Flexion

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF CATE KENNEDY

Born in 1963 in England, Cate Kennedy moved around with her parents throughout childhood, living in different parts of the U.K. and eventually settling in Australia. She graduated with a bachelor's degree from the University of Canberra and has since gone on to teach writing at several universities. Kennedy also worked as a community arts coordinator in Victoria, Australia, and spent two years teaching adult literacy in Mexico with Australian Volunteers International in the 1990s. Kennedy is the author of the award-winning novel *The World Beneath*, as well as a number of poetry and short-story collections, including *Like a House on Fire* (in which "Flexion" appears). Her short stories have also been appeared in publications like *The New Yorker* and *Harvard Review*. Kennedy is the recipient of numerous literary awards, including the Age Short Story Award, the NSW Premier's People's Choice Award, and the Stella Prize. She currently lives in Victoria.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Though the setting of "Flexion" is somewhat nondescript, it takes place rural Australia, likely in the mid-2000s. Australia is one of the most urbanized nations in the world—as of 2016, 90 percent of the population was concentrated in less than 1 percent of the country's land area. As such, people like Frank and Mrs. Slovak, the main characters in the story who earn a living off of a one-man sheep farm, are the minority. Most of the growth and job opportunities in Australia arise out of major urban centers like Sydney and Melbourne, whereas rural farmers often struggle to make a living. This is certainly the case for the Slovaks: their house is run-down, Mrs. Slovak fantasizes about being able to afford a new car, and the couple must be diligent to keep the farm from going under after Frank has a serious accident. "Flexion" is thus a story that's implicitly impacted by the modern Australian economy, as the Slovaks' financial struggles subtly underpin their marital conflicts.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"Flexion" and the other short stories in *Like a House on Fire* are works of realism: they portray both the mundanity and the tragedy of everyday life in a pared-down, honest manner. Other realist books by Australian authors include Charlotte Wood's *The Weekend*, Toni Jordan's *Nine Days*, and Favel Parrett's *Past the Shallows*. In its focus on a troubled, imbalanced marriage, "Flexion" is similar to other short stories like Jhumpa Lahiri's "A Temporary Matter," in which an estranged married couple confesses their secrets to each other during a power outage, and Edith Wharton's "The Other Two," in which gender inequality drives a wedge between two newlyweds. Additionally, Cate Kennedy has cited authors like Roald Dahl (*Matilda*), John Steinbeck (*East of Eden*) and Harper Lee (*To Kill a Mockingbird*) as influences on her writing.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Flexion
- **Where Written:** Australia
- **When Published:** 2008 in *Harvard Review*; 2012 in *Like a House on Fire*
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Short Story
- **Setting:** Rural Australia
- **Climax:** As the Slovaks are lying in bed together, Mrs. Slovak takes Frank's hand in hers and places it over Frank's heart.
- **Antagonist:** Frank Slovak
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Short and Sweet. Cate Kennedy's favorite short story is actually a classic children's book: Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*.

PLOT SUMMARY

Frank Slovak, a sheep farmer, is severely **injured** when his tractor flips and pins him underneath. People in town gossip about the accident: they say that Frank's shy wife, Mrs. Slovak, was the one to find him, and they imagine how terrified they would feel in her shoes. On the day of the accident, Mrs. Slovak pulls up to the house after grocery shopping and sees the tractor overturned out on the farm. Running across the paddocks to the field, she finds Frank crushed beneath the huge machine. After turning the tractor off, Mrs. Slovak tells Frank that she's going to run and call for help—and she knows Frank is badly hurt when he closes his eyes instead of shouting at her. Frank's face is pained, and Mrs. Slovak thinks that all the emotions he's repressed and hidden away from her throughout their 18-year marriage are showing now. It takes Mrs. Slovak 15 minutes to run to the house, call an ambulance, and run back.

