

Five-Dollar Family



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF CATE KENNEDY

Cate Kennedy was born in Louth, Lincolnshire, England, where her father was on a posting with the air force. She returned to Australia in her childhood and lived in several states around the country with her family. After graduating with a BA in literature from the University of Canberra, she worked a wide variety of jobs, including for the Australian Customs Service, as a tutor, waitress, life model, kitchenhand, community arts worker, theatre director, and for a microcredit cooperative for peasant farmers in Mexico. These experiences have fed into her writing: in 2005, she published the travel memoir *Sing and Don't Cry* about her time in Mexico, and her short story "Habit" (2001), which tells the story of a woman who dies while smuggling Cocaine across the border, is inspired by her time working for the Customs service. Kennedy's writing has spanned a variety of genres, including fiction, non-fiction and poetry, but she is best known for her short fiction. In 2001, she published her first collection of short stories, *Dark Roots*, to critical acclaim. Her latest collection of short stories, *Like a House on Fire*, was shortlisted for the prestigious Stella prize in 2013. Cate Kennedy teaches creative writing in schools and Universities across Australia. She lives on a farm on the Broken River in North-East Victoria.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Though readers are never provided with specific information about the time period in which "Five-Dollar Family" is set, the presence of modern technology and culture suggests that the story is set sometime in the late 20th or early 21st century. Much of "Five-Dollar Family" centers around Michelle's transition into motherhood and the realization that she will be a single mother, at least for now, given that the baby's father is going to prison. At the time of the story's publication in 2012, 15% of all families in Australia were one-parent families. Out of those one-parent families, 81% were single-mother families. The story also focuses on the importance of having the "perfect" family portrait (the name "Five-Dollar Family" references the five-dollar family portrait that Michelle takes with her boyfriend and baby). Prior to the 19th century, which marked the advent of photography, families had to have their portrait painted if they wanted to immortalize themselves or preserve a moment in time. Having a painting commissioned was extremely costly, so it typically was something that only the very rich would pursue. But when photography came about in the 1850s, even middle- and working-class people wanted wedding portraits and family portraits taken. Since then, family

portraits have only continued to surge in popularity—in 20th-century America, for instance, sending holiday cards with a formal family portrait was an important marker of a family's status and prestige. And in recent years, sending holiday cards with a formal—or often informal—family portrait has surged with the Millennial Generation's interest in keeping the tradition alive.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

In a 2006 interview, Cate Kennedy cites two other Australian authors whose work has influenced her own: Peter Carey and Tim Winton. Peter Carey is a novelist and the author of two short story collections, *The Fat Man in History* (1974) and *War Crimes* (1979). Tim Winton is a novelist, playwright and author of six short story collections, including *On Her Knees* (2004) and *The Turning* (2005). Like Winton and Carey, Kennedy's works often reflect a contemporary Australian cultural context. In the same interview, she also mentions authors of American fiction between the early and mid-20th century, including John Steinbeck (*The Grapes of Wrath*, 1939), Harper Lee (*To Kill a Mockingbird*, 1960), and Ray Bradbury (*Fahrenheit 451*, 1953). Like Kennedy, these writers all created fiction that reflected and commented on aspects of the world around them: for John Steinbeck, the Great Depression; for Harper Lee, racism in the American South; and for Ray Bradbury, the horror of World War II and the Cold War. American fiction during this period was also largely characterized by a restrained, observational writing style and realistic dialogue, the influence of which is noticeable in Kennedy's own writing. Kennedy's short story "Laminex and Mirrors" resembles "Five-Dollar Family" in that it's also set in a hospital and follows a young woman protagonist as she breaks the hospital's rules.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Five-Dollar Family
- **When Published:** 2012
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Short Story
- **Setting:** A hospital and supermarket in Australia
- **Climax:** After struggling to nurse her newborn, Michelle's breastmilk finally comes in.
- **Antagonist:** Des
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Jack of All Trades. Cate Kennedy has certainly established a

successful career as an author, but she has also reported working as a tutor, waitress, life model, kitchenhand, and theater director. Many of these jobs provided her with source material for both her fiction and nonfiction writing.

Lucky Break. One of the proudest moments of Kennedy's career was when her short story "Black Ice" was published in the prestigious *New Yorker* magazine in 2006. She had submitted the same story to Australian journals three or four times and faced rejections each time.



PLOT SUMMARY

Michelle is dazed and in pain after giving birth to her first child, Jason. The nurses and midwives fuss over her since her breastmilk hasn't come in yet, and they teach her how often to wake up her baby, how to get him interested in feeding, and how to hold him. By now, Michelle is a little less afraid of holding him, but Des—who is Michelle's boyfriend and Des's father—is still visibly nervous and uncomfortable.

That night in the hospital, Michelle sneaks Jason out of his crib and gently lays him in bed with her, even though she's not supposed to. She makes up songs for him and listens to him breathe for a while before sneaking him back into his crib. She decides that if any of the midwives scold her, she'll scold them right back.

The next morning, the hospital staff continues to pester Michelle about whether or not her breastmilk has come in—they call it the "let-down reflex." It hasn't, nor has Jason developed his sucking reflex yet. The woman in the next room laments that she has the opposite problem: her baby feeds so aggressively that her skin is painfully cracked and raw. When the midwives are out of earshot, the woman confesses to Michelle that she plans to put her baby on formula the second she's discharged from the hospital.

On Monday, Michelle is allowed to take a short, slow walk around the hospital courtyard. There, she spots a poster advertising \$5 **family portraits** on Tuesdays at the supermarket complex across the street. Even though the doctor has ordered Michelle to stay in bed a few more days, she resolves to get her family portrait taken the following day. Though she's still in severe pain, she lies to the nurses that she feels fine.

Throughout the day, Michelle tries to feed Jason, but she's frustrated and close to tears that her milk hasn't come in. The nurses wonder if she has the baby blues—one symptom is crying constantly, often for no reason—but Michelle says no. She actually hasn't been crying recently—though she used to cry all the time before the birth. Back then, she'd thought that having a baby would spur Des to be a better person and partner, and that he'd become an adoring and committed father

once he had a child of his own. But when Michelle went into labor, Des paced around, looked at her with "startled distaste," and then excused himself from the room. He wasn't even in the room when Jason was delivered. But the second that the nurses handed Jason to Michelle, she stopped worrying about Des and suddenly realized she didn't need him anymore.

Des has always been secretive with Michelle—she only knows about his current criminal charge for aggravated assault because she found the court summons in his wallet. Michelle knows that Des is going to jail, since he's already had three similar offenses and thus has no more probations. His court date is this Thursday, and she knows he'll try to sidestep his sentence by explaining that he has a girlfriend and a newborn baby. But no more probations means that Des will be immediately shuttled from the court to jail. And though Des knows this too, he hasn't said a word about it to Michelle. She thinks back to other instances of his secrecy, like when she borrowed his shirt and found a receipt in the pocket for an eight-pack of condoms—proof that he was cheating on her, even though she was pregnant with his baby.

Back in the present, Michelle tells Des that she might be allowed to go home on Thursday. He mumbles that he has "this court thing" then, so she tells him to arrange for his mother to be Michelle's driver instead. Michelle remembers the first time she met Des's parents: his mother indulgently fussed over Des and her other son, Kyle, while Des's father laughed about Des's misdemeanors and called him a "naughty boy." Michelle smiled at the time, but now, looking at Des, she refuses to. Before Des leaves, Michelle tells him to buy something for the baby to wear in the portrait.

