakes up, Trudie was telling Ray that she though they were losing Tash forever. The next day, Tash and Trudie refused to go to church. Nomi walked with Ray, and he explained radioactive isotopes to her. She was is happy to see him so enthusiastic, even if he was talking about "something breaking down."

Nomi's feelings of religious guilt or anxiety are often manifested through dreams. The unlikely scene she imagines contrasts with the very pressing anxieties expressed by Ray, but the dream's surreal nature keeps her from taking the conversation she overhears very seriously.

Nomi started to spend her time lying under the garage door while it closed, rolling out of the way at the last minute. Tash ruined the fun by telling her that the door was programmed to stop as soon as it touched a person. Nomi remembers that when Tash was four, she fell out a tree and broke her elbow. Tash thought that God made the accident happen, but Trudie told her that God saved her life. After that, Tash wanted to throw Nomi out of a tree to "test God's love," but Trudie rejected this idea. Nomi wonders whether accidents really exist. Maybe, by saving Nomi, Trudie was thwarting God's will as expressed by Tash. Maybe Nomi should have been thrown from the tree.

This memory shows that Nomi, Tash, and even Trudie are uncertain about the extent of their own agency, as opposed to God's will. However, while Tash—and to some extent Nomi—are intent on testing and proving divine authority (much like church elders are desperate for evidence of real miracles), Trudie is more willing to accept uncertainty and acknowledge that God and accidents can exist in the same world.

One day, Tash gave Nomi a rainbow decal, which Nomi put on the living room window. Ray made her take it off; he didn't like "overt symbols of hope." When his school planned a 20th anniversary party, he refused to refer to it a "celebration." Tash suggested that they name the event "Twenty Years: A Long Arduous Journey," an idea that Ray took seriously.

In many ways, Ray is an extremely conventional Mennonite—for example, any kind of celebration makes him nervous and uncomfortable. However, while Nomi sees this tendency as threatening and severe in people like The Mouth, in mild-mannered Ray it's an endearing quirk.

Tash told Nomi that Ray and Trudie couldn't even say the word "party" because it's against Mennonite rules. On a long drive, they tried to trick their parents into saying the word. When Trudie wouldn't, Tash stuck her head out the window and closed it as if she was going to cut off her head. Ray told her sharply to sit down, but Tash refused until he pulled the car over to the side of the road. Nomi doesn't understand why small things mean so much to Tash.

While Nomi accepts Ray and Trudie's behavior unquestioningly as a child, Tash objects to it strongly. For Tash, her parents' willingness to accept seemingly arbitrary rules represents a coexistence with religious dogma that she can't bear.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Nomi thinks back to the last years of the 1970s when, like many other Mennonite teenagers, Tash started rebelling against their way of life. The Mouth and Aunt Gonad frequently warned her not to pay so much attention to her physical self, but Tash didn't pay attention. Instead, she tried to scandalize her parents by singing raunchy songs from *Jesus Christ Superstar* while Ian accompanied her on the piano. When she would stride out of the **house** in her skimpy tank tops, Trudie assured Ray that it was just a phase. After watching Tash for a few mournful seconds, she always turned to Nomi with a smile on her face. Nomi didn't realize that "that sort of bravura could have a shelf life."

At times, it seems like Tash's rebellion is completely unique, but here Nomi contextualizes it within a broader trend; she makes her narrative representative not only of her family, but of the dilemmas afflicting her broader community. It's also interesting that Nomi senses Trudie's anxiety and instability most when her mother is smiling; for her, the strain of Tash's rebellion is greatest when she has to pretend everything is alright, just as Nomi feels worst when she has to pretend that she's getting along well without her mother.

One day, Mr. Quiring visited the **house** to tell Trudie and Ray that Tash had been skipping school and ignoring her assignments. He admitted that Tash was very smart and talented, and said it was a shame that she was unable to express herself in this town. After he left, Trudie became angry with Ray, saying that "even Almon Quiring could see that Tash didn't belong," but Ray said he was not going to let a stranger tell him about his own daughter. In retrospect, Nomi thinks that Trudie blamed Ray for Tash's departure, believing that if the entire family had left town she wouldn't have wanted to run away.

It's interesting that Mr. Quiring is so sensitive to Tash's talent; at least for this moment, he's willing to question the conventions that he normally defends so rigorously. In a way, Nomi is facing the same dilemma now that her mother once did—she knows that she has to leave East Village for her own sanity, but she also doesn't want to leave or uproot Ray.

Nomi thinks that Trudie and Tash are the same kind of person, while she and Ray are themselves alike. Trudie seems to view Mr. Quiring as a kind of "guidance counselor" figure for the family. However, Nomi seriously doubts his ability to give useful advice.

Nomi senses that Mr. Quiring occupies a role of power and authority in her family's life that he doesn't seem to merit. The fact that Trudie places so much weight in Mr. Quiring's opinion implies that he may

More and more, Trudie had to defend Tash against criticism from The Mouth. When Tash skipped a dinner at their grandmother's house, The Mouth wouldn't even let Trudie talk about her at the table. Meanwhile, Tash and Ian got library cards in the nearby city and read books about communist philosophy. Tash started talking about "metaphors" all the time—this frustrated Ray, who says that "some things are nothing but what they are." While Tash's sexy lingerie and habit of swearing never bothered Nomi, Nomi was worried by her sister's newfound intellectual interests.

Even though Tash hasn't been excommunicated, The Mouth is trying to erase her from communal life as much as possible; he's using ideas of "propriety" and virtue to exert power over his family members. It's also interesting that while Nomi is unfazed by Tash's clothes and music, she immediately recognizes that the new ideas she's learning about will be far more transformative than her first superficial rebellions.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Nomi is riding her bike down the highway when her pants catch in the chain and she falls. Normally she catches a ride with a farmer when this happens, but today Travis happens to drive by and picks her up. Travis says she should wear bike clips on her pants, and asks her if she's on the Pill yet. Nomi says she will be in about two weeks. Nomi and Travis drive to a field, take off their clothes, and lie in the truck bed. Travis suggests that they move to Paris, where he can write and Nomi can learn to bake bread. He says than can save up for airplane tickets, but Nomi points out that neither of them have jobs. Suddenly they see a tractor approaching, so Travis rolls Nomi up in a carpet and drives away.

Travis often brings up the idea of leaving town, but the situations he imagines are so extravagant and unrealistic that it's hard to take him seriously. However, even though Nomi has seen her mother and sister leave town and knows that it can be done, she still feels she needs Travis in order to escape. Moments like this show her sense of dependence on Travis, even though she's clearly more mature and sensible than he is.

Travis pulls up to The Comb's trailer and helps Nomi get dressed and pull carpet fluff out of her hair. She thinks he is very sweet. They sing a Roy Orbison song and vow to name their first son after the singer. For a while they sit around sniffing purple gas out of a container near the trailer, but suddenly Travis asks what would happen if they broke up and Nomi stops talking to him. She feels like she always wrecks beautiful moments.

It's clear that talking about potential children has made Travis uncomfortable and caused him to make a hurtful comment about breaking up. Even though this remark is indicative of Travis's insecurities more than anything else, Nomi still feels that she is at fault.

Nomi and Travis see The Comb inside his trailer, but they don't have any money to buy weed. Nomi suggests they trade the carpet for drugs, so they drag it up to the door and Travis convinces The Comb that it's a valuable object. While he takes it inside, The Comb kisses Nomi on the mouth and says he saw her getting dressed by the gas tank.

The Comb is emerging as an increasingly predatory figure. It's clear from Nomi's descriptions of these incidents that she does not fully comprehend his sinister potential, perhaps because she does not value herself enough to be proactive about her own safety.

On the way home, Travis tells Nomi that he once asked his mother whether she loved God or his father more, and his mother answered God. When they arrive at **Nomi's house**, they listen to the radio in the car for a while. Nomi muses that music "is the glue of our relationship," but Travis tells her to be quiet because he can't hear. Nomi gets out of the car without kissing him goodbye. That night, it rains outside. Nomi says she can hear it through the screen and feel it on her face, "and it was warm, but it wasn't rain."

Based on this anecdote, Travis's mother is a foil to Trudie, who values familial relationships as much as (if not more than) her connection with God. Even though Travis has denigrated Nomi's parents, it seems like he's envious of their focus on each other, rather than on religion. Nomi's conflation of her tears with rain is emblematic of her circular narrative style, and it matches the ambivalent way she describes Trudie's facial expressions in moments of crisis.