Once Frank has been in the hospital for over a week, the townspeople continue to talk. The consensus is that Frank's life is effectively over—he's always been a hot-headed, solitary man

with a deep desire to work hard. Now, Frank is partially paralyzed and will likely never regain the function he once had, though no one in town is sure of his exact injures. When people begin staring at Mrs. Slovak sympathetically in public and leaving meals and gifts on the Slovaks' doorstep, Mrs. Slovak becomes bitter. When she had a miscarriage years ago, Frank forced her to keep it a secret, and so she never got this kind of community support. Though Frank was adamant that they should put the loss behind them, Mrs. Slovak now feels haunted and weighed down by her grief.

Soon, Frank comes down with a serious case of pneumonia while he's recovering from the accident in the hospital. Listening to Frank struggle to breathe, Mrs. Slovak imagines that the illness is similar to drowning; it must be a relief to finally die from it. She's surprised at how easily she's able to think of Frank in the past tense—given the prognosis of his injuries, death seems like the best-case scenario to Mrs. Slovak. She begins fantasizing about Frank passing away: telling the doctor to take him off life support, delivering the news to others, the small funeral she'd hold.

But much to Mrs. Slovak's chagrin, Frank recovers from his pneumonia, and the doctors are even optimistic that he'll regain some movement. Mrs. Slovak pretends to be relieved, but inside she's seething with rage as she watches Frank stubbornly relearn to feed himself. When the doctor leaves the room, Frank slaps Mrs. Slovak's hand out of the way when she goes to wipe his mouth—this is just like Frank, Mrs. Slovak thinks. As Frank continues to progress throughout the following weeks, Mrs. Slovak holds out hope that Frank will be unable to maintain the farm so they'll have to move to a bungalow in town. With the insurance payout, money from selling the farm, and the caretaker pension Mrs. Slovak hopes to get, she thinks she may even get a new car. Meanwhile, men from around town come to repair Frank's tractor and take the Slovaks' lambs to market for them.

One day, Frank exceeds the doctors' expectations in physical therapy and manages to stand and take a step. Mrs. Slovak continues feigning gratitude for Frank's improvements, all the while secretly loathing him. That afternoon, when Mrs. Slovak returns home, she finds a local plumber at the house: he's installed a handicap-accessible shower and sink for the Slovaks, free of charge. He also informs Mrs. Slovak that another farmer is going to come bale up Frank's hay for him. Again, Mrs. Slovak pretends to be appreciative but seethes with resentment. She knows that this will be her new normal: acting thankful for Frank's recovery all the while being bossed around and berated by him. Having limited movement will be fine for Frank, Mrs. Slovak thinks, since he's already unemotional and unmoving toward her.

When Frank comes home from the hospital, he complains about the cost of the remodeled bathroom and handicap ramp, but Mrs. Slovak assures him that the improvements were done free of charge. Frank brushes her off, goes outside, and stares at all the baled hay stacked neatly in the shed. Mrs. Slovak imagines him falling to the ground and lying there, curled up and pathetic, so unlike the in-control Frank she's used to. When Frank comes inside, Mrs. Slovak helps him take a shower, noticing how decrepit and weak his body looks. Frank is rude and combative as Mrs. Slovak gives him instructions, but when she helps him adjust the water temperature, she can tell he wants to thank her. She thinks that this is the longest conversation they've had in months.

After the shower, Mrs. Slovak gives Frank a shave and a haircut. Then, she hands him the telephone and a list of numbers of everyone who helped them while Frank was hospitalized. She tells him to call each of these people and thank them. When Frank refuses, Mrs. Slovak reminds Frank that they're going to need favors now if they want to keep the farm from going under. She again notices how pathetic Frank looks. Angling the mirror she used for the haircut toward him, Mrs. Slovak orders him to look at himself and then to make the calls.