On Tuesday morning, Des proudly brandishes what he got for the baby: a tiny leather **motorcycle jacket**. Michelle is horrified. Once Michelle takes her pain medication, she gingerly makes her way to the supermarket complex with Des and Jason for the photo. There, she firmly tells the photographer that they want the \$5 family special, and she poses herself, Des, and Jason just as she's been planning. After the photographer snaps the picture, Michelle asks for another, this time without Jason's motorcycle jacket on. Michelle is certain that this will be the shot she'll choose. But when the camera flash goes off, Jason lets out a piercing wail, and milk suddenly begins seeping through Michelle's shirt. She fumbles with the buttons on her shirt so that she can feed Jason, but Des is disgusted that she'd breastfeed in a public place. Michelle hardly hears him—she's focused purely on Jason and knows that she has everything Jason needs.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Michelle – The story's protagonist Michelle is Des's girlfriend

and Jason's mother. The story charts her evolution from a bewildered new mother to an assertive, competent one. Alongside this shift, the story also reflects Michelle's transformation from overly permissive girlfriend who centers her world around her boyfriend to independent single mother who is wholly devoted to her child. Prior to giving birth to Jason, Michelle clings to the irrational hope that Des—who has several misdemeanors and cheats on her—will be a steady partner and capable father once they have a baby. But once Michelle gives birth, and Des *doesn't* suddenly step into a fatherly role—in fact, he even steps *out* of the room when she gives birth—Michelle is forced to see Des's shortcomings with stark clarity. Throughout the story, Des continuously disappoints Michelle, most notably when he uses her baby budget to buy an expensive leather **motorcycle jacket** for Jason. And as Des continually shows himself to be a “let down,” Michelle begins to dismantle her hopes of having a perfect family. For Michelle, having a perfectly posed **family portrait** would at least make it look like she, at one point, had this perfect family. But even the portrait goes awry near the end of the story when her breastmilk comes in right as the photographer's flash goes off. As the story comes to a close, Michelle comes to the realization that she doesn't need Des anymore, nor does she need this so-called perfect family unit. Jason is all she needs.

Des – The story's antagonist, Des, is Michelle's boyfriend and Jason's father. He has a lengthy criminal record—including several charges for aggravated assault. When the story begins, he's days away from being sent to prison, as parole is no longer available to him. While Michelle gradually learns how to be a competent mother to her newborn baby (e.g., learning how to hold and nurse him), Des has no such character arc. From the beginning of the story until the end, he's depicted as careless, immature, and either unwilling or unable to change his behavior. Both Des's mother and father gloss over their son's criminal behavior, flippantly suggesting that he's just a “naughty boy” whom Michelle needs to keep an eye on to keep him in line. But as the story unfolds, Michelle comes to reject this perspective—seeing it as overly permissive—and accept that Des will never become the partner and father she needs him to be. For instance, when Michelle gives Des the one job of buying the baby a nice outfit to wear in the upcoming **family portrait**, Des botches the task by buying Jason an expensive leather **motorcycle jacket**. Michelle's narration makes it clear that this was a foolish, inappropriate purchase for several reasons—among them, that Michelle doesn't have other baby necessities (like a changing table) yet, and this jacket likely made a deep gouge in her baby budget. Throughout much of the story, Michelle is waiting for the “let-down reflex”—that is, waiting for her milk to come in so she can nurse Jason—and she begins to realize that Des is the real let down, and that she no longer has the patience for his behavior.

Des's Father – Des's father is a lighthearted man who glosses over Des's criminality, affectionately deeming him “a bit of a naughty boy” and suggesting that it's Michelle's job to look out for him. The story briefly suggests that Des's mother and father have a similar dynamic where the woman is expected to take care of the man: Michelle thinks back to a barbeque where Des, his brother Kyle, and their father lazily sat around in lawn chairs while Des's mother scurried around bringing the men food and beer.

Des's Mother – Like Des's father, Des's mother appears unconcerned with her son's criminal behavior. Just as Des's father depicts Des as a “naughty boy” rather than a criminal, Des's mother frames her son's community service order (painting lines on basketball courts) as a real job rather than a punishment. In the story, she's constantly fussing over Des or waiting on the men in the family by bringing them food and beer.

Jason (Michelle's Baby) – Jason is Michelle and Des's newborn baby. When it becomes clear to Michelle that Des won't be able to step into a fatherly role (he's helplessly immature and headed for prison) Michelle comes to terms with the fact that she doesn't actually need Des anymore—Jason is all she needs now.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The Photographer – The photographer offers the titular \$5-portrait special and takes a family portrait for Michelle, Des, and Jason. His photography studio is inside the local grocery store.

Kyle – Kyle is Des's younger brother whom Michelle met at a barbeque along with Des's mother and father.



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.



EXPECTATIONS VS. REALITY

Throughout “Five-Dollar Family,” Michelle's expectations—of herself, her baby, and her boyfriend, Des—repeatedly go unmet. These expectations largely center around what she believes motherhood and parenthood “should” feel like or look like, at least according to the various forms of media she was exposed to throughout her pregnancy (e.g., informational brochures, greeting cards, etc.). Through Michelle's unmet expectations and her ultimate acceptance of reality, the story shows that

media and advertising set lofty expectations surrounding relationships, parenthood, and womanhood that real life and real people often don't live up to.

The various forms of media and advertising that Michelle sees throughout her pregnancy inform her expectations of new motherhood and her baby, though her reality is far more unglamorous than she anticipated. For instance, before Michelle gives birth to Jason, she assumes that he'll look like the baby on the front of the baby-oil bottle: the angelic-looking baby, who is clapping its hands in delight, has chubby, pink cheeks and a perfect, curled tuft of hair at the top of its head. But instead of looking like this familiar, archetypal baby, Jason's face is "startling in its strangeness," emphasizing that his appearance completely subverts Michelle's expectations. His skin is bright red rather than a charming rosy pink color, and instead of being round and chubby, his face is scrunched and wrinkly. He looks more like "a tiny old man exhausted after a long and arduous journey"—or, when he's swaddled, like "a big parcel of hot chips"—than the bouncy, happy baby she expected.

The informational brochure about breastfeeding that Michelle reads also leads her to have unrealistic expectations about motherhood. The brochure explains the let-down reflex: when the baby attempts to breastfeed, the mother's brain releases the chemical oxytocin into the bloodstream, which consequently makes breastmilk flow. The brochure describes the let-down reflex as a gentle "tingling sensation" or "tightening" feeling. But when Michelle's breastmilk finally comes in at the very end of the story, the experience is sudden, intense, and emotional. Rather than a subtle tingling or tightening, Michelle's let-down reflex feels like an uncontrollable shiver surging through her body. She likens the experience to "the way tears will start when something makes you forget, for a minute, what you're supposed to be holding them back for." In other words, just like when the floodgates open and someone begins to sob after holding back tears, Michelle's milk suddenly pours out in a "shocking flood." As Jason's eyes peer up at her, Michelle imagines that he's saying "it's you," and that her eyes silently tell him "yeah, it's me." The analogy of tears, following the tender moment between Jason and Michelle, also implies that Michelle might be crying here—and this is especially likely given that, earlier in the story, she was holding back tears out of frustration over not being able to feed Jason. So not only is the let-down reflex more physically powerful and shocking than Michelle had expected based on the brochure, but it's also implied to have an entire emotional layer to it that the brochure didn't prepare Michelle for.

Different forms of media and advertising also inflate Michelle's expectations of her boyfriend, Des, in regards to his capacity as a partner and father. And just like her expectations of motherhood, these expectations prove unrealistic. While she was pregnant, Michelle would sift through greeting cards at the newsstand depicting "guys with their shirts off holding little

vulnerable babies, expressions of adoration on their faces; guys who looked like models, but still." Though the pictures on the cards are implied to be staged, Michelle nevertheless begins to believe "that adoration would kick in once Des saw the baby and she saw Des with the baby." With the phrase "kick in," Michelle implies that Des isn't the adoring type, and that she is counting on this changing suddenly when the baby arrives. Michelle's hope is twofold, as she also implies that she doesn't feel very loving towards Des and expects this to change, too. But when he first sees his son, Des looks "perplexed" and wears a "faintly incredulous look" of "startled distaste"—a sharp contrast from the way the men on the greeting cards gazed affectionately at their babies.

And though while she was pregnant, Michelle "had some vague idea that she'd be able to rest and Des would take over and look after them both, hold his son unashamedly in the crook of his arm like the men on the cards," her reality is much different. For much of the story, Des declines to hold their baby, and when he finally does, Michelle has to stuff down her impulse to "bat his hands away," and she "banishes the thought of Jason ever lying naked in the crook of Des's arm." So while the greeting cards led Michelle to believe that Des would immediately become tender and loving towards Jason—and that seeing this would make Michelle feel tender and loving towards Des—neither of her expectations are met.