In the morning, Nomi checks herself for bite marks and gets ready for school in the dusty kitchen. The neighbor girl knocks on the door and asks Nomi to play charades with her, and although it makes her late she plays a couple rounds. On the way to school, Nomi sees a group of young boys throwing rocks at construction workers building a new slaughterhouse. Suddenly, the construction workers run out of the building, throwing rocks back at the kids. They run away, but one boy gets hit and falls down. Nomi runs over to help him. Some of the construction workers join her, and tell the boy that he should learn not to throw rocks. Nomi offers to take him to school; she learns that he's a recent immigrant from a Mennonite settlement in Paraguay, and gives him a cigarette.

The kids' antics are wrongheaded, but the construction workers' response is clearly overblown. What's more, even though they help the fallen boy, they seem to believe that his punishment is just and merited, in that it will somehow teach him to behave well. In a way, this anecdote mirrors the community's wider emphasis on punishment, an outlook that ultimately lets the powerful impose their will on the vulnerable without feeling guilty.

Nomi is kicked out of typing class "for flippancy." She's distracted by thinking about her phone call with Travis before school. He's acting cranky, and she tells him that he should just apologize for being mean the night before and admit that he loves her "more than life itself." Nomi hangs up, but five minutes later she calls him back and apologizes.

Nomi is desperate for Travis to make some strong declaration of love, whereas every aspect of his behavior is a declaration that he doesn't care about her nearly as much as she cares about him.

In the afternoon, the guidance counselor calls Nomi to her office and asks what she wants to do with her life. Nomi says she'd like to be a city planner, but the counselor reminds her that this career would require "exceptional math skills." She asks why Nomi is having so many problems with her English assignments; Nomi insists that she hands them in, but that Mr. Quiring doesn't like them. The guidance counselor hugs her.

Because Nomi acts out and gets bad grades, the guidance counselor tries to discourage her from any ambitious career plans. But it's obvious that, with her creativity and perceptiveness, Nomi is full of potential. It seems she'll ultimately have to leave East Village entirely for that potential to be recognized.

Nomi has a gynecologist appointment after school, but she stops by the general store first and buys Ray a plastic bird that can drink water. Back on the street, she sees a toddler walking around with a doll stroller strapped to her rear end, so she can sit down whenever she gets tired. Nomi admires her resourcefulness. The doctor's waiting room is full of Hutterites, members of a related religious sect. Nomi prays to move to New York and convert her grief into hit songs.

Without admitting it to herself, Nomi is trying to postpone the gynecologist appointment, which implies that she has misgivings about sex with Travis. It seems like she's taking the step of getting birth control pills because Travis represents her dream of leaving home and moving to New York, rather than because she trusts and feels comfortable with him.

The doctor asks Nomi if her father knows that she's getting on the Pill; bluffing, she says that he does. The Mouth regularly criticizes this doctor in church because he provides the women with birth control if they don't want to have kids. The doctor also prescribes antidepressants, and has written that East Village has a disproportionate number of mentally ill people because of the culture of "sin, shame, death, fear, punishment, and silence." The Mouth says this is "fiction."

The Mouth's description of the doctor's medically sound conclusions as "fiction" is interesting. For Nomi, the fiction that she constructs is often more revealing and heartfelt than the beliefs that people around her accept unquestioningly. That The Mouth dislikes the very idea of fiction shows how disruptive stories can be to an established order.

The doctor asks Nomi about her medical history and gives her the birth control. Nomi reflects that even her deep longing to escape to New York would probably be a joke in the outside world. People would treat her as a premise for a comedy.

It's often when Nomi is actively transgressing the norms of her community that she realizes how much she herself embodies some of the ingrained principles that separate East Village from the outside world.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

After leaving the doctor's office, Nomi goes to see Lids in the hospital. The mean nurse tells her that visiting hours have ended, but she slips into the room where Lids is sleeping and wakes her up by singing quietly. She shows Lids her birth control prescription and the bird she bought for Ray, both of which Lids admires. Lids tells Nomi that she heard the doctor refer to her parents as "holy roller shitsqueaks."

Lids's unquestioning acceptance of Nomi's bourgeoning sex life shows that her faith inspires her to love and tolerate those who are different from her. She's a foil not only to religious characters like The Mouth but to secular ones like the doctor, who is condescending toward Lids's parents.

Nomi offers to wash Lids's hair; at first Lids declines, as she finds this process very painful. However, Nomi comes up with a plan to do it without removing Lids from the bed. Nomi sings while she washes, getting water all over the floor, and afterwards Lids is clean and smells good. Lids kisses Nomi goodbye, and Nomi remembers the days when they would walk halfway home from school together and kiss on both cheeks before splitting up. She leaves the hospital and smokes a cigarette.

Much like when she visits Mrs. Peters, Nomi performs an intimate task for Lids that requires tact and empathy, seemingly without any trouble. It's especially important that caretaking roles—often considered to be traditionally feminine and therefore belittled or erased in patriarchal communities—here signify adult maturity and strength.

Back home, Ray is sitting in a lawn chair in the driveway and looking at the highway. He tells Nomi that he's planning on removing the badminton net and selling some of his tools. Then he asks Nomi if she'll accompany him to buy a new suit. She wants to hold his hand but feels it would be "pathetic." At Schlitzking Clothing, the tailor measures Ray while Nomi sits on the floor and secretively reads her birth control directions. Her geography teacher walks out of one of the dressing room and asks her opinion on the suit he's trying. It's "piss-yellow" and she hates it, but she says politely that it's very practical. The tailor convinces Ray to buy matching socks for his suit.

Nomi's desire to hold Ray's hand contrasts with her covert study of the birth control instructions. Nomi is torn between the comforting, childlike way she used to relate to Ray and the new, adult life she's trying to build by having sex. In this moment, she's occupying the uncomfortable, transitional space between youth and adulthood.

On the way home, Ray says sadly that he's a bad parent. Nomi assures him that he's not, and sings the theme song from *The Partridge Family* to cheer him up. At home, she gives him the plastic bird, which he enjoys. Then he goes downstairs to watch *Hymn Sing*, a TV program in which a Mennonite choir performs sacred music. Nomi lights some of Tash's incense and listens to Bob Marley.

Ray is a loving parent, but in many ways he does neglect Nomi when she needs attention and care. Moreover, Nomi's worries about Ray's mental health keep her stuck in East Village, even as she realizes she needs to leave for her own wellbeing.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Nomi recalls turning 13 three days before Tash and Ian left town. Nomi knew that Ray and Trudie were having tense discussions all the time, but she didn't really understand their content; she suspected that Tash had begun selling drugs. After one night when Tash stayed out very late, Nomi woke up to find that Trudie had gone to shelve books in the library and Ray had gone for a drive. When Nomi woke Tash up, she cursed until Nomi fled the room, sobbing. Nomi felt sure that Tash was eternally damned.

It's significant that Nomi turns 13 just as Tash leaves—at this age, Nomi is becoming an adolescent who can take over her sister's rebellious role in the family. But right now, Nomi's incomprehension of Tash's existential anguish shows the extent to which Nomi is still a child.

When Trudie came home, both Nomi and Tash were sobbing in their respective rooms. Nomi heard Tash wailing to Trudie that everything in her life was "a fucking lie" and that the sense of falseness was "killing [her]." Nomi was astonished to hear Trudie agree with Tash and start crying herself. Nomi couldn't figure out what was killing Tash or why Trudie wasn't mad. She concluded that Tash was repenting of her drug-pushing lifestyle and was going to come back into the fold.

Trudie's admission shows that, although she's not outwardly rebellious like Tash, she's just as disillusioned about life within the Mennonite community. This moment makes the philosophical gulf between Trudie and Ray, who still believes in many of the church's tenets, abundantly clear.

For a while, Nomi heard Tash and Trudie talking in low voices. Then Trudie went into the kitchen to talk to Ray. When Nomi knocked on Tash's door, her sister welcomed her uncharacteristically kindly and suggested they listen to a record together. Nomi sobbed that she didn't want Tash to go to hell, and Tash hugged her and told her that "God is love." Nomi thought that Tash was "doomed."

Nomi sees Tash's new-age talk as evidence of sin, but later on, this is exactly the way that Ray and Trudie will conceptualize their own faith. While Nomi never decides if she believes in God, she finds peace in her parents' loving, accepting form of religion.

Soon, Ian came to pick Tash up. With a "tender genuine smile," Tash gave all her records to Nomi. Trudie packed up some blankets and food, and loaded them into Ian's truck. The scene reminded Nomi of Trudie's bedtime stories of their Mennonite ancestors fleeing Russia in the middle of the night. Trudie and Nomi hugged Tash and Ian goodbye, but Ray wouldn't come out of his bedroom.