That night, as Mrs. Slovak and Frank lie next to each other in bed, Mrs. Slovak thinks about the "flexion" exercises a physical therapist performed on Frank in the hospital. The movements, which consisted of repeatedly flexing and unflexing different joints, were meant to encourage muscle memory and prevent atrophy. Suddenly, Mrs. Slovak notices that Frank is silently crying next to her. She's never seen Frank like this before; to save him the humiliation, she decides to turn away rather than try to help him. Then, Frank confesses to Mrs. Slovak that he'd wanted to die while she ran to call the ambulance—that's what he could have given her, he says. Mrs. Slovak reflects on the day of the accident and thinks she knows how Frank feels: she knows what it's like to feel paralyzed, helpless, and wounded. Mrs. Slovak reaches over and gently takes Frank's hand in hers. She raises their arms and flexes their elbows together, places Frank's hand over his own heart, and holds it there.

CHARACTERS

Frank's Wife / Mrs. Slovak – Mrs. Slovak, the 45-year-old wife of sheep farmer Frank Slovak, is the one who finds Frank pinned under his overturned tractor at the beginning of the story. For the duration of the Slovak's 18-year marriage, the timid and submissive Mrs. Slovak has been ignored, belittled, and outright abused by Frank, who's alternately hot-tempered and stoic. Still traumatized by the miscarriage she experienced years before the events of "Flexion," Mrs. Slovak is embittered by Frank's denial of her trauma and the community's perception of her as "invisible." As such, when Frank has his accident and is partially paralyzed in the hospital, Mrs. Slovak's long-held resentment of Frank deepens, and she begins to fantasize about how much happier and freer she'd be if he died. But much to her disappointment, Frank survives—though he's

permanently handicapped, and this means that Mrs. Slovak becomes the dominant one in the household for the first time. While Mrs. Slovak is repulsed and even frightened by Frank's weakened, frail **body** and is tempted to treat him with the same cruelty he's shown her over the years, she's taken aback when she realizes that Frank is actually grateful for her help. After taking a stand and forcing the withdrawn, prideful Frank to call and thank everyone who helped them during his hospitalization, Mrs. Slovak ultimately softens and empathizes with Frank when she sees him crying in bed next to her in the dark. Realizing that their marriage requires effort to sustain, much like Frank's muscles require "flexion" exercises to prevent atrophy, Mrs. Slovak takes Frank's hand and holds it over his heart. Mrs. Slovak's progression from helpless victimization to deep-seated bitterness to this subtle gesture of compassion and togetherness encapsulates the story's message that equality and solid communication are the makings of true empowerment and healthy relationships.

Frank Slovak – Frank is a middle-aged shepherd who lives with his wife of 18 years, Mrs. Slovak, on a small farm in rural Australia. At the beginning of the story, Frank's tractor overturns on him and **injures** his spine—an accident that leaves him partially paralyzed in the hospital and that drives the rest of the story's plot. Prior to this, Frank is a hardworking man who takes pride in himself and refuses to be beholden to anyone. But his self-sufficiency and stoic disposition also have a dark side: Frank is withdrawn from people in town to the point of hostility, and he's verbally and physically abusive toward Mrs. Slovak. When he's not lashing out, he's cold and uncommunicative—he barely speaks to Mrs. Slovak and even forced her to keep her miscarriage a secret years before "Flexion" takes place. As such, there's a great deal of tension and unspoken resentment between the couple. After Frank's accident, he defies odds by learning to walk again, all the while berating his wife and resisting her help. And unbeknownst to him, Mrs. Slovak despises him and actively wishes he'd die. But when Frank returns home from the hospital, the couple experiences a shift in their dynamic, as the newly disabled Frank is now dependent upon Mrs. Slovak for help. As such, they begin taking subtle but meaningful steps to communicate more, understand each other's roles in the marriage, and empathize with each other's suffering. At the end of the story, Frank cries in front of Mrs. Slovak—a rare display of vulnerability—and humbly confesses his desire to protect Mrs. Slovak from pain. "Flexion" thus leaves readers with the hope that even a character as unlikeable as the emotionally stunted and abusive Frank can make progress toward expressing himself and fostering healthier relationships.

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.