The video that Michelle watches in her prenatal class—which depicts a woman going into labor while her partner rubs her back soothingly—also shapes her expectations of how Des will act during and after the birth. But rather than comforting Michelle as her labor pains intensify like the person in the video, Des distracts himself by pacing or flipping through TV channels. And rather than staying by Michelle's side, Des leaves the room entirely to go get himself a drink and doesn't return until after Jason is born. Near the end of the story, Michelle grapples with the fact that Des will never be like the doting fathers on the greeting cards or the supportive significant other in the prenatal video. Looking at the tiny **leather jacket** Des bought for Jason—itsself symbolic of Des's immaturity and incompetence as a father and partner—Michelle finally accepts that "Jason might grow out of it [...] but Des never will."



MOTHERHOOD

"Five-Dollar Family" follows its protagonist, Michelle, as she gives birth to her first baby and adjusts to being a new mother. Though the story depicts several tender moments between Michelle and her newborn baby, Jason, the story largely frames Michelle's transition into motherhood as both physically and emotionally taxing. Over the course of the story, she struggles to breastfeed, suffers a painful tear in labor, worries about the financial responsibility of having a baby, navigates her complicated relationship with the baby's father (Des), and

more. Through Michelle, “Five-Dollar Family” presents a complex picture of motherhood—it’s tender, grueling, and transformative all at once.

The story often alternates between describing moments that are physically or emotionally tender and ones that are painful, suggesting that motherhood is a mix of both extremes. For instance, the story describes Michelle’s “big loose body, slack and sore” after giving birth—a physically painful mark of her newfound role as a mother—and describes how her baby looks “startling in its strangeness.” But the story then quickly transitions to Michelle sharing a quiet, sentimental moment with her newborn in the middle of the night, as she sings her baby made-up songs and listens to his breathing. This kind of back-and-forth between painful and joyful moments happens all the way until the end of the story, reflecting the idea that motherhood—and particularly new motherhood—encompasses both ends of the emotional spectrum.

“The light in the hospital is cold, and everything hums,” and Michelle hates how her noisy, plastic-lined hospital bed keeps her awake when she knows she should be sleeping, but she’s nevertheless “burning with bright energy, like someone’s flicked a light switch on.” Here, the contrast between the dark, cold, sterile hospital and Michelle’s warm, bright energy mirrors the story’s insistence that motherhood can’t be distilled down to just the uncomfortable moments or just the warm, playful, and joyful ones. Instead, these two experiences of motherhood happen one after another or unfold at the same time, as they do in this passage. And when Michelle looks at her baby, she always feels a “rush of disbelief, terror and happiness,” again underscoring the emotional complexity of motherhood.

The story also suggests that becoming a mother is a deeply transformative experience, both physically and emotionally. Michelle notes throughout the story that, after giving birth, her body no longer feels like it belongs to her—the skin around her belly is “slack,” while the skin around her stitches (the result of a tear she suffered during labor) is so swollen and inflamed that it feels foreign to Michelle when she touches it. Her body changes in other ways, too, as she experiences the let-down reflex; when Jason learns to latch to Michelle’s breast, this eventually signals Michelle’s brain to release the chemical oxytocin into her bloodstream, which consequently makes her breast milk begin to flow. Motherhood, then, is physically transformative for Michelle as it completely changes the body she once knew so well.

Becoming a mother also transforms Michelle’s behavior in various ways. For instance, Michelle now allows the nurses to “poke and prod” her (like when they teach her how to breastfeed) whenever they need to, even though she notes that this would have been wildly embarrassing for her just a matter of days ago. Michelle also finds herself becoming increasingly assertive now that she’s a mother. The story implies that Michelle is usually a passive, permissive person, but now she

feels emboldened to break the midwives’ rules when it comes to how and when Michelle interacts with her own baby. Even though she’s not supposed to take Jason out of his crib at night in the hospital, Michelle does so anyway and settles him in bed with her for a while, deciding that the midwives would certainly back down if she told them to “mind their own business.” And throughout the second half of the story, Michelle hears a new sense of power and “steel” in her voice when she talks to people—suggesting that becoming a mother has turned her into a more assertive version of herself. Through Michelle, “Five-Dollar Family” shows that having a baby and transitioning into being a mother is a complicated, transformative experience.



FAMILY

After Michelle gives birth to her first child, Jason, she gradually releases her hope of having the “perfect” nuclear family—or even a dysfunctional one that looks perfect on the outside. What stands in the way of Michelle’s vision of the perfect family is Des: Michelle’s boyfriend and Jason’s father. With four criminal charges to his name and no more paroles, Des is headed to prison in a matter of days, effectively forcing Michelle to become a single mother. But by the end of the story, Michelle isn’t begrudgingly resolved to this fate; instead, she actively welcomes it, realizing that neither she nor Jason really need Des, so losing him isn’t a loss at all. Charting Michelle’s shifting understanding of what makes a good family, “Five-Dollar Family” ultimately suggests that a family doesn’t have to align with the image of the stereotypical nuclear family to be fulfilling, strong, and meaningful.

Throughout her pregnancy, Michelle clings to the idea that she can (and should) have a stereotypical nuclear family, and specifically that Des will step into the role of loving father and steady partner. During her pregnancy, Michelle would “browse mistily” through the greeting cards at the store, lingering over the ones “that showed guys with their shirts off holding little vulnerable babies, expressions of adoration on their faces.” The word “mistily” suggests that Michelle was teary-eyed while looking at these cards, emphasizing her deep longing for Des to be the kind of tender father depicted on the cards. In addition, the fact that these men are on greeting cards suggests that they represent an ideal image of fatherhood: handsome and masculine, but gentle and loving. And indeed, Michelle’s narration goes on to note how she hoped “that that adoration would kick in once Des saw the baby and she saw Des with the baby.” With this, Michelle implies that she *doesn’t* adore Des—or at least not in recent times—but that rather than part ways with Des, she wants their relationship to be reinvigorated so that they can preserve their family unit.

Even as it becomes clear to Michelle that Des doesn’t have the capacity to be the kind of father or partner she longs for, she

remains hung up on preserving the image of the perfect family, as seen through her preoccupation with their **family portrait**. Michelle's assumption that her baby will look like the cute, cherub-like one on the front of the baby-oil bottle—and her “startl[ed]” reaction when her baby doesn't look like this—is an early indication in the story that Michelle is preoccupied with looking like she has the perfect family.

Later in the story, when Michelle notices a poster advertising family portraits, she becomes obsessed with having the perfect family photo of her, Des, and Jason. For instance, she instructs Des to go out and buy something for Jason to wear, stressing that she wants Jason to “look really good.” She also methodically plans out exactly how she wants each family member to be posed—Des with his arm around her, giving off the appearance that they're a happy, loving couple—and she fantasizes about framing the picture and sending it out to friends and family. By this point in the story, Michelle disdains Des, seeing him as immature and incapable of changing his ways. But she nevertheless wants this picture that makes them look like a tightknit, happy family to have “The feeling sealed, at least, like evidence.” In other words, she wants this perfect family photo as proof that she once had something like a nuclear family unit, even if it didn't last.

But by the end of the story, Michelle realizes that she and Jason already are the ideal family, and that they don't need Des at all. Neither of the two family portraits turn out the way Michelle had planned: in one, Jason is wearing the tiny **leather jacket** that Des bought him, which Michelle hates. And in the other, Jason is kicking and screaming, startled by the camera flash right as the picture is being taken. But the story implies that the botched photos free Michelle from her preoccupation with making her family look perfect.

This is in large part because Jason's cry in the second photo is what triggers Michelle's let-down reflex, which finally allows her breastmilk to flow (something she's been waiting for days to happen). As Michelle scrambles to feed Jason, she faintly hears Des protesting that she shouldn't breastfeed in such a public place. But to her, Des's voice sounds “like someone you're hanging up on, going small and high-pitched and distant as you put the phone down.” With this description, the story's focus literally zooms out from Des and Michelle's dynamic (which has been the topic of much of the narrative) and instead foregrounds Michelle and Jason, suggesting that Des is no longer a necessary part of the story or the family. Now that she can feed her baby, Michelle realizes that “She's got everything this baby needs, now. And he's twisting his head, searching for her. He knows it too.” Michelle and Jason lock eyes, and she imagines his eyes are saying to her, “*it's you,*” and that her eyes are saying back, “*yeah, it's me.*” By zooming in on this silent exchange between Michelle and Jason, the story suggests that the pair have solidified their connection as a family unit. “Five-Dollar Family” shows that it's Michelle and Jason's close, loving

relationship—and her commitment to taking care of him—is enough to make them a family, even without Des.