It's important that Nomi and Tash reconcile just as Tash leaves. This moment illustrates what Nomi will realize by the novel's end: that in order to coexist and thrive, the family has to leave East Village. It's ironic that although Tash's ancestors fled an oppressive regime in Russia, she now has to leave the very community they established to escape its intolerance.

In the present day, Nomi takes her first birth control pill and lays in bed, feeling anxious about her life. She hears Ray come upstairs and lie down in his own bed. It's funny that both of them take turns lying awake and bed and sneaking out at night to drive around in the dark. Ray snores horribly loudly, so Nomi goes into his room and pushes him over on his side. She sees the plastic bird sitting on his dresser, and remarks to herself that his graying curtains need to be washed.

Nomi's relationship with her father is a series of missed connections. Even though she's aware that Ray is grieving as much as she is, they can never fully share their feelings.

Later that night, Nomi sneaks out to go swimming in the pits with Travis. They float on inner tubes and speculate on what it would feel like to go crazy. Nomi thinks it would be "sad and easy…like losing a friend." Travis responds with a long quote from Kafka, and tells Nomi about his aunt who went insane. They start singing a country song about an old woman stuck in her hometown and obsessed with her former lovers, and Travis says it could be about Nomi. Nomi feels like crying, but Travis has told her "that I was boring when I was offended, and to be boring was the ultimate crime," so she holds the tears back. She and Travis practice standing up on their inner tubes together.

Travis is trying to establish himself as an expert—backed by literature—in life's dilemmas, but it's actually Nomi who is struggling with mental instability, in herself and in Ray. Her own blunt description is much more evocative than his quote. Nomi's inability to reveal her feelings for Travis prevent their relationship from being healthy or constructive for her.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Nomi doesn't want to go to bed when she gets home, so she walks downtown to the Trampoline House. While the family who owns it is away or asleep, people can drop a dime in the can and jump on the trampoline as long as they like. Nomi tries to think about her problems by putting them in categories like "Travis," "school," and "environment." She remembers jumping on the trampoline with Tash years ago. Tash instructed Nomi authoritatively that if she liked a boy at school, she should ignore him.

By visiting the Trampoline House, Nomi is trying recapture a more tranquil time in her life, when she could rely upon Tash's advice. Yet that advice—that Nomi should always be guarded around people she likes—isn't serving her well in her relationship with Travis. As Nomi's relationship derails, so does her faith in her sister's concept of romance.

Nomi leaves the Trampoline House and goes to school, where she is supposed to write a "fifteen-hundred-word story that included a triggering point, a climax, and a resolution." She wants to write about Turkish weddings, but Mr. Quiring rejects the topic immediately. Frustrated, he asks why she isn't more bothered when she receives her graded essays covered in red underlines. Nomi responds that she doesn't mind because, in the Bible, the words of Jesus always appear in red. Mr. Quiring hits her with a pencil case and Nomi walks out of the school.

Here, Mr. Quiring's rigid conception of a "correct" story contrasts with Nomi's nonlinear method of portraying her life. Her narrative style is more revealing, candid, and subversive than his. It's worth noting her funny quip about Jesus's words—like storytelling, humor allows her to question dogmatic adults. As in other traumatic moments, Nomi downplays Mr. Quiring's aggression here, but the fact that she's actually facing violence raises the stakes of her storytelling even further.

Nomi walks down Main Street. She waves to one of her mentally-handicapped cousins, who is sitting outside the supermarket, and sits at the post office with another mentally-handicapped cousin, Jakie, to watch a group of Hutterites emerging from a Land Rover. Nomi encourages Jakie to tell her the birthdays of everyone he knows. Then she walks by the church, where The Mouth has posted a fearsome Bible quote saying that God's true followers "shall go forth, and look upon the carcasses of the men that have transgressed."

The idle presence of so many of Nomi's relatives gives a sense of stasis to the community, which she desperately wants to escape. It's important that The Mouth chooses the harshest, most threatening biblical passages to represent the church. This shows the extent to which he considers religion a means of power and control. Later, both Ray and Trudie will reference lyrical, loving biblical passages to represent their own faith.

In the supermarket window, Nomi sees a sign advertising a new meat department, so she goes inside to check it out. The butcher looks at her hopefully, but she doesn't know anything about cooking cuts of meat. To avoid disappointing him, she asks for a pound of any kind of meat, and he gives her a roast to cook for her dad. Outside, some boys from school drive by and call her a "doob," a local slang term for a condom. Nomi refrains from throwing the roast.

By buying a roast, Nomi is implicitly trying to fill her mother's housekeeping role and pretend that nothing is wrong with her family. But her total lack of cooking skills is a reminder that she can't—and shouldn't have to—take on these responsibilities, and the taunts she faces remind her that most people see her family as broken and set apart from the community.

Nomi runs into two classmates, Marina and Patty, who are babysitting some young kids. They invite her back to the house for cake and vodka, but before the vodka appears Marina says that the parents are coming home soon and they should leave. A few minutes later, Nomi is standing at her kitchen window and sees Patty walking back towards the house. Nomi thinks that she really is a "doob."

Nomi never explicitly says that she's lonely, but her lack of friends besides Lids and her growing dependence on Travis suggest that she is. While Nomi's relationships with marginalized people like Mrs. Peters are commendable, they also implicitly point out how alienated she is from typical teenage experiences.

Ray comes in from watering the flowers and sees that Nomi has been crying. He asks her to accompany him to the town dump, which he visits often. He tells her to load the wood from her playhouse, which he's recently dismantled, and an old bed frame into the car. Nomi reflects that Ray always comforts people in ridiculous ways. She remembers the time when Trudie had to identify her sister's body after she was killed in a horse-and-buggy accident, and Ray told her not to "let it be an entirely negative experience."

By referencing Ray's darkly funny comment about the morgue, Nomi presents her father as earnest and well-intentioned, yet emotionally obtuse. But at the novel's end, it's he who gives Nomi the help and guidance she needs to leave home. It's possible that Nomi is underestimating her father's emotional strength as an excuse to stay in East Village and care for him.

Nomi likes to see Ray driving because he looks in control of his life. She admits that she bought a roast and lost it on the way home, and Ray tells her not to worry about it. Even though people are supposed to pay to enter the dump, the owner lets Ray in for free; Ray confesses that this is because sometimes he visits the dump at night and organizes the garbage. They pile their trash in the dump and look around for interesting objects. Nomi sees a small cowboy boot that reminds her of her own days of riding horses. Ray used to take her to compete at rodeos, where he would be the only person dressed in a suit and tie.

Both Nomi and Ray derive a sense of control and freedom from driving around at night, but they rarely share this experience—instead, Nomi drives around with Travis and sometimes hears Ray return from late-night expeditions. This is a moment of new understanding as Ray and Nomi try to reimagine their relationship in the absence of Trudie and Tash.

Nomi knows that Ray wants to move the boot to a better place, so she teases him about organizing it until he picks it up and places it in a different pile for broken toys. Nomi reflects that for Ray, the dump is like a "cemetery where he could organize abandoned dreams and wrecked things into families, in a way, that stayed together."

Even as his own house becomes more chaotic, Ray enjoys organizing things in the dump. Imposing order in a typically disordered place likely helps him compensate for his family life, which would ideally be tranquil but is actually messy and tragic.

CHAPTER TWENTY

When Nomi and Ray return home, they find a bullet hole in the **house**'s picture window. A policeman comes to survey the scene and says that kids have been messing around with BB guns lately. When things like this happened, Ray becomes energetic and almost decisive. He's cheerful even while stepping on broken glass in the living room and even cleans up the house a little. When Nomi makes him a TV dinner he compliments her on her cooking. Nomi feels like he's pretending to be "an idiot dad" and she's just acting like a "rebellious teenager," when really they're "two mental patients just getting through another day." She decides to go out.

This is a serious incident, yet Nomi and Ray seem unfazed, and no one makes plans to fix the window. The increasing physical disarray of the house reflects the increasing oddness in both Nomi and Ray's behavior, and their inability to truly confront the absence of the rest of the family. This is especially apparent when Nomi says the incident makes her realize that her attempt to take over the housework is largely a pose, rather than a reflection of her actual character.

Nomi remembers that after Tash left, she started having nightmares about her sister burning in hell. When she woke up, she would find Trudie reading in the living room and ask if Tash was going to hell; Trudie would give vague responses like, "it won't come to that, I'm sure." When Nomi demanded the truth, Trudie said she didn't know. Trudie quit her library job and started taking care of old Mrs. Klippenstein, who had sores on her leg that needed daily treatment. Nomi often accompanied her, and listened to Mrs. Klippenstein's tales of her childhood in Russia and her marriage to a man who was eventually excommunicated. Trudie started spending a lot of time at Mrs. Klippenstein's house.