ABUSE AND POWER DYNAMICS

"Flexion" focuses on Frank and Mrs. Slovak, a married couple whose relationship is riddled with abuse, neglect, and alienation. This is largely due to the couple's imbalanced power dynamic: Frank is dominant to the point of cruelty, while Mrs. Slovak is submissive to a fault. However, when Frank is seriously **injured** in a farming accident and becomes disabled, this dynamic is switched: suddenly, Mrs. Slovak has power over Frank, as Frank is entirely dependent upon her to even do small tasks like showering. Through the couple's role reversal, the story shows that an imbalance of power inevitably leads to abusive relationships, and it ultimately argues that trading places in an unequal dynamic doesn't result in genuine empowerment for the formerly submissive person. Rather, making an effort to equalize the dynamic—that is, choosing compassion for rather than control over the other person—is what makes a relationship healthy for both parties.

Early on in the story, it's clear that there is a severe imbalance of power between Frank and Mrs. Slovak that manifests in both verbal and physical abuse. Frank is overbearingly dominant, whereas Mrs. Slovak is submissive. Frank is known around town as having a "a temper like a rabid dog," while his wife is known as "the quiet one" who "wouldn't say boo" to anyone. Right away, readers can intuit that this mismatched combination of Frank's controlling, hotheaded nature and Mrs. Slovak's timidity doesn't bode well for their relationship. Indeed, when Frank's tractor overturns and pins him underneath, Mrs. Slovak knows that Frank's injuries are serious when she "sees him swallow and close his eyes instead of shouting at her." Later, when Frank is partially paralyzed in the hospital, he forcefully slaps Mrs. Slovak's hand away when she tries to wipe his face for him. "That's Frank all over. Can't hold a fork, but can still find a way to smack her out of the way," Mrs. Slovak thinks. Together, these instances imply that the couple's unequal dynamic has led to abuse, both verbal ("shouting at her") and physical ("smack her out of the way")—and that this is something Mrs. Slovak has come to expect and silently tolerate in their marriage.

However, when Frank comes home from the hospital after his accident, the couple's roles reverse: Frank is no longer physically capable of abusing Mrs. Slovak, and Mrs. Slovak has newfound power over him. As a disabled person trying to adapt to his new life, Frank is dependent upon Mrs. Slovak to help bathe, feed, and generally care for him. As such, he's now the submissive one in the relationship by default. This causes Frank to feel a great deal of shame, as he's adamant that he doesn't

want to be a burden on anyone. Mrs. Slovak senses this weakness and makes a decision to use it to her advantage, a vengeful attitude that shows how deeply Frank's abuse affected her over the years. Mrs. Slovak actively wished that her cruel husband would die in the hospital—and now that he's survived, she's eager to treat him with the same cruelty he's showed her over the years. Repulsed by Frank's withered, frail body, she tells him to "take a good look" at himself in the mirror and forces him to call the people who did them favors while Frank was in the hospital—knowing that both of these things will degrade and humiliate the headstrong, prideful Frank. Mrs. Slovak has become the dominant one in the household, and her behavior confirms that such an unequal dynamic will inevitably lead to an abuse of power.

Ultimately, Mrs. Slovak doesn't give in to replicating Frank's abuse now that she has the upper hand—she realizes that domineering over another person and truly being empowered are two different things. On Frank's first night home, as the couple lies in bed, Mrs. Slovak notices Frank silently crying next to her. Seeing this, Mrs. Slovak thinks she "has a sense of how it is, suddenly," and she relates Frank's physical paralysis in the hospital to her own figurative paralysis that she's experienced for years in their abusive marriage. Essentially, Mrs. Slovak empathizes with Frank: she knows "how it is" to feel weak, helpless, and afraid. Further, Mrs. Slovak reflects that she "understands better than anyone" what it's like to be hurt, likening Frank's pain and humiliation to her own trauma within their relationship. As a kind of symbolic peace offering, she reaches across the bed, takes Frank's hand in hers, and holds it over Frank's heart. This empathy with Frank's suffering and subsequent gesture of togetherness imply a realization on Mrs. Slovak's part: that controlling and abusing Frank like he controlled and abused her won't give her lasting empowerment or fulfillment. Instead, she opts to extend compassion and make a subtle but meaningful attempt to reach out and equalize their dynamic—something that will benefit them both in the long run.