SYMBOLS

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



FAMILY PORTRAIT

In “Five-Dollar Family,” the family portrait symbolizes Michelle's desire for the perfect family—or at least one that appears perfect on the outside. When the photographer prepares to take the portrait, Michelle poses Des and Jason “the way she's planned it: Jason on her lap, Des with his arm around her.” That Michelle has mentally planned out how she wants everyone arranged in the picture speaks to how important it is to her that the picture looks a certain way. And indeed, she thinks to herself throughout the portrait session that she “needs one image at least that looks right,” and she already fantasizes about framing it and displaying it on a shelf next to the congratulatory cards people have sent her. Even though she's struggling with her transition into motherhood, has a rocky relationship, is in severe physical pain from her stitches, and has a partner who is going to prison in two days, Michelle is focused on preserving the image (literally) of a happy family. Des's arm around Michelle gives the appearance of closeness and affection—they look like two new parents in a happy, mutually loving relationship—but nothing in the story thus far has suggested that Michelle and Des actually share that kind of emotional warmth and love, or at least not in recent times.

The portrait's cheap cost and location—it's only \$5 and takes place in a photography studio that's inside a grocery store—suggests that Michelle is getting a cheapened version of the perfect family she longs for. In a prenatal class, she watches a video that shows a man rubbing his partner's back as she prepares to give birth. Not only does Des *not* do this, but he actually excuses himself for the entirety of the labor to get himself a drink. While pregnant, Michelle often looked at greeting cards that depicted handsome men looking lovely at their newborns, but Des declines to hold Jason and looks at him with “startled distaste.” Des—who is laden with criminal charges and doesn't have a job—is far from being the partner and father Michelle wants him to be.

The family takes two photographs: in the first, Jason is wearing a tiny leather **motorcycle jacket** that Des picked out (which Michelle hates), and Michelle thinks that she blinked or looked dazed. In the second photo, Michelle insists on removing Jason's leather jacket. As they prepare to take the photo, Michelle is certain that this is the photo she'll choose. But the moment the flash goes off, Jason begins to wail, and Michelle's

breastmilk suddenly comes in, seeping through her shirt. So while Michelle's family is far from the perfect ideal she wants to project, even the picture itself doesn't seem to come out the way she intended.



MOTORCYCLE JACKET

The leather motorcycle jacket that Des buys for Jason to wear in the **family portrait** has two layers of symbolic significance. On the surface, the jacket represents how Des and his parents gloss over Des's criminality (he's facing his fourth criminal charge for aggravated assault) and instead frame him as an impish troublemaker or "naughty boy." When Michelle tasks Des with buying an outfit for their newborn to wear in the family portrait, she emphasizes that she wants their baby to "look really good." But when Des comes back to the hospital toting a miniature leather jacket covered in zippers and patches, it's clear that his version of "look[ing] really good" means looking like a "naughty boy." In other words, he sees his own "naughty boy" image as a level of coolness to strive for and pass down to his son—not something to be ashamed about. And as he slides the jacket onto Jason, Des announces proudly, "He'll be a little bikie" (biker), again showing how he glorifies and relishes in his own bad-boy image. Just before Des bought the jacket, Michelle was thinking back to a barbeque she attended with Des's family. As Des explained to his parents that he was being made to paint lines on basketball courts as part of his community service order (i.e., part of his punishment for criminal behavior), his father had "[shook] his head with something like admiration" and said to Michelle with a smile, "You'll have to watch this one, love [...] He can be a bit of a naughty boy." So now, as Des beams proudly at his newborn son in a tiny leather jacket, he seems to be echoing this same dynamic.

In line with this, the baby-sized motorcycle jacket also symbolizes Des's inability to mature into the kind of partner, father, and adult that Michelle wants him to be—he will always be an immature "naughty boy." When Michelle sees the motorcycle jacket, she immediately recognizes that it's unfit for a newborn baby: the collar is "cumbersome," and Michelle "imagines it chafing at Jason's soft neck" before he's even wearing it. That Des picked out such an uncomfortable garment for their days-old baby—and is so proud of the jacket he chose—underscores that Des is ill-equipped to be a father and caretaker for their baby. Michelle also groans inwardly at how expensive the jacket must have been—and at how foolish it was for Des to spend a lot of money on baby clothes when their baby is going to quickly grow out of the jacket *and* they don't yet have other baby necessities like a changing table. Here, Michelle's level-headed reasoning contrasts sharply with Des's impulsivity, impracticality, and "idiot chimp smile," again suggesting that Des is unable to think like a parent. Looking at the jacket, Michelle thinks to herself, "Jason might grow out of

it [...] but Des never will, and there's nothing she can do about that now." With this, Michelle underscores that Des will be perpetually stuck in his immaturity, and that there's nothing she can do to force him to grow out of it.



QUOTES


Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Read How You Want edition of *Like a House on Fire* published in 2013.

Five-Dollar Family Quotes

💬 She's not tired now, though. She's burning with bright energy, like someone's flicked a light switch on.

'You've got little hands, I've got big hands, let's put our hands together,' she sings to him in a whisper. She invents heaps of songs, in the middle of the night, songs that definitely sound as good as The Wiggles. She lies curled with her tiny oblivious son, hearing his moth breaths, singing softly to him until she has to put him back in the crib before the midwife does her rounds again. They've tried to be strict about it, but she bets they wouldn't push their luck if she told them to mind their own business. Her wakefulness seems tinged, now, with a private, freshly minted exhilaration.

Related Characters: Michelle (speaker), Jason (Michelle's Baby)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 94

Explanation and Analysis



This scene takes place in the hospital the night after Michelle has given birth to her first child, Jason. Here, Michelle has just snuck Jason out of his crib and settled him into bed with her. Prior to this point, the story has stressed the physical and emotional toll of motherhood—and especially that of new motherhood—so it's significant that Michelle feels wide awake and energetic as she sings to Jason hours after giving birth to him. This suggests that while motherhood is physically and emotionally intense and exhausting, it's also having an invigorating effect on Michelle. The change in Michelle is sudden, as if "someone's flicked a light switch on," and it creates in her a "private, freshly minted exhilaration."

At several points in the story, Michelle shares anecdotes to illustrate how the old version of her—that is, who she was before giving birth and becoming a mother—was naïve,

passive, and overly permissive. So given that Michelle breaks the rules in this passage (taking Jason out of his crib) and prepares to tell the midwives off if need be suggests that becoming a mother has made her more assertive.

“Let Baby find his own way there,” says the midwife [...]. *Baby*. She hates the way they call him that, like he hasn’t even got a name, And the way they talk about you as if you weren’t there in the room, like the obstetrician who called the trainee midwife over after the birth, when they were weighing and measuring her baby and Michelle was lying there stunned, like a casualty thrown against a wall after a bomb blast [...].

Related Characters: Michelle (speaker), Jason (Michelle’s Baby)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 97

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, one of the midwives at the hospital is teaching Michelle how to breastfeed her newborn, Jason. Here, Michelle’s narration reveals that she’s frustrated and surprised by the impersonal treatment she’s received in the hospital, both during and after labor. Throughout the story, Michelle’s expectations—of herself, of others, and of motherhood—repeatedly go unmet, and this passage provides a few instances of this. Both of the examples Michelle shares here (the midwife’s use of the impersonal word “Baby” and the doctors talking among themselves) suggests that Michelle had expected mothers (especially new mothers) to receive more personalized, compassionate treatment in the hospital, but that in reality, Michelle and her baby are being treated impersonally. (Ironically, though, Michelle refers to the midwives, nurses, and other hospital staff attending to her with the impersonal word “they” throughout this passage.)

Michelle’s description of herself as “lying there stunned, like a casualty thrown against a wall after a bomb blast” also reflects the contrast between expectations and reality that runs throughout the story. That she’s “stunned,” like a person who’s been unexpectedly caught up in a bomb blast, suggests that childbirth was far more painful and destructive (she suffers a painful tear that requires heavy-duty stitches) than she anticipated.

She’d browse mistily through those cards at the newsagent that showed guys with their shirts off holding little vulnerable babies, expressions of adoration on their faces; guys who looked like models, but still. All the time she was pregnant, she thought that that adoration would kick in once Des saw the baby and she saw Des with the baby. She’d had some vague idea that she’d be able to rest and Des would take over and look after them both, hold his son unashamedly in the crook of his arm like the men on the cards.