Trudie's inability to firmly assure Nomi that Tash isn't going to Hell shows that she's uncertain about this herself; even though she sees the flaws in her religion and encourages Tash to leave, she's unable to disown it completely. Like Nomi, Trudie takes an interest in people like Mrs. Klippenstein, who live on the margins of the community. Nomi's interest in the way people function after a family member's excommunication foreshadows her own family's possible expulsion from the community.

The Mouth often came to Nomi's **house** to pray with her parents. Both he and Nomi were shocked to find out that Tash had become an atheist, but it turned out Trudie had known for months, even before Tash left, and didn't care. Nomi blamed Tash's library card.

That Nomi, as a child, thinks more similarly to The Mouth than to Trudie emphasizes the extent of her religious transformation over the course of the novel. It's clear that her critical view of the Mennonite church has been a gradual transition, likely spurred on by Tash's own atheism.

In the present day, Travis tells Nomi that he's planning to move to Montreal. He says that she can come with him, find a cheap flat, and work as a life drawing model. Nomi says that she refuses to go because he used the word "flat," and stalks back to her **house**, where Ray is sitting in front of the bullet-shattered window working on a watercolor painting. She goes inside and takes some of Tash's Valium.

Nomi's immediate recognition of Travis's pretensions is funny and endearing, but underneath that, it seems like she's mad that Travis has asked her to accompany him as an afterthought. Although Nomi can't articulate it yet, she wants to leave town on her own terms, not as an accessory to someone else's plan.

Inside, Nomi sees that the dining-room table is gone. Ray explains that he has sold it, along with the freezer, in which he found the frozen body of Tash's old cat, Blackula. It died in the winter, and Tash left home before she could bury him in the spring. Ray digs a grave for the cat, and Nomi tries to make a cross, although she's too high on Valium do so well. Finally she gives up and watches Ray work. She enjoys being outside in the grass under the darkening sky, listening as her father makes corny jokes and smelling stubble fires from far away.

Ray has now sold two essential pieces of furniture. Making the house uninhabitable reflects his feelings of transformative loss over his wife's departure. Yet, even though neither Ray nor Nomi want to move on from their former family life, Nomi's lyrical description of the beautiful twilight as Ray buries the cat shows that they are still capable of enjoying life and forging new memories together.

After Ray finishes the grave, he leaves Nomi lying outside. After a while, she goes inside, puts on a record, and decides to razor her bangs, because Travis doesn't like her hair that way. Then she puts on Tash's sweatshirt and walks down to Main Street. She imagines Tash complimenting her hair and asking why she's stolen her sweatshirt. In her mind, Tash says that she split up with Ian long ago and asks why Nomi is out here all alone if she has a boyfriend. Nomi walks home. As she's sitting in the garage smoking a cigarette, a corner of the garage roof unexpectedly collapses.

Nomi's fantasy of Tash dumping her boyfriend implies that Nomi herself is toying the with idea of leaving Travis behind. The fact that she has to imagine herself following her sister's example shows how much she misses Tash and is desperate for guidance. It's telling that her feelings of loneliness and evocation of her sister coincide with the roof's collapse—another landmark of the physical disintegration that reflects the family's breakdown.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

At school the next day, Nomi sleeps through two classes and is sent to the principal's office. The principal says that it's clear these are not "the best years" of Nomi's life, and lets her leave early. Travis comes to pick her up, but she criticizes him for wearing a poncho and he drives away angrily. Nomi goes back to history class and remembers her nightmares again.

The principal's comment is remarkably soothing and empathetic, a stark contrast to the derision she usually faces from her teacher. The principles words suggest that Nomi's worth isn't measured by her ability to succeed in high school or conform to Mennonite norms, and this reassurance could potentially imbue Nomi with the confidence to break away from these institutions and forge a life for herself.

After Tash's departure, Trudie became so frustrated with Nomi's nightmares that she drove Nomi to The Mouth's house in the middle of the night and demanded that he apologize to Nomi and promise that Tash wouldn't go to hell. The Mouth said that Trudie was crazy, just like Tash, and Trudie sobbed that he knew "nothing about love" and that his beliefs were just stories. The Mouth refused to apologize. Trudie said she would never forgive him, and after The Mouth went inside, she threw rocks at his windows and screamed.

This dramatic moment highlights the differences between Trudie and The Mouth. Trudie prizes the wellbeing of her family over religious certainty, while The Mouth sees dogma as more important than human relationships and seems to relish the terror and shame it inspires. Nomi's nightmares and Trudie's anguish show the human cost of this strict approach to religion.


After school, Travis picks Nomi up and they both apologize for their earlier behavior. Without telling Nomi where they're going, Travis drives out of town; eventually they arrive at his parents' snowmobile cabin. Travis says it has a bed and a fireplace, and Nomi gets the point. Later in the afternoon they drive back to town so Travis can help his dad lay a carpet. Before he leaves, Travis calls Nomi "baby."

Nomi doesn't say explicitly if she has sex with Travis, but it's notable that Travis dictates the what they do and where they go—Nomi merely gets to choose whether or not she wants to go along.

Nomi recalls that Trudie started behaving really strangely after their nighttime encounter with The Mouth. She wandered the town at night and stopped speaking almost entirely. One afternoon, Nomi came home to find Trudie and Ray crying in each others' arms. Another day, Nomi got mad at Trudie because she forgot to make dinner and, in a frenzy, Trudie wrote "eat" on every square of the calendar as a daily reminder.

In a way, Trudie's increasing neglect of household chores is the prelude to Ray's disregard for home maintenance after her departure. Neither one can bear to carry out the routines of normal life when their family structure seems so broken.

In the present day, Nomi wanders aimlessly around Main Street. The church has a new sign that says, "You think it's hot here…God." Nomi thinks that The Mouth must be insane to make threats in God's name. Thinking of all the beautiful and hopeful Bible verses he could have posted instead, she starts crying and banging on the door of The Mouth's office. When no one answers, she kicks the sign until all the letters fall out. A little boy and girl see her doing this, but they kindly promise not to tell anyone.

It seems like The Mouth is actually threatening people with damnation in God's name. Ironically, Nomi's horror and fury at his arrogance and abuse of power shows that she has more respect for the idea of divine authority than The Mouth does, even though she's not sure if she believes in God.

Nomi misses Lids, so she walks to the hospital to visit. However, Lids's parents are in the room talking to the doctor, and they ask her to come back later. In the hallway, the nice nurse tells Nomi that Lids impulsively decided to go on a walk earlier that afternoon and collapsed on the street, refusing to let anyone touch her because of her pain. Lids's parents want to take her home and treat her with "prayer and tomato juice," but Lids has insisted on returning to the hospital. The nice nurse admits that the doctors don't know how to cure her either.

The exact nature of Lids's chronic illness is unknown, but it's interesting that neither her religious parents nor the secular doctors can cure her. Both parties are equally certain of their own righteousness and the other's delusion, while Lids seems equally skeptical and disillusioned by both. This provides yet another layer of ambivalence in the novel's depiction of religion, as it suggests that neither dogmatic beliefs nor a total rejection of spirituality are necessarily ideal.

Nomi walks out of town to the waste lagoon, which she's never visited. Contrary to her expectations, it doesn't smell bad and it almost looks pretty. Tash once told Nomi that Ray proposed to Trudie here, so Nomi reflects that the lagoon is the reason for her existence.

Nomi frequently finds beauty in places that most people dismiss, like the sewage pit where her classmates hang out or this lake of waste. The fact that Ray might have proposed here links this endearing trait to her parents and their shared family bond.

Walking back through town, Nomi spots Ray in the bank lobby, quoting Yeats to a bank teller who was once his student. Together they walk home, where a repairman is fixing the garage roof. Ray brings him a glass of water and stands outside watching him work. Nomi thinks this is embarrassing.

The workman's matter-of-fact attitude toward the job at hand contrasts with Ray's indecision and apathy. Ray clearly wants to take charge of his life by caring for the house, but his grief over his fractured family renders him unable to commit to the task.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Nomi remembers the days when Tash was paid to hang out with their grandmother so she didn't "get wasted on vanilla, burn down her apartment, get kicked out and have to live with us." Tash said that their grandmother was going insane because of The Mouth. Nomi often kept Tash company outside the apartment, and Tash gave her dimes for the Trampoline House. One day, Tash told her that whenever she thought about boys she always sneezed, and she was terrified that Trudie and Ray are going to discover what the sneezes mean.