The story ends ambiguously with Mrs. Slovak holding Frank's hand in this way, tentatively opening the door for a new chapter of their marriage wherein Mrs. Slovak and Frank are a teammates rather than adversaries. And significantly, Frank doesn't resist or slap Mrs. Slovak's hand away like he did in the hospital. This mutual gesture of solidarity, then, suggests that compassion is the way forward—only by regarding each other as equals can two people come together and make progress toward a healthier relationship.

COMMUNICATION

In addition to the outright abuse that plagues married couple Frank and Mrs. Slovak's relationship, a lack of communication also has a devastating effect on them. The Slovaks are notably closed off and lack any vulnerability or emotional intimacy, a dynamic that leaves them miserable and estranged from each other. However, this status quo is threatened when Frank has a farming accident that leaves him disabled, and communication becomes necessary for the couple to navigate their new situation. In tracing the Slovaks' progression from a detrimental a lack of communication to this tentative fresh start, the story ultimately suggests that openness, vulnerability, and mutual effort are essential for any relationship to function properly.

Prior to Frank's accident, he and Mrs. Slovak barely communicate, and this lack of openness leads to a great deal of resentment and marital strain. Years before Frank's accident—in which his tractor overturns and **injures** his spine—Mrs. Slovak lost a pregnancy. Frank refused to let anyone else know about the miscarriage and still won't talk about it, which has resulted in Mrs. Slovak feeling like they're dragging the loss "like a black deadweight at their backs." Mrs. Slovak is already haunted by the trauma of the loss, and Frank's enforced silence only exacerbates it. Her pain is further compounded by Frank's general stoicism. After Frank is left disabled by the accident, Mrs. Slovak thinks, "Limited mobility is actually going to suit Frank [...] he's been minimising all his movements for years, barely turning his head to her when she speaks, sitting there stonily in the kitchen, immoveable as a mountain. Unbending." Lack of communication has damaged the couple's relationship to the point that Mrs. Slovak has come to expect being ignored and having no one to confide in—the Slovaks are totally alienated from each other. In fact, there is so much unspoken resentment in their relationship that Mrs. Slovak actually hopes Frank will die in the hospital. She "[tries] to show brightness and gratitude" as the doctors deliver the good news that Frank will recover, "while inside her, choking rage burns like a grassfire, like gasoline." In lieu of being able to voice her concerns to her husband, Mrs. Slovak despises him and wishes ill will on him. Clearly, their uncommunicative marriage has all but destroyed itself.

But when Frank comes home from the hospital, the Slovaks find that their new life necessitates increased communication. The situation is unfamiliar and awkward for both of them: Frank is embarrassed that he needs help to care for himself and perform basic tasks, and Mrs. Slovak is disturbed by how weak and helpless Frank has become. She thinks about the possibility of Frank losing his balance and "toppling, curled there on the ground." She's only ever seen Frank poised, stoic, and in control—but both Frank and Mrs. Slovak realize that given Frank's limited functioning and dependency on Mrs. Slovak, some level of vulnerability is now unavoidable. Indeed, when Mrs. Slovak is helping Frank shower, she senses that he wants to thank her. But "even without the thanks [...] she thinks it's probably the longest conversation they've had for months." Their new, uncomfortable reality clearly necessitates more communication than they're used to, and even this simple conversation goes a long way in showing Mrs. Slovak that she's

appreciated. Thus, the story shows how openness and vulnerability are necessary for a relationship—especially one challenged by a tragedy—to function, and particularly for both parties to feel understood and appreciated. This idea also extends to the people who helped the Slovaks while Frank was hospitalized. After Frank's shower, Mrs. Slovak insists that he call up everyone who did them a favor and thank them. Having just experienced the positive effects of even a small effort to communicate openly, Mrs. Slovak is now adamant that Frank should extend that courtesy to others. It seems there's no going back to the way things were—just as the Slovaks' daily lives were changed by the accident, so too must their communication (with each other and with everyone else in their lives) adapt and improve to ensure that they can weather those changes.