Related Characters: Michelle (speaker), Jason (Michelle’s Baby), Des

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 98-99



Explanation and Analysis

Here, Michelle thinks back to when she was pregnant and used to fantasize about Des becoming a father and how this would improve her relationship with him. The words “mistily” and “vague idea” both suggest that Michelle’s hopes are unrealistic—something she affirms right before this passage, when she notes that her past self (that is, who she was before giving birth) was overly optimistic and unwise. Similarly, she recognizes that the men on the cards were just models, but she nevertheless has internalized this idealized and stylized image of fatherhood and hoped that, in becoming a father, Des would magically live up to it. The story suggests that advertisements and the media—here, the greeting cards—can give people unrealistic expectations about parenthood.

As the story goes on to show, Des doesn’t “take over” as Michelle expects—the only thing he does for Michelle is going out to buy something nice for Jason to wear in their family portrait, a task that he botches by buying an expensive and ridiculous baby-sized motorcycle jacket. He doesn’t “hold his son unashamedly,” as he declines to hold Jason when Michelle offers. And he doesn’t look at Jason adoringly—he looks at his newborn son with “startled distaste.”

God knows what she’d hoped he’d do—rub her back like on the video in the antenatal class, maybe, or sponge her forehead with a face washer; she couldn’t put her finger on what she’d expected, but whatever it was, this wasn’t it. Not this wordless hanging back like it was all beyond him, folding and unfolding his arms. Not switching off the TV just when things were starting to get really rough, and going to get himself a drink.

Related Characters: Michelle (speaker), Des

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 99-100

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Michelle recounts how, when she went into labor, Des become so nervous, restless, and uncomfortable that not only didn't he offer her comfort, he eventually excused himself entirely from the room and didn't return until after Jason was born. This passage shows Michelle grappling with her unmet expectations, as Des doesn't do any of the typical comforting things a partner is expected to do during labor, like "sponge her forehead with a face washer." Instead of participating in any capacity, Des hangs back on the sidelines "like it was all beyond him," and like it's not *his* girlfriend giving birth to *their* baby. Significantly, right after Michelle gives birth and gets to hold Jason, she immediately realizes that she's "way beyond" Des now and no longer needs him. The repetition of "beyond him" emphasizes that while Michelle is stepping into her role as a new mother, Des is unwilling or unable to step into his, so Michelle has no choice but to surpass him and continue her journey into motherhood.

☞ [...] Des wasn't even next to her when she turned her head to look for him.

When they handed her Jason, though, it was like she finally stopped thinking about Des. Stopped worrying about him. She leaned over and smelled her son's head, fresh as newly turned earth, then glanced over at her boyfriend, who was back now, bashing an empty Gatorade bottle mindlessly against his thigh and jiggling his leg in his stretched tracksuit pants as he sprawled in the chair in the corner, so freaked out that he couldn't even meet her eye. *Useless*, she'd thought, feeling a startling surge of impatient, adrenaline-fuelled scorn. She was suddenly way beyond him now. She couldn't believe she'd ever needed him for anything.

Related Characters: Michelle (speaker), Jason (Michelle's Baby), Des

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 100-101


Explanation and Analysis

Here, Michelle recalls giving birth to Jason and then

realizing that Des wasn't even in the room—and when he returns, he's still jumpy, unengaged, and "useless." Throughout the story, Des is often described as being more like a teenager than a mature life partner and father, and the above passage is a prime example of this. Des is unkempt in "stretched tracksuit pants," he's "sprawled" out lazily in the corner of the room, and he's "bashing an empty Gatorade bottle mindlessly against his thigh" like a bored teenager who desperately wants to leave but isn't allowed to do so yet. He also avoids making eye contact with Michelle, making him seem like a child who knows they've misbehaved but are unwilling to admit it. The characterizations of Des in this passage contrast sharply with the image of the male models on the greeting cards that Michelle admired in pregnancy. Those men looked strong and masculine (they were male models with their shirts off) and looked like adoring, engaged fathers gazing down lovingly at their babies, and Michelle believed that Des could be like this too. But as this passage shows, Michelle's expectation goes unmet, as the birth clearly hasn't changed Des.

☞ He's said nothing to her about it. Not a thing. Even though the court date is this Thursday, and even though he's got a girlfriend with a newborn baby. That'll be the first thing he'll mention, though, you can bet on that. He'll get his solicitor to stand up there and use her and Jason to try and duck the sentence. But no more probations means he'll go straight to the jail from court. Not a word to her. It's like he thinks that if he ignores it it's all going to go away.

Related Characters: Michelle (speaker), Jason (Michelle's Baby), Des

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 102



Explanation and Analysis

Michelle has just given birth and is privately astounded that Des hasn't told her yet that he's going to jail in a matter of days. (And Michelle only knows about Des's latest criminal charge for aggravated assault because she found the court summons in his wallet.) Once again, the story depicts Des as more of a "naughty boy" (a phrase his own father uses to describe him later in the story) than a responsible parent and life partner. Michelle anticipates that Des will try to "duck the sentence" like a child trying to avoid punishment for their actions. And likewise, Michelle surmises that Des

falsely “thinks that if he ignores it it’s all going to go away.” This points back to the moment earlier in the story when Des, visibly nervous, left the hospital room while Michelle was giving birth—implying that he was perhaps attempting to ignore that he was about to become a father in the hopes that the situation would just go away. But the story shows that just as ignoring that Michelle was going into labor didn’t prevent Des from becoming a father, ignoring his impending jail sentence won’t make it go away either.

☛ [...] [S]he remembered that night too, the way he’d bought those chips and dip to take home to his eight-months-pregnant girlfriend, then gone out alone. And how she’d believed he’d been thoughtful that night, buying snacks and renting her those DVDs to shut her up and keep her fat and dumb and happy. Thoughtful.

Related Characters: Michelle (speaker), Des

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 103

Explanation and Analysis

Michelle recalls how one night during her pregnancy, Des was uncharacteristically thoughtful and brought her snacks and DVDs before leaving the house for the night. But as Michelle’s narration reveals just before this passage, Des actually went out and cheated on Michelle, and the snacks and DVDs were just tools to stop her from noticing. By describing herself here as Des’s “eight-months-pregnant girlfriend,” Michelle stresses Des’s moral depravity. In other words, he didn’t just cheat on his girlfriend, or cheat on his pregnant girlfriend—he cheated on his “eight-months-pregnant girlfriend” who was only weeks away from giving birth to their child.

The sharp contrast between what Michelle thought Des was doing (taking care of her) and what he was actually doing (cheating on her) points to the story’s overarching theme of expectations versus reality. Throughout the story, Michelle often has to grapple this tension between expectations and reality when it comes to motherhood, her baby, medical care, co-parenting, and more. But significantly, many of these instances of unmet expectations center around Des’s unwillingness—or sheer inability—to be the father and partner that Michelle expects him to be.

☛ ‘You’ll have to watch this one, love,’ he said, smiling. ‘He can be a bit of a naughty boy.’

She’d smiled back at the time, she remembers. Felt herself as indulgent and forgiving and tolerant as his mother, like it was a club women belonged to. Staring at Des now, Michelle thinks that’s exactly what he looks like: a naughty boy. She pauses to make him look at her, refusing to smile.

Related Characters: Michelle, Des’s Father (speaker), Des

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 104

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Michelle remembers meeting Des’s parents at a barbeque and how Des’s father characterized Des as a troublemaking child rather than an adult with several criminal charges to his name. And while Des’s father distills Des’s behavior (like his aggravated assault offenses or his cheating on Michelle) down to merely “naughty” acts, and even seems to find Des’s behavior amusing, Des’s mother is “indulgent and forgiving and tolerant.” Michelle suggests that, at the time, she fit right in with Des’s parents: she “smiled back” at Des’s father after his “naughty boy” comment and thereby silently allowed Des’s behavior, and his parents’ approval or permissiveness of it, to continue. It’s significant, then, that now Michelle “refus[es] to smile” *and* makes sure that Des sees this. The story suggests that Michelle’s open disapproval in this passage forms a significant break from her past permissiveness, and that it’s her newfound role as a mother that has made her more assertive and tenacious.