Nomi's grandmother's precarious mental state contrasts with Trudie's highly positive memories of her Mennonite childhood. This gap shows how memory can reflect one's ideal of family, rather than one's actual familial circumstances. Meanwhile, Tash's comment about The Mouth shows how his overbearing authority can be damaging even to very devout community members.

In the present day, Travis teaches Nomi how to walk properly; she has to "roll and bob more" and give off a "druggy" vibe. They walk to the museum village, where it starts to rain, and sit inside the barn to keep dry. Then they go outside and practice walking on top of the fence. Nomi tells Travis she loves being with him, and Travis responds that she smells nice. They walk to Travis's house and listen to Lou Reed in the basement. They fall asleep and wake up when Travis's mother says that he has to do his chores and Nomi has to go home. On Nomi's way home, she runs into her neighbor, who is furious because her young son has eaten her bath salts. The neighbor tells Nomi that when she has kids, she'll "know true misery."

Just as Travis redesigns Nomi's signature, he now instructs her to walk a different way. Rather than acknowledging any of Nomi's unique qualities, he concentrates on transforming her into a cooler, trendier person. In a way, Travis's inability to accept people the way they are mirrors The Mouth's insistence that people conform completely to Mennonite norms, even if that means suppressing individuality. This is a stark contrast to Nomi herself, as she is highly empathetic and accepting of people's quirks and faults.

When Nomi gets home, Ray says that the school has called to tell him that she's skipping too much class to graduate high school. She goes to her bedroom and watches tourists passing through in RVs. Travis has a job now pretending to be a shepherd at the museum and erasing the profanities tourist kids write on the schoolhouse blackboard. One day he writes "OBEY" on the blackboard as a joke, but The Mouth approves of it. Sometimes he pretends to be married to a girl named Adeline, who once beat up another girl at school for stealing her look. Travis aspires to set up a "shunning booth" for the American tourists.

Travis's pioneer persona contrasts with his actual love for pop culture, represented by the "OBEY" slogan. Similarly, Adeline's virtuous, motherly character contrasts with her modern, aggressive personality. This is a humorous passage illustrating the ridiculousness of the museum village, but more broadly shows how rigid societies force people to adopt personae that are obviously at odds with their actual identities.

Ray leaves and Nomi goes downstairs, where she finds a piece of paper on which Ray has listed the necessary qualifications of an elder. She wonders if things would be different with Ray in charge. On the other side of the paper is a chart titled "Satan Cast Down," which explains the Rapture through a series of arrows and categories like "saved dead, unsaved dead, millennium, bottomless pit, lake of fire." Nomi can't make sense of the chart, so she goes back upstairs.

The church chart has reduced the lyrical, complex storytelling of the Bible to an utterly incomprehensible mess of lines and arrows. This humorous moment corresponds to Mr. Quiring's insistence that his class write reductive, ultimately meaningless stories.

After a while, Nomi puts on a halter top and a lot of makeup. She leaves a note for Ray promising to go to school and asking a question about Canadian history because he loves to answer them. She walks to the museum and is annoyed to see Travis and Adeline happily sharing a joint. Nomi and Travis go for a walk, and she makes him promise he's not "having some weird thing" with Adeline. Then she asks if he's really going to Montreal; Travis says he's not sure, because he doesn't have enough money and his parents won't like it. They hug before he returns to his job.

Travis wants to move to Montreal, but he's also unable to make a decision without his parents' input. Meanwhile, Nomi has (albeit reluctantly) become much more independent than him, essentially living her life free of any parental input. That she feels dependent on him to leave town, then, reflects her lack of self-confidence, rather than any actual competence on Travis's part.

Nomi goes to the general store to buy some candy. The manager remarks that Nomi hasn't been to church lately. Nomi knows the manager is genuinely worried she's going to hell, and she feels bad for her. The manager gently suggests that Nomi read the Gospels, and Nomi thanks her. As Nomi leaving, the manager asks if she can pray for her; Nomi says yes and thanks her again. She walks to the pits and wades into the water with all her clothes on, only leaving when she hears other teenagers arriving.

The manager's genuine concern for Nomi's salvation contrasts with The Mouth's use of dogma to exert control over his congregants. Meanwhile, even though Nomi no longer shares this woman's ideals, she accepts her concern graciously. This moment of mutual tolerance and respect represents the positive aspects of a community that Nomi often sees as irremediably flawed.


Nomi recalls one of her favorite childhood books. There were no words, only colors. The first page was black, to symbolize her heart "without Jesus." The second was red, showing Jesus's blood washing over the Mennonites and saving them. The third was white, representing her "new clean heart." Nomi's Sunday school teacher read this book with the children regularly. They also did other activities like acting out Bible stories on a felt board, but no one was allowed to "do voices for the characters because it always ended in Jesus leaping from the cross and drop-kicking the bad guys." One day at home, Nomi scratched herself to see what color her blood was, and she was disturbed to find it didn't match the color of Jesus's blood in the book. Later, Tash discovered the book covered in bloody fingerprints and got angry when Nomi wouldn't admit what she'd done.

Just like the chart of Satan's fall, the picture book and Sunday school rituals rob Biblical stories of their full, complex meanings. Even though the children's transformation of Jesus into a superhero is somewhat irreverent, it's an attempt to participate fully in these stories, just as Nomi's own narrative is an attempt to view her life outside the dogma imposed by the church. Ultimately, the church establishment represses the most meaningful engagement with biblical lore, just as it prevents serious personal introspection by enforcing a single accepted narrative.


CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Nomi reveals that Trudie left home because she was excommunicated from the community by The Mouth. Nomi doesn't even know how she feels about this. She remembers Trudie sitting by her bed afterward, smiling "the same kind of real smile that Tash had smiled just before she left." Trudie cried for a little while and then left the room. The next morning, Ray was looking dully out of the picture window and Trudie had left. Ray doesn't say much about what has happened, and Nomi doesn't even think that he blames The Mouth. She remembers what Mr. Quiring has said: that ideologies, not individuals, are responsible for most problems.

Even though Nomi has been discussing her mother's departure since the beginning of the novel, at this point she only subtly hints that Trudie may have been excommunicated. This withholding of information allows the reader to sympathize with Trudie's warm, complex character without being prejudiced by the church's condemnation. Unlike the church's categorization of Trudie as sinful and transgressive, Nomi's narrative provides a more loving and ultimately more truthful portrait of her mother's character.

A month after Trudie's departure, Nomi was walking by the Mennonite nursing home and saw Mrs. Klippenstein sitting outside in a wheelchair. She told Nomi despondently that she was living there now. Nomi wondered where Trudie had been going almost every other night, if not to take care of Mrs. Klippenstein at her house. She tried to ask Mrs. Klippenstein how long she'd lived at the nursing home, but the old woman didn't respond. A few weeks after that, Nomi was folding Ray's laundry and putting it away. She opened a drawer and found Trudie's passport and some letters from Mr. Quiring.

As soon as Nomi reveals one piece of information about Trudie's departure, it becomes clear she's hiding something else. Her mention of Mrs. Klippenstein together with some mysterious letters from Mr. Quiring reminds the reader of the English teacher's inexplicable knowledge of Mrs. Klippenstein's house earlier in the story, but Nomi doesn't fully explain these circumstances. Again, she's using a nonlinear narrative to present her version of Trudie's behavior to the reader, rather than the church's.

Nomi walks home from the museum village to find Ray asleep in his lawn chair with a photo album. She checks the mileage on his car and finds that he's driven almost 300 miles that afternoon. She brings him a blanket and goes inside. Under the note she left him that morning she writes another question, asking why Trudie didn't take her when she left.

It's telling that Ray and Nomi can only discuss these major issues through scribbled notes. Like the gradual disintegration of the house, this tendency shows the difficulty of facing their familial collapse head-on.

When Nomi wakes up in the morning, Ray is sitting at her bedside. He says that a storm has caused a lot of damage in town overnight. He leaves for work and Nomi goes downstairs, where she finds he has written a note to himself that says, "develop a new life strategy." Ray calls from work to remind Nomi that she should go to school because she might want a high school degree in the future. Nomi asks why he's selling all the furniture, and he says he likes empty spaces "because you can imagine what might go in them someday." Nomi says that she's never going to leave him. When he hangs up, she sees that he's written an answer to her question from the day before: that Trudie didn't take her because Nomi was sleeping when she left.

Ray's aspirational notes to himself contrast with his actual apathetic and self-destructive behavior. Although his comment about the furniture reveals that he wants to imagine starting over and building a new life, he's not sure how to go about doing it. Nomi's response is an endearing gesture of familial loyalty, but it's also clear that she and Ray aren't helping each other cope effectively right now.