Near the end of the story, Mrs. Slovak reflects on the "flexion" exercises a physical therapist performed on Frank in the hospital to prevent his muscles from atrophying. At home, as the couple lies in bed, Mrs. Slovak raises Frank's arm and flexes their elbows together, mimicking one of these therapeutic movements. This gesture is highly symbolic: it suggests that Mrs. Slovak realizes that she and Frank must perform a kind of "flexion" in their marriage as well, putting in habitual effort and maintenance to keep lines of communication open and prevent their relationship from atrophying just like Frank's muscles. And with a path to better communication tentatively opened, the story's conclusion provides hope that with consistent, mutual effort, even two estranged people can achieve a relationship that's open, supportive, and intimate.

TRAUMA AND SUPPORT

Neither Frank Slovak nor his wife, Mrs. Slovak, are strangers to trauma: Mrs. Slovak suffers a miscarriage prior to the events of "Flexion," and Frank has a farming accident at the beginning of the story that leaves him permanently disabled. Though the couple has a troubled marriage and they've been alienated from each other for years, they have similar experiences as they suffer from their personal traumas: both are devastated and ashamed, and neither receives the individualized kinds of support that they desperately need from each other or from the community. As such, "Flexion" shows how trauma can be both physically and mentally destructive on an individual and how improper support can worsen the problem. The story makes the case that the best course of action in response to trauma is simply recognizing the sufferer's pain, empathizing, and being openminded about how to offer effective support.

After Mrs. Slovak loses a pregnancy, a lack of emotional support means that she suffers much more than she needs to. After the miscarriage, Mrs. Slovak longs to be comforted by others and to talk openly about her trauma. But Frank's attitude makes her feel anything but consoled or supported: he takes her to a hospital out of town so the local nurses won't find out about the miscarriage, and he refuses to let any of the townspeople know about it either. Afterward, he's adamant that "We're putting this behind us," forbidding either of them to discuss what happened. Unsurprisingly, this makes Mrs. Slovak feel ashamed and unable to move on, showing how a lack of support can worsen an already traumatizing situation. Indeed, Mrs. Slovak feels that she and Frank have become "beasts of burden" to the miscarriage, dragging the trauma around yet refusing to acknowledge it. As a result, after Frank is pinned under his overturned tractor and left partially paralyzed, Mrs. Slovak is resentful of how people look at her sympathetically and bring food and gifts to the Slovaks' door. "And all for Frank, she thinks with bitterness. Frank, who'd rather cut off his own hand than be beholden to anyone […] who liked his privacy to the point of glowering, hostile secrecy." Mrs. Slovak wishes she'd received people's condolences when she'd had the miscarriage, since she—unlike Frank—would have appreciated it. In this case, brushing trauma under the rug makes Mrs. Slovak feel unsupported by her husband and also unable to receive support from others, compounding her pain to the extent that she's still haunted and embittered by the loss many years after it occurred.

In the aftermath of his accident, Frank also experiences what it's like to receive the wrong kind of support. Described as a lifelong "glutton for work," Frank is someone who needs to feel like a provider: useful, capable, and respectable. But as a newly disabled person, Frank is unable to work on the farm or even to care for himself on a basic level. This is a traumatizing experience for Frank: even beyond his physical **injuries**, he's devastated by his loss of agency, livelihood, and purpose. During this time, both Mrs. Slovak and their small, rural community step up to help Frank. Mrs. Slovak becomes his caretaker, while men in town repair Frank's tractor, take the Slovaks' lambs to market, bale up their hay, and even install a handicap-accessible shower and sink for the couple. While these gestures are ostensibly kind and helpful, they don't have the intended effect on Frank. He's adamant that "I'm not going to be a burden on anyone," and the favors he receives make him feel like just that: infantilized and useless, like a charity case. As such, it's clear that even well-intended gestures can worsen people's trauma if it's not the specific kind of support they need.