☛ Jason might grow out of it, she thinks, but Des never will, and there’s nothing she can do about that now. The let-down reflex, she thinks fleetingly as she holds out her arms to take her son. Let-down is right. The story of her life: numb on the outside, and a burning ache inside.

Related Characters: Michelle (speaker), Jason (Michelle’s Baby), Des

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 



Page Number: 106


Explanation and Analysis

Looking at the baby-sized motorcycle jacket that Des bought for Jason, Michelle thinks about how Jason is going to grow out of it quickly, but Des will never grow out of his immaturity and foolishness, which the jacket represents. Michelle describes herself as “numb on the outside” with “a burning ache inside,” which reflects how her body physically feels right now after childbirth, suffering a deep tear, and getting stitches. But this also suggests that out of the common physiological responses to trauma—fight, flight, or freeze—Michelle has chosen freeze thus far when it comes to Des and his behavior. As other anecdotes throughout the story have shown, Michelle has been passive and permissive with Des, silently accepting his misdemeanors, cheating, lying, withholding of information, and more. But the “burning ache” inside of Michelle suggests that her frustration and pain is festering and will eventually bubble up. The let-down reflex refers to when a woman’s breastmilk finally begins to flow, so Michelle seems to be suggesting that her anger and frustration over her broken relationship with Des—who is a “Let-down,” or disappointment—will eventually flow, too.

●● ‘The five-dollar family,’ says Michelle. ‘The portrait.’ He gets straight away at the tone in her voice, folding his paper with a snap. She can hear it too, the new hint of steel there. [...] The stitches are killing her and she eases herself gingerly onto the chair, sitting them the way she’s planned it: Jason on her lap, Des with his arm around her. Dragging pain makes her face damp with perspiration; it’s like a flush of heat goes through her, a tensed fist tightening.

Related Characters: Michelle (speaker), Jason (Michelle’s Baby), Des, The Photographer

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 107

Explanation and Analysis


In this passage, Michelle, Des, and Jason are about to get their titular \$5 family portrait taken—something Michelle has fixated on for much of the story. That Michelle already knows how she wants everyone to be posed reveals that she has a specific vision for what a “good” family should look like, and which she wants to achieve in this portrait. The pose itself is close and loving—Des has his arm around

Michelle—which consequently makes the family seem close and loving, too. With this, the story engages with the theme of expectations versus reality in a slightly different way than before. Just after this passage, Michelle thinks about how she’s going to frame this picture and send it out to all her friends and family. Her plans for the photo’s distribution, coupled with her planned-out pose, suggests that Michelle is intentionally trying to give off the image of a happy, nuclear family. In other words, Michelle is creating the expectation that her family is close, tender, and loving, even though in reality, this isn’t the case.

On another note, the edge in Michelle’s voice—described as a “new hint of steel”—again shows that motherhood is transformational, as it has made her more assertive and tenacious. The “steel” sound in her voice carries associations with her “barbed-wire” stitches from childbirth, further suggesting that motherhood has toughened and emboldened her in a mere matter of days.

●● Some women describe the let-down reflex as a tightening or tingling sensation, the brochure had said. It’s not, though—not for her. It’s like a shiver rippling out of your control; the way tears will start when something makes you forget, for a minute, what you’re supposed to be holding them back for.

Related Characters: Michelle (speaker), Jason (Michelle’s Baby)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 109

Explanation and Analysis

In the story’s closing lines, Michelle thinks about a brochure she read about breastfeeding, and how her experience of the let-down reflex—the moment when her breastmilk finally came in—was far different than what the brochure had described. The brochure treads lightly in its description of the let-down reflex, describing it as a gentle sensation that feels like “tightening or tingling,” and it doesn’t speak to whether there are certain emotions that might accompany these sensations. By contrast, Michelle’s experience of the let-down reflect is all-encompassing: it’s physically intense and sudden, and carries with it an effusion of emotion. Throughout the story, Michelle has been holding back frustrated tears over her inability to breastfeed Jason *and* about Des’s obvious failures as a father. Because of this, the closing line about how the flowing breastmilk is like “the way tears will start” after someone’s been holding them

back suggests that these emotions have been let loose: both her sadness at what she can see will be the failure to create

an “ideal” family with Des, and her joy at being able to provide by herself for her baby.



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.

FIVE-DOLLAR FAMILY

Michelle's eyes are barely open as she listens to a midwife instruct her to wake up her newborn baby boy every three hours, which will help make him interested in feeding and help Michelle's breastmilk come in. This particular midwife is "the bossy one." The other one is a lot more gentle and compassionate, and always asks Michelle how she's doing rather than scolding her or examining her stitches.

The midwives squeeze a thick, sticky substance from Michelle's breasts. Just two days ago this would have been embarrassing and horrifying for Michelle, but now she allows them to "poke and probe and pump her." Her body feels so saggy and uncomfortable that it doesn't even feel like it belongs to her anymore.

Michelle's baby's red, scrunched face looks "startling in its strangeness." Michelle had thought her baby would look more like the one on the front of the baby-oil bottle: happy and rosy, with a little tuft of hair. When Des first saw their baby, he'd looked "perplexed"—just like he did throughout the labor.

Now, Michelle asks Des if he'd like to hold their son. Michelle herself is getting better at holding her baby and is less scared about it—it's like "holding a big parcel of hot chips." Des nervously declines, and Michelle pities him. He offers to purchase a disposable camera, which Michelle takes as Des's version of apologizing for pawning her camera.

The midwife's instructions regarding how and why Michelle needs to wake up her newborn suggests that this is Michelle's first baby, and so she is just beginning to learn how to step into this new role as a mother. That she misses the kinder, gentler midwife suggests that Michelle is overwhelmed at suddenly being thrust into motherhood.



The thick, sticky substance described in this passage is colostrum, the first form of milk that a woman produces when breastfeeding. The story is bookended with references to breastfeeding—it opens with this reference to colostrum, and it ends with Michelle's breastmilk finally coming in days later—which underscores that the experience of stepping into motherhood for the first time is of central importance to the story. Michelle describes how the midwives "poke and probe and pump" her, implying that she's treated impersonally while in the hospital. "Poke and probe" resembles the phrase "poke and prod" (e.g., cattle are poked and prodded along to move them), which adds to the suggestion that Michelle is being treated more like a cow—a producer of milk—than like a person.



This passage introduces two of the story's key themes: that of expectations versus reality, which is a tension that runs throughout the story, and the idea of having a picture-perfect family, which is something Michelle strives for. That Des is described as looking "perplexed"—as opposed to looking overjoyed, emotional, or excited, for instance—is an early indication that he will struggle to step into a fatherly role.



Michelle's initial fear of holding her baby gives way to the realization that holding him when he's swaddled is a lot like "holding a big parcel of hot chips," or French fries. This is another example of how motherhood subverts Michelle's expectations, and it also shows her more confidently stepping into her role as a mother with practice.



Later that night, Michelle quietly inches out of bed and across her hospital room to Jason's crib. Even though she's been warned not to do so, she carefully lifts Jason out of the crib and settles him in bed next to her. She's not tired—a bright, fiery energy is pulsing through her, as if someone turned on a light switch.

Michelle quietly sings little made-up songs to Jason before sneaking him back into his crib. She knows the midwives wouldn't approve, but she thinks that they'd back down if she told them off. Her bright energy is colored "with a private, freshly minted exhilaration."

When the midwives do their rounds the next morning, they check if Michelle's milk has come in yet. It hasn't. They urge her to keep trying to feed Jason because doing so will stimulate her pituitary gland to release oxytocin, and then her milk will flow—this is what they call the "let-down reflex." Michelle worries that her baby will starve, but the midwife reminds her that it's only day two. Eventually, her milk should come in, and Jason will develop his sucking reflex.

The woman staying in the next hospital room pokes her head in the room and says she has the opposite problem: her baby feeds so aggressively that her nipples are cracked and painful. She whispers "conspiratorial[ly]" to Michelle that the second she gets home, she's putting her baby on formula rather than continuing with the breastfeeding, even though "these nipple Nazis" would disapprove.

Several of the anecdotes Michelle shares throughout the story depict Michelle as permissive and passive prior to giving birth (examples include Michelle's nonconfrontational attitude towards Des regarding his criminal charge and infidelity, her tolerant smile while listening to Des's father, etc.). But the idea that someone has turned on a light switch within Michelle suggests that motherhood is transforming her. And indeed, as the story continues, Michelle will increasingly lean into this new, fiery energy and shed her old passivity.