Nomi thinks that Trudie didn't take her because Trudie knew Ray needed company more than she did. She also thinks that Trudie left town so that Ray didn't have to choose between his wife and his community. It would be impossible for him to "publicly denounce" the love of his life, but equally difficult to turn away from the church that will assure their salvation in the afterlife. Nomi feels that, like her, Ray is "stuck in the middle of a story with no good ending."

In a way, Trudie and Tash's decision to leave has made Nomi feel responsible for Ray and forced her to stay at home. Nomi's description of her story as having "no good ending" shows that she's in a moment of despair, since normally she feels freed and empowered by storytelling.

While Nomi gets ready for school she thinks about a job she once had at the town daycare. She loved hanging out with the little kids, but eventually got fired for teaching them to dance to The Beatles. At school, there's a baseball tournament; Nomi stands in the outfield so she doesn't have to participate. In the afternoon, the class goes swimming at a slimy dam that makes a perfect slide. There are hot dogs and popsicles, and some of Nomi's classmates are crying out of sadness that high school is almost over. Nomi goes home and sits in her living room near the shattered window, remembering when Tash explained the concept of an erection to her.

The end of high school is supposed to be a bittersweet and celebratory time, and for many of Nomi's classmates it is just that. But Nomi bookends this experience with moments of transgression: her hijinks in the preschool and Tash's sexual education. Because so many of her formative memories stand in contrast to church norms, it's hard for her to participate in the core rituals of her community.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

For Ray's birthday, Nomi buys a frog-shaped garden decoration and makes crêpes with syrup and cantaloupe. For dessert, she makes a cake which Trudie had taught her to make at the age of four. At that time, Nomi was sad about the recent death of her grandfather, Nicodemus. She wrote him a letter and threw it into the wind to get to Heaven. One day, Nicodemus wrote back, saying that he was very happy and that Nomi should play with her friends and not worry about him.

It's clear that Trudie is the one who writes the letter that is supposedly from Nicodemus. She wants Nomi to focus on the everyday pleasures of childhood, rather than the future prospect of Heaven. In this sense, she's foregrounding the respect for worldly life that Nomi will develop as an adolescent.

But a week later, Nomi found the original letter scrunched up by the fence, and realized that the one she received was fake. Trudie admitted that she wrote the letter, and told Nomi that nothing could reach Heaven on the wind because Heaven was always calm. To cheer Nomi up, Trudie taught her how to make chocolate cake. Now, Nomi loves feeling the wind on her face because it reminds her that she's "in the world."

This is a beautiful image: even though wind isn't always pleasant or fun, it's a reminder of the varied, fluid nature of life on earth. For Nomi, even the paradise of Heaven can't compensate for that.

That night, Nomi helps Travis paint his goat barn red. They take off their clothes and paint each other's bodies red as well. Then they drive to The Comb's trailer and hose each other off with purple gas, and swim in the pits, where the gas makes rainbows in the water. Travis lights little pools of gas on fire with his lighter, and Nomi enjoys the spectacle, the smell of stubble fires, and the hot wind on her face. She wonders how to remember a town "that's not supposed to exist."

This is exactly the kind of spontaneous experience the church frowns on, but for Nomi it's a memorable and beautiful moment. It's also important that for Nomi, appreciating daily life doesn't just mean noticing obvious moments of beauty. Rather, it involves savoring odd and poignant moments, like this night of floating in a lake full of gas.

When Nomi gets home, there's a note from Ray asking if she has plans after graduation. Nomi passes out in bed and is still exhausted when she wakes up. She takes her French horn to Main Street, where she sits on it and smokes a cigarette. It's getting unbearably hot and Nomi thinks that God hates her. Nomi takes the French horn to school and tries to return it in exchange for her $50 deposit, but the secretary tells her she can only claim the deposit if she graduates. Nomi storms out of the office.

Ray wants Nomi to plan for her future life, but he has no idea how to help her go about it. Meanwhile, Nomi's main concern is scrounging up money to buy drugs. Both father and daughter realize that life within the community is toxic for them, but neither one knows how to get out.

Nomi doesn't remember much of what happens in the afternoon. She picks some flowers with the intention of trading them for drugs, then passes out and wakes up in The Comb's trailer. She notices that she's lying on her own couch, which Ray has apparently sold to The Comb. The Comb's cousin, Eldon, brings her a beer. Nomi says that she doesn't have any money to buy drugs, and The Comb and Eldon offer to trade her some pot for the French horn. Nomi thinks about the offer, but eventually she just picks up her French horn and leaves.

Items of furniture that once represented the security of Nomi's family life are now reappearing in The Comb's trailer, which has always been a site of confusion and danger. However, at the same time it's possible that this reminder of her past life helps Nomi make a responsible decision and leave the trailer without buying any marijuana.

Dragging her French horn, Nomi walks all the way back to her **house**, where Ray is intently examining a pile of coupons for fabric softener. He informs her that her driver's test is tomorrow, and she tells him jokingly not to sell the car. Nomi starts looking around for something for dinner, but then realizes that the freezer is gone and they don't have any food.

Ray's habit of selling the furniture is making it increasingly hard to live and eat in the house. Ostensibly, this is a self-destructive pattern of behavior, but eventually it will force both father and daughter to leave the community—a healthy decision for both of them.

Instead of making dinner, Ray and Nomi decide to go to the Demolition Derby. Ray is the only person there wearing a suit and tie. They see lots of American cars driving toward East Village to watch The Mouth pretend to be a pioneer, "while the people of the real town sat in a field of dirt cheering on collisions." On the way home, Nomi drives while Ray looks out the window, as if the landscape is entirely new to him.

This moment beautifully illustrates the gap between the ideals of the Mennonite community and the actual needs and desires of its members. The quaint image of East Village portrayed to tourists is clearly inaccurate to the reality of its inhabitants' daily lives.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

That night, Nomi and Travis sit in the park drinking until they accidentally smash their liquor bottle. They give each other haircuts and sleep until dawn. They climb up the feed mill fire escape and make out, hoping some farmer will see them and be scandalized. Nomi can see the sun rising and mist coming off the river; it feels like "the outdoor version of waking up to your mom making breakfast and your dad sitting confidently at the table with no plan to sell it."

Nomi compares her closeness to Travis to her previous closeness to her family. This moment of satisfaction—however ephemeral—effectively functions as a replacement for the family life she once had.

At home, Nomi shaves her entire head before going to school. Mr. Quiring asks if she's having a nervous breakdown, and when Nomi tells him not to touch her, he throws her out of class. Nomi remembers being nine years old, going for a walk before school, and feeling happier than ever before in her life. When she went to school, she told her teacher that she was so happy she could fly or dance. The teacher said sharply that "life was not a dream" and "dancing is a sin." For the first time, Nomi was aware that was alive and would someday be dead, and that after she dies there might be no afterlife. She realized that the world "is good enough" for her "because it has to be."

Mr. Quiring is one of the few people who actually notices that something is wrong with Nomi, but he's so insensitive and judgmental that his insight isn't helpful at all. He's much like Nomi's earlier teacher who urges her to repress her feelings of joy in the name of religious virtue. In both of these cases, Nomi has to learn to disregard their teachers, rather than follow their examples.

Nomi walks to the school where Ray teaches and waves at him through the window. His desk is filled with flowers that his students have picked for him. She walks home, reads part of *The Screwtape Letters*, and falls asleep. When she wakes up, she finds a strange woman lying on the living-room floor. Ray explains that she's a state inspector who collapsed while visiting the school. The woman wakes up and introduces herself as Edwina, and they all have tea on the porch. When Edwina discovers their last name is Nickel, she asks if they're related to Trudie, whom she knows from performing musicals together many years ago. Nomi is shocked to find out that Trudie ever did theater, but Ray doesn't want to talk about it, and soon offers to drive Edwina home.

The Screwtape Letters is a philosophical meditation by Christian thinker C.S. Lewis. That Ray gives this book to Nomi indicates his desire that she retain her faith, but also approach it with more intellectualism than is generally condoned in her community. At the same time, the revelation that Trudie used to star in secular musicals reveals the extent of Trudie's own ambiguities about her faith, and her transgressions of Mennonite principals.

Nomi walks to the museum village and makes out with Travis in the barn until his fake wife from the museum comes to find him. Nomi sits on the forge to smoke a cigarette, and an American teenager strikes up a conversation with her. Nomi tells him where to buy drugs and asks how he likes being an American. Then his parents come to collect him and he leaves. Nomi turns to watch some men from the town slaughtering a pig in a historically accurate manner. Some tourists are watching in evident disgust, telling their children not to get too close.