It's not until the Slovaks finally open up to each other and offer a mutual recognition of each other's suffering that they begin to feel adequately supported. Near the end of the story, Frank admits to Mrs. Slovak that he'd wanted to die under his tractor while Mrs. Slovak went to call the ambulance. "That's what I could give you," he says. Frank hoped to save Mrs. Slovak the pain of watching him suffer and then having to care for him if he survived, and thus, Frank's reasoning for denying the miscarriage is also brought to light: he likely just wanted to make Mrs. Slovak's trauma go away. With this small yet

powerful revelation, Frank implicitly acknowledges how much Mrs. Slovak has suffered since losing her pregnancy and how afraid he is of adding to her pain. Just after this, Mrs. Slovak reflects on Frank's accident and thinks that she "understands better than anyone [...] the painful stretch of sinew, the crack of dislocation." In other words, having experienced loss herself, she empathizes with Frank's feelings of physical and emotional pain. Then, noticing that Frank is crying in bed next to her, she quietly reaches out and holds his hand rather than making any grand gesture to help him. In this moment, both of them seem comforted and at peace for the first time in many years. Thus, together, Frank's candid admission and Mrs. Slovak's simple yet significant show of solidarity demonstrate how often, the proper way to comfort someone isn't ignoring their problems or making assumptions about what will help someone. Rather, effective support simply entails legitimizing the other person's pain, offering a shoulder to lean on, and being open to what they need.

The story doesn't offer tidy resolutions for Frank or Mrs. Slovak: when "Flexion" ends, both of them still have plenty of trauma to work through, and neither has definitively established how best to support the other. But given the newfound sense of clarity and cohesion that the Slovaks experience after acknowledging each other's suffering for the first time, the story suggests that for traumatized people, simply being authentically seen—rather than fixed on other people's terms—is what's important.

SYMBOLS

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

FRANK'S BODY

Frank Slovak's injured, weakened body in the aftermath of his farming accident symbolizes his broken marriage with his wife, Mrs. Slovak. At the beginning of "Flexion," sheep farmer Frank is severely injured and partially paralyzed when his tractor overturns on him and crushes his spine. After a months-long hospital stay, Frank regains some limited movement, but his body is disabled and wasted away: "he's as scared and frail as an old, old man," Mrs. Slovak thinks. As the Slovaks have had an abusive, uncommunicative marriage for many years, Frank's atrophied state is a physical manifestation of the couple's emotionally atrophied relationship—and both of these problems weigh on the couple in an obvious yet unspoken manner.

But at the end of the story, as Frank silently cries next to her bed, Mrs. Slovak thinks back to the titular "flexion" exercises that a physical therapist performed on Frank in the hospital. This repeated flexing of joints was meant to encourage muscle memory and prevent the very atrophy that's affecting Frank now that he's stopped doing the exercises. As a kind of symbolic peace offering and gesture of solidarity, Mrs. Slovak performs one of these movements on Frank: she takes Frank's hand and raises his arm with hers, flexing their elbows together. She then places Frank's own hand over his heart and holds it there—and importantly, he doesn't slap her hand away like he did earlier in the story. Having lacked any openness or affection for years, the couple shares a rare moment of intimacy that is one of both bodily and interpersonal "flexion," ushering in the potential for a healthier, more communicative relationship if the Slovaks are willing to put in the kind of habitual effort that any therapeutic measure requires. As such, Frank's frail body comes to represent not only the Slovaks' troubled past but also the possibility of a fresh start toward a better marriage.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Scribe edition of *Like a House on Fire* published in 2012.

Flexion Quotes

Sees too, as she pulls his shirt up to shade his eyes, that every emotion he's withheld from her for the last eighteen years, every flinch and grimace and jerk of the eyebrows and lips, is boiling and writhing across his face now. It's as if the locked strongbox inside has burst open and everything in there is rippling free and exorcised to the surface, desperately making its escape.

Related Characters: Frank Slovak, Frank's Wife / Mrs. Slovak

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 2-3

Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of "Flexion," sheep farmer