Once again, the story emphasizes that motherhood is leading Michelle to significantly break with her past passivity. As she toys with the idea of telling off the midwives, Michelle feels a "freshly minted," or new, sense of confidence and energy pulsating through her.



Michelle's struggle to successfully breastfeed her newborn is the undercurrent that runs throughout the entire story and backs up the story's claim that motherhood (and especially new motherhood) is fraught with frustration. Michelle's concern that her baby will starve suggests that she expected breastfeeding to come easily, but the reality is far more complicated. The midwives' explanation of the let-down reflex speaks to the idea that motherhood is transformational on a physical level: giving birth, followed by the mere act of attempting to breastfeed, sends a powerful signal to a woman's body that leads her to begin producing breastmilk.



Much of the story hinges on the idea that media and advertising give women inflated expectations about what childbirth, motherhood, and co-parenting will look and feel like. Here, though, the story engages with the idea that other people's expectations can be just as formative. In referring to the midwives as "nipple Nazis," the woman in the next room suggests that the midwives so firmly believe in the value of breastfeeding that they're unwilling to entertain formula as a viable alternative.



On Monday afternoon, Michelle is allowed to take a short walk in the hospital courtyard, which is where she sees a poster advertising a \$5 **family portrait** at the shopping center across the street. “Let a PROFESSIONAL PHOTOGRAPHER do a studio portrait of you both with your new baby,” the poster reads. Michelle resolves to get the portrait done tomorrow.

Michelle asks one of the nurses about the portrait special, and the nurse says it’s only on Tuesdays, so Michelle wouldn’t be able to go till the following week—the doctor has ordered her to stay in bed at least until Thursday. Michelle claims that she feels fine, though she tries to hide the deep ache coursing through her and sweat dripping down her back from the pain. Inching painfully back to her hospital room, she thinks about how every time she sees Jason’s plastic crib, she feels a mix of “disbelief, terror, and happiness.”

Later, a midwife assists Michelle in trying to breastfeed again. Michelle is annoyed that the midwife keeps referring to Jason as “Baby,” as if he didn’t have a proper name. Likewise, the midwives and doctors often talk about Michelle as if she weren’t in the room—like after the labor, when the doctors were giving Michelle stitches for a tear and talking amongst themselves while Michelle laid there shellshocked, as if she’d been flung against a wall by a bomb blast. The stitches were sharp like a barbed-wire fence, and Michelle’s skin was so swollen that it didn’t feel like it was her own.

Frustrated with Jason’s lack of interest in breastfeeding, Michelle wants to cry but knows better than to do so while the midwives are around. She knows they’re watching her like a hawk, “trained to keep an eye out for the new mothers who dissolve into weeping.” The other day, one of the midwives asked Michelle if she was experiencing any signs of postpartum depression, such as crying all the time for no reason. Michelle says no but thinks privately about how she was doing that before Jason was born.

This passage introduces the titular \$5 family portrait, which is central both to the story’s action and Michelle’s evolving understanding of family. The advertisement for the family portrait reads, “do a studio portrait of you both with your new baby,” thereby suggesting that a family consists of two parents (“you both”). Michelle clings to this more traditional understanding of family throughout her pregnancy, as shown through the anecdotes she shares later in the story.



Michelle’s willingness to lie about her severe pain underscores that the family portrait is extremely important to her—raising the question as to why this is, and why she can’t get the portrait done the following week once she’s had the chance to heal. Her cocktail of emotions when she sees her baby (“disbelief, terror, and happiness”) suggests that motherhood, and particularly new motherhood, is a complex experience of emotional extremes. Michelle’s pain, meanwhile, stresses the actual physical strain that women must endure to become mothers—something that men never have to deal with.



Here, Michelle gives two examples of receiving impersonal treatment at the hospital, and her frustration suggests that she expected mothers, and especially new mothers, would have more tender, individual attention from hospital staff after giving birth. The references to a bomb blast and barbed-wire fence carry associations with war, death, and imprisonment. In using these analogies, Michelle highlights the extreme level of shock and destruction her body endured in labor. With this, the story stresses how giving birth and becoming a mother is physically transformational—Michelle’s body quickly goes from feeling familiar to foreign to her—and also that it’s a physically excruciating experience. The story doesn’t attempt to sidestep the more unsavory parts of having a child; instead, through Michelle, the story displays many of motherhood’s physical and emotional extremes.



Even though Michelle’s narration just revealed her frustration with the impersonal treatment she’s received at the hospital, this passage suggests that she feels that the midwives can be too attentive to their patients at times—the word “hawk” makes the midwives’ attention sound threatening rather than comforting. With its reference to postpartum depression, this passage also points to the story’s overarching claim that motherhood is an emotionally complex and emotionally draining experience.



The old her, Michelle thinks, was dumb and ignorant compared to the person she is now. She had been so sure that everything was going to change for the better between her and Des after they had a baby together. When she'd look at the cards at the newsstand that pictured male models gazing adoringly at a baby in their arms, she was always so sure that that same adoration would appear in Des once he saw his baby and Michelle saw him with the baby. She'd had a "vague idea" that he'd then take care of her and the baby and be just like the men on the cards.

Prior to giving birth to Jason, Michelle believed that the birth would be redemptive for Des and for their relationship. But that Michelle now considers this past, optimistic version of her to be so foolishly naïve reveals that her expectations went unmet. Michelle's longing when looking at the male models holding babies on the greeting cards reveals her attitude towards family and fatherhood: she wants Des to be a present, committed, and tender father, even though her narration suggests that he's unlikely to be any of these things. Her "vague idea" suggests that her hopes in Des's abilities as a partner are founded on media depictions of fathers and not on any actual traits in Des himself, but that she nevertheless clings to the idea that he should show up in this way now that they're having a baby together and more formally becoming a family.



When Michelle was admitted to the hospital, she was initially grateful to have Des's familiar presence there. But once Michelle's pain intensified, Des grew nervous and looked at her with "startled distaste." She'd hoped he would soothingly rub her back like she saw in the video in antenatal class—or at least do *something* besides hanging back on the sidelines and then leaving altogether to get himself a drink.

The video Michelle watched in her antenatal, or prenatal, class informed her expectations of how Des is supposed to act while Michelle is in labor, but these expectations go unmet, too. Michelle's expectations imply that she sees childbirth—and, by extension, raising a family—as a joint effort. But Des's choice to eventually leave the room altogether suggests that he sees childbirth (and perhaps the baby itself) as Michelle's responsibility, while his nervousness and look of "startled distaste" betray what appears to be his discomfort with and fear about becoming a father.



As Michelle was preparing to give birth, the staff instructed her to "listen to her body," which she scoffed at. But as the time drew nearer, she realized that her body *did* know what to do. Labor was a whirlwind, and when it was over, Michelle realized that Des wasn't even in the room.

The whirlwind of activity that ensues as Michelle goes into labor mirrors the idea that motherhood is a complicated experience of both emotional and physical extremes. Nevertheless, the hospital staff suggest that childbirth—and, by extension, motherhood—is at least partially innate rather than learned. Just as Michelle's body eventually knows how to create and release breastmilk, her body will know how to deliver a child. That Des isn't even in the room when Michelle gives birth again shows how he's subverting Michelle's expectations of how he should act as a partner and father, and his unwillingness and inability to show up as a parenting partner for her.



Once Michelle had Jason in her arms, though, she stopped worrying about Des. She'd looked over at Des once he returned: he was slumped in a chair, avoiding her gaze and jiggling his leg nervously in his stretched-out sweatpants. "Useless," Michelle had thought irritably.

The story's description of Des in this passage frames him as a jumpy teenager rather than an excited father. That Michelle sees Des as "useless" suggests that, in this moment, she recognizes his sheer inability to step into a fatherly role the way she had hoped he would.



Back in the present, Michelle thinks about how Des has always been secretive. When someone appeared at their door a few weeks ago with a court summons for Des, and he'd simply retrieved it and sat back down in front of the TV, not saying a word to Michelle about it. Later, she'd sifted through his wallet in search of the summons, feeling guilty about it but wanting to know what he was being charged for: aggravated assault.