Normally Nomi feels alienated by American tourists, but this boy is much like her—an apathetic teenager more interested in scoring drugs than hanging out with his parents. At the same time, the parents' understandable squeamishness at the pig slaughtering is a reminder of Nomi's community's isolation, and its strangeness in the eyes of the outside world.

That night, Travis picks Nomi up for a drive. They have sex, and Nomi says in retrospect that it might have gone better if she wasn't "drunk, depressed, and jealous." Travis tells her to "move with me," and she thinks he's inviting her to Montreal, but he just wants her to move with his body. On the way home, Nomi starts crying for no reason, and slams the truck into reverse while driving 50 miles per hour.

Nomi has always equated Travis with the possibility of escape from East Village, and by having sex with him she hopes to cement this life path. However, this tragically funny incident shows Nomi that sex with him won't make her happier, and that if she wants to leave home, she can't count on Travis to help her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Nomi is still awake when Ray pulls into the driveway at 4:00 in the morning. She goes downstairs and poaches him an egg, and Ray asks if she wants to spend the rest of her life here. Too tired to talk, Nomi buries her bald head in her knees. Ray traces the fishhook scar on her head and reminisces about the day she got it. He, Nomi, Trudie and Tash had rented a motor boat to visit an island on Falcon Lake. Ray wore a dress shirt and swim trunks, and let Nomi and Tash steer the boat. When they got to the island, Ray showed Tash how to cast a fishing line, but she accidentally threw it backwards and hooked Nomi's head. Nomi was in pain, but Trudie cleansed the cut and cheered her up with lunch.

This is one of Nomi's longest and most evocative reminiscences about her former family life. But even as the fishhook scar is a reminder of positive relationships, its visibility on Nomi's bald head is a visceral reminder of her current state of instability. Interestingly, as it becomes clear that leaving home alongside Travis is not feasible, Ray starts to take a more involved role in encouraging Nomi to imagine a different future for herself.

Later in the afternoon, a storm rolled in and the boat floated away on the choppy waves. Nomi was so happy to be stranded with her family that she didn't even worry about getting home. They took shelter from the rain in the woods and then played tag in the water by the island, and Nomi saw Ray and Trudie kissing. As the sun set, they roasted marshmallows, and when the boat reappeared Nomi watched Ray swim out to bring it back.

This romantic image of Ray and Trudie contrasts with the emotional distance that grows between them after Tash's departure, and with Trudie's eventual decision to leave her husband. Yet Nomi's narrative leaves room for both sides of this relationship, without trying to decide which is more truthful.

In the present day, Nomi asks Ray if Trudie really acted in musicals. Ray nods and says that The Mouth took her to audition; he was a different person back then. Nomi asks what score Edwina gave to his choral classes, and Ray says dully that she failed them. Nomi wakes up late the next morning to find that the kitchen table and chairs are gone. Ray calls from school to say that she forgot her driver's test yesterday, but he rescheduled it for the afternoon.

Presently, The Mouth appears totally certain in his religious convictions. But moments like this complicate his character, showing that he was once attracted to the outside world just as Tash and Nomi are. Ray's decision to keep selling essential furniture makes the house even more uninhabitable than before. Coupled with his insistence that Nomi learn to drive, this gesture may represent his growing conviction that she must leave home.

Nomi aces the test while Ray looks on proudly. She makes minestrone soup for dinner. She tells Ray that in order to graduate, she needs to write a story with "a triggering point, a climax, and a conclusion." Ray goes upstairs to watch *Hymn Sing*, and Nomi smokes a cigarette and reflects that Travis hasn't called since she "botched yet another common human activity."

The contrived assignments Nomi must complete to obtain a diploma contrast sharply with the real skills she'll need in order to make her way in the world, like gaining independence (represented by the ability to drive) and self-confidence (shown by her waning dependence on Travis).

Nomi calls Travis. His mother picks up and says that he and his father are doing a job in another town. Nomi asks for the address of the job, but Travis's mother won't tell her. Nomi takes the car and drives to the town where Travis is theoretically working, but she can't find his truck anywhere. She drives to Travis's house and accuses his parents of lying to her, and Travis's mother says pityingly that Travis cares about Nomi a lot. Nomi pretends that she forgot a bracelet in Travis's room. In her mind, she hears Tash telling her to walk away. Nomi reflects that Tash taught her that people who can leave "will always be infinitely cooler than those who can't," and that because Tash is in the first category, Nomi must be in the second.

The "advice" that Nomi invents and attributes to Tash has always been important, but this time it's especially clear that Nomi's sister is indirectly influencing her to do the right thing. At the same time, Nomi's declaration that she feels trapped at home by her sister's decision to leave shows her understandable resentment of Tash's actions, and suggests that her lack of self-confidence stems from a feeling of living in Tash's shadow.

Finally, Travis's mother lets Nomi into his room. It's empty, and Nomi takes a guitar pick and leaves. She goes home, cries, and falls asleep. When she wakes up, she spells out Travis's name with cigarettes in the backyard.

Even though Nomi's behavior right now is disruptive and strange, this moment of breakdown is crucial to getting over Travis. Sometimes, transgressing social norms is essential to growing as a person.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The next morning at dawn, Nomi is sitting in the field behind the dump. She has a strange feeling, which she likens to spending a long time with relatives and wanting to be alone, but then feeling guilty when it's time for them to leave and wishing she was a better friend.

Nomi's reflection here captures her ambivalent relationship to her community; she both desires to leave it and feels guilty about that desire because she's so entrenched within it.

Before driving to the dump, Nomi has gone to the hospital to see Lids. But Lids's normal room is empty, and the orderly tells her that she's been moved to another facility to undergo shock therapy. Nomi tells one of the nurses that her face aches so much she thinks she's dying, and asks for painkillers. The nurse says that she should be enjoying her adolescence, which is the best time of her life, and tells her to make some tea and lie down. Nomi says that all the furniture in her **house** is gone, but the nurse just shakes her head.

Even though Nomi often chafes at her life in East Village, this sudden, unwanted separation from Lids is traumatic for her. The nurse's well-intentioned but completely clueless response to Nomi's cry for help shows that neither Nomi nor Lids can receive the care or understanding they need within this community—but unlike Lids, Nomi actually has the ability to leave.

Even before going to the hospital, Nomi says, she drove to a local motel where she found Travis's truck parked. She figured that he and Adeline must have found a sitter for their pretend baby. She lit some carpet in the trunk on fire, and the truck exploded. Then she bought some soda at the general store and walked to her grandmother's house, where she went up to Trudie's old room and lay down. On the bureau was an old picture of Ray with one of his classes.

Nomi reveals that Travis has been cheating on her in a muted, almost unnoticeable way. This is emblematic of her tendency to downplay negative and hurtful events. But it's also a reclamation of agency: Nomi will no longer overthink her relationship, and she won't let Travis's infidelity define her narrative.

After she leaves the hospital, Nomi walks to The Comb's trailer. She tells The Comb that she doesn't have any money, but he gives her a cigarette anyway. Nomi starts crying, and The Comb kisses her shoulder and takes her into his bedroom. When she wakes up, she's in a field with The Comb, who tells her she "gave it up real sweet." She suddenly remembers that she left her car at the general store, and The Comb gives her a ride into town. Nomi drives around for a long time, looking for a good place to get high, and ends up at the dump. She decides she will live here in the car and sometimes have Ray over for dinner.

Nomi never directly specifies whether this sexual encounter was consensual, but it is implied that The Comb raped her while she was unconscious or otherwise incapacitated. Sex with Travis had represented Nomi's hope to build a new life outside her community. By contrast, sex with The Comb shows how mired she is in the self-destructive patterns of life at home. It's telling that Nomi goes to the dump after this: for both her and Ray, it provides an atmosphere of stability in the midst of their tumultuous lives.

After some time, Ray comes to find Nomi at the dump, bringing her a muffin. She tells him that she's not looking forward to the next day, but he says she should look at "the flip side." Nomi tells him that the dump is looking very clean, thanks to him, and Ray says that he and his students will be cleaning up a river bank today. Nomi asks what exactly "the flip side is," and Ray thinks for a while and says it's faith that tomorrow will be a better day. Nomi wonders if this is a triggering point.

Ray often seems to offer comfort in unhelpful platitudes; but here, his declaration of faith in God's ability to improve the future shows how religion can be a positive, sustaining force, and actually does make Nomi feel better. Although Nomi is joking by referencing Mr. Quiring's narrative conventions, it's important that she imagines Ray's faith as the "triggering point" of her story, as her narrative is an interrogation of the role of faith in everyday life.