Des has already been charged for similar things three times, which means he has no more probations. Despite this, he hasn't mentioned it to Michelle, and his court date is on Thursday. She knows that he'll try to get the court's pity by saying he has a girlfriend and newborn baby—but no more probations means he'll go straight from the courtroom to jail. Des seems to think that if he ignores it, it will go away.

Stroking Jason's ear, Michelle thinks back to when she'd borrowed one of Des's shirts recently and found a receipt in the pocket for condoms. After nearly fainting, Michelle thought about that night when Des had brought her snacks and DVDs and then went out alone. At the time, she'd thought he was thoughtful to take care of her like that, but now she knows he was just trying to "shut her up and keep her fat and dumb and happy."

Back in the present, Des asks Michelle what day she's allowed home. When she says Thursday, he awkwardly mumbles that he has "this court thing" that morning, so Michelle tells him firmly to arrange for his mother to pick Michelle and Jason up from the hospital if Des can't do it.

The story again frames Des as a teenager here in describing his silent return back to the TV. And Michelle is depicted as a mother who is forced to sift through her uncommunicative teenager's belongings in order to learn about what's going on in their life. This backstory about Des's communication style (or lack thereof) and criminal charge begin to flesh out why Michelle deems him "useless."



Des's latest criminal charge has broad implications for his life, as well as Michelle's: though the story doesn't suggest how long Des's sentence would be, it does emphasize that Des going to jail will effectively make Michelle a single mother. This passage also speaks to Des's moral depravity: he has faced several similar criminal charges in the past, he abdicates responsibility for his latest charge by not telling Michelle about it even though it will severely impact her life, and he's likely to leverage his role as a new father in a desperate attempt to sidestep his sentence without ever acting as a real father.



Here, the story again engages with the theme of expectations versus reality when it contrasts Michelle's belief that Des was compassionately taking care of her with the reality that he was trying to appease her and keep her out of the way so that he could cheat on her. This is the second time in the story that Michelle has suggested that she used to be dumb and naïve (at least in situations regarding Des) and is wiser now, which suggests that becoming a mother has begun to transform her.



Des's evasiveness and mumbling—and the fact that he needs his mom to pick up Michelle from the hospital—again frames him as immature, as essentially a teenager. This is a sharp contrast from the fathers on the greeting cards whom Michelle hoped Des could be like.



Michelle remembers when she first met Des's parents at a barbecue. His mother fussed over Des and his younger brother, Kyle, and talked about Des's community service order—painting lines on basketball courts—as if it were a real job. Des's father, meanwhile, laughed about how Des “can be a bit of a naughty boy” and told Michelle to keep an eye on him. At the time, Michelle just smiled, feeling as permissive as Des's mother.

Now, Michelle realizes that's exactly what Des is: a “naughty boy.” She pointedly tells Des to pick her and the baby up on Thursday “after the court thing.” He gulps nervously, and Michelle feels powerful. She instructs him to buy something nice for the baby to wear in the **portrait** the following day.

The next morning, Des arrives and proudly displays what he bought for the baby: a tiny **motorcycle jacket** covered in zippers and patches. Des smiles an “idiot chimp smile,” and Michelle is horrified, knowing that this jacket must have used up most of her baby allowance—and she doesn't even have other necessities, like a changing table, yet. Des happily wrestles Jason into the jacket, and Michelle has to fight off the impulse to swat Des's hand away from their baby. She thinks that Jason will outgrow the jacket quickly, but Des will never outgrow his behavior. This, she thinks, is the real let-down reflex.

After taking her pain medication, Michelle gingerly walks through the hospital en route to get the **portrait** taken. The nurses chide her for being out of bed, but she remains resolute: she is going to get her picture taken no matter what they say.

This passage again contrasts expectations with reality. Des's mother frames Des's task of painting lines on basketball courts like it's a real job, while his father frames Des as a “naughty boy” rather than a criminal with multiple offenses who cheats on his pregnant girlfriend. Michelle's silent smile at these comments stands in stark contrast with the assertiveness she'll begin to show throughout the rest of the story.



Here, Michelle suggests that the term “naughty boy”—though a seemingly inaccurate description of a criminal—isn't all that far off. She implies that “naughty boy” is infantilizing, and because Des acts more like a teenager than a life partner and parent, the term is perhaps fitting. The way Michelle tells Des directly what he is going to do, while making clear her understanding of the gravity of the court appearance that he is trying to pretend is just a small thing, is a sharp departure from the way she quietly, tolerantly smiled at Des's father's comments in the last passage, again suggesting that something about becoming a mother has transformed and emboldened her. It's also significant that she stresses wanting Jason to look nice in the family photo, as it again suggests that getting the photo taken (and how they'll look in it) is extremely important to her. Even if Des has turned out to be disappointing, she wants to “look” like one of those idealized families, at least once.



While Michelle previously fantasized about seeing Des holding Jason, she now fights the impulse to prevent Des from even touching their baby, which confirms that her expectations about how the birth would change Des for the better were unfounded. Her narration reveals that he's foolish (he smiles an “idiot chimp smile”), financially irresponsible, and ignorant, and the tiny motorcycle jacket symbolizes this.



Michelle's fierce resolve to get the family portrait taken—despite her clear contempt for Des—begins to suggest that preserving the appearance of having a nuclear family via a single photo is perhaps more important to her than trying to make things work with Des.



When Des, Michelle, and Jason arrive at the supermarket complex where the **portraits** are being taken, Michelle firmly tells the photographer that they're there for the \$5 family special, hearing a "new hint of steel" in her voice. Her stitches are excruciating as she carefully poses in a chair and arranges Des and Jason just as she's envisioned. As the camera's flash goes off, Michelle thinks that she needs at least one picture that "looks right."

The mention of the "new hint of steel" in Michelle's voice comes right before the mention of her stitches (which she has because of the trauma of giving birth and which she previously compared to metal barbed-wire). This close association suggests that it's motherhood—and all it has entailed thus far, like suffering a deep, painful tear in childbirth—that's given Michelle this newfound strength and tenacity. Meanwhile, her thoughts about needing a picture that "looks right" confirms that she wants to hold things together with Des just for this photo, and that having two parents in the family portrait instead of one is what will make it "look[] right."



Michelle decides that they need one **family portrait** without Jason's **jacket** and tosses it to the side. She knows this picture is going to be "the one." But when the camera's flash goes off, Jason kicks suddenly and wails, and liquid seeps through Michelle's shirt: her milk has finally come in. Michelle feels like Jason's cry is tugging on a wire through her body, extending all the way down to her stitches.

One of the clearest instances of unmet expectations, the photo that Michelle expects will be "the one" that "looks right" ends with Jason kicking and screaming while milk seeps through Michelle's shirt. (It's unclear how the picture itself turns out, but given that the flash goes off before a camera captures the image, it's likely that the picture wasn't the perfectly posed one Michelle anticipated.)



Des is horrified that Michelle is about to breastfeed in public, but Michelle can hardly hear him—like the faint sound of someone's voice coming through the phone right as you hang up on them. Michelle knows she has everything Jason needs, and that Jason knows this, too.

The analogy about hanging up the phone on someone implies that Michelle is metaphorically hanging up on Des and ending their relationship. Her realization that she has everything Jason needs—and thus doesn't need Des's help with co-parenting—suggests this as well.



Michelle had read in a brochure that the let-down reflex is a tingling feeling or a tightening sensation. But for her, it's more like a strong, surging shiver that's entirely out of her control, like the feeling when a person finally stops holding back their tears.

Michelle's experience of the let-down reflex was far more sudden, emotional, and intense than the brochure led her to believe. The physical shiver—coupled with the suggestion that Michelle may be crying here—also points back to the idea that motherhood is both a physical and emotional experience, and that in Michelle's specific case the disappointments around Des combined with the realization that she can give her baby what he needs floods her with both grief and joy..





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

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Weeks, Rachel. "Five-Dollar Family." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 30 Jan 2021. Web. 30 Jan 2021.

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Weeks, Rachel. "Five-Dollar Family." LitCharts LLC, January 30, 2021. Retrieved January 30, 2021. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/five-dollar-family>.

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Kennedy, Cate. *Five-Dollar Family*. Read How You Want. 2013.

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Kennedy, Cate. *Five-Dollar Family*. Sydney: Read How You Want. 2013.