That day, The Mouth comes over to Nomi's **house**. He announces that the church has decided to excommunicate Nomi for skipping church and setting fires. Ray says that he understands. The Mouth says that the neighbors are starting to talk about the house's state of disrepair and the lack of furniture, which they view as sinful. Nomi starts to drink water out of the tap. Ray offers The Mouth more coffee but he declines, saying he has to go to a ceremony at the museum village.

Ray's lack of concern about Nomi's excommunication, as well as his disregard for his "sinful" treatment of the house, shows that although he won't openly defy the church, its dictates have ceased to be meaningful for him. While this loss of confidence in the church is destabilizing for Ray, it opens up the possibility of new solidarity between him and Nomi.

After The Mouth leaves, Ray starts to quote the Bible, saying that "all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags." He gives Nomi a table cloth to wipe off her wet face and smeared makeup. Nomi promises to do all the laundry and cook something good for dinner. She gives Ray the car keys, and he leaves for work. Nomi wraps herself in the tablecloth and walks upstairs, where she sees her French horn. She drags it to a nearby hill and teaches herself to play "All Through the Night," practicing until the sound becomes bearable.

Ray quotes a verse about the perils of being too confident in one's own righteousness. While The Mouth bases his repressive ideology in scripture, Ray uses the Bible to emphasize the importance of humility and open-mindedness. Like Nomi's own narrative, the Bible is a complex story that allows for different interpretations, and the novel argues that religious doctrine shouldn't be used to ground such a reductive outlook as The Mouth's.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Nomi announces that she is now the sole owner of her family's car. Ray has even taken it to the car wash before disappearing. She wonders how he left without being able to drive. Nomi also has Tash's records and stereo, a French horn, and an official document testifying to her ownership of the **house**. Ray has only taken his new suit, his plastic bird, and his Bible. He's left a note telling Nomi how to sell the house and change the car's oil. He says that he'll give her a year or two to herself, but that she should remember Jesus's words: "Lo, I am with you always." He closes the note with a verse from Isaiah, saying that when she finds joy "the mountains and the hills shall break forth before you singing."

Throughout the novel, Nomi has felt responsible for Ray's wellbeing and worried about leaving him behind—by choosing to leave first, he's dispelled these anxieties for her. Nomi's calm and contemplative tone here shows that her new solitude isn't loneliness—rather, it's a manifestation of her father's love and understanding. Paradoxically, Nomi often feels closest to her family when she's apart from them.

Nomi sits in Ray's lawn chair for a while, in case he comes back. She concludes that he has left so that he doesn't have to shun his own excommunicated child. That's what everyone in East Village has to do if they can neither disown the church nor live without it. Nomi starts loading things into the car, and the little neighbor girl comes outside to watch her. When Nomi has finished, she spins the little girl around until they both fall down. Finally, she feels that she can see everything in her life clearly, from the pits to Travis's hands playing the guitar to The Mouth and her "windowless school." Now that she knows she won't encounter any of this anymore, it doesn't seem so bad.

Nomi has referenced many families whose members have gone insane or even committed suicide after the excommunication of a loved one. Even though it seems like her family may have split up permanently, by collectively leaving a toxic environment they're also preserving the possibility of reunion in the future. Meanwhile, the idea of gaining some distance from her community allows Nomi to evaluate and appreciate life in East Village.

Nomi thinks that Menno Simons must have had a terrible childhood in order to think that excommunicating people and forcing their families to shun them was a good idea. She thinks about "the way things could have been," which is the name she's giving to this piece of writing, her final assignment. Addressing Mr. Quiring directly, she says that she'll leave it on his front porch. She assumes he won't like it, but he doesn't need to give it back.

Throughout the novel, Nomi's narrative has functioned as an implicit protest against Mr. Quiring's brand of storytelling; now, she makes this contrast explicit. Instead of conforming to the teacher's rules in order to graduate high school, Nomi is proving her adulthood by her ability to evaluate and portray her life in a thoughtful, cogent manner.

Speaking to Mr. Quiring, Nomi wonders why she still craves his approval so much. Perhaps because, like him, she's fixated on Trudie. Nomi says that Mr. Quiring gave her family "an ending," following his own rules about the unalterable structure of all stories.

Nomi ironically credits Mr. Quiring with breaking up her family. But in fact, Nomi doesn't believe her family is broken, and leaves open the prospect of future reunification. In this sense, her comment is a rejection—not an embrace—of Mr. Quiring's reductive storytelling.

Along with her assignment, Nomi is returning to him the last letter he wrote to Trudie. Unlike the previous letters about his "bottomless passion" for her, this letter is angry and harsh. In it, Mr. Quiring threatens to tell The Mouth that Trudie has been using Mrs. Klippenstein's empty house to have adulterous relationships with several men. Since Trudie is widely believed to be "demented," no one will believe her word over his. Nomi comments this isn't a very good way to try to win someone back.

In a sense, the radically different tones of Mr. Quiring's letters reflect the Mennonite emphasis on stark distinctions between good and evil. Mr. Quiring is unable to accept that Trudie is a complex character, and so reimagines her as entirely virtuous or entirely sinful. Moreover, by threatening to use his powerful position to peddle falsehoods about her, Mr. Quiring shows how narrative can be used to oppress vulnerable community members.

Nomi believes that Trudie began a relationship with Mr. Quiring out of grief, and returned to Ray out of love, both for him and for the idea of her family. Love is more powerful than grief, Nomi says, and people will do anything to "keep alive the love we've felt." Mr. Quiring uses the church to keep his love alive, while Nomi lies in bed with her memories.

At times Nomi can feel overwhelmed and oppressed by the force of her memories, but by weaving them together into this narrative, she turns them—and her family's history—into an empowering force.

Nomi comes out of her reverie when the little neighbor girl rubs her bald head. Nomi quietly thanks Ray for knowing that, in order for Nomi to break away from East Village, he had to leave first. Nomi sends the neighbor girl home.

It's fitting that Nomi says goodbye to her community through a final interaction with the neighbor girl. This moment emphasizes her ability to connect with different people and appreciate the positive aspects of her life in East Village, even as she flees its negative effects.

It occurs to Nomi that Trudie might have left town not reluctantly, to spare Ray the pain of shunning her, but exuberantly, to embrace all the possibilities of the outside world. Maybe she has never really loved Ray, or no longer loves him as much as the idea of being free. Perhaps she had an affair with Mr. Quiring out of frustration with Ray for keeping her in a community that was so harmful in her family.

Positing an explanation for Trudie's behavior that contrasts with the previous passages, Nomi complicates her narrative and her vision of the future. Yet she refuses to judge or condemn her mother, ultimately embracing the complexity of Trudie's character. This gesture is fundamentally at odds with the norms of her community.

The Mouth has suggested that Trudie killed herself after leaving town, "out of guilt and regret." Nomi wonders if Trudie really is dead, or if she's living quietly somewhere in Canada or has managed to leave the country without her passport. Perhaps Ray has killed himself as well. Nomi decides that she's going to put her faith in the first version of the story, because it holds out the hope "of being reunited, of being happy again." From living in East Village, she's learned that it's people's choices in the stories they tell that matter the most; her town has given her "faith to believe in the possibility of a happy family reunion."

This is the first time Nomi has explicitly mentioned the possibility that Trudie has killed herself, but by openly facing this haunting thought, she deprives it of its ability to scare her. Ultimately, Nomi's narrative leaves room for good and bad outcomes while also retaining hope and confidence in the future. Paradoxically, even though Nomi is leaving home, she credits East Village with developing the worldview that makes it impossible to fit in.

Nomi leaves her favorite leather bracelet between the doors of Mrs. Peters's house. She hopes that Mrs. Peters will find another way to keep Clayton alive in her imagination. Nomi lights a cigarette and drives away.

Like Nomi's last encounter with the little neighbor girl, this gesture signals that she will always be rooted in the community to some extent, even while she leaves.

Actually, Nomi says to Mr. Quiring, she hasn't quite left yet; she has to sell the **house** yet. Really, Nomi says, the story ends with her sitting on the floor of her room, wondering who she'll be once she leaves town. She remembers being a kid and falling asleep listening to Tash and Trudie talking in the kitchen and Ray working in the yard, "making things beautiful right outside my window."

Although Nomi has acknowledged that she's now on her own, through this passage she expresses more unity and confidence in her family than she's felt during all these years waiting for her mother to come home. Family has finally become a force that helps her move boldly into the future, rather than one that holds her back.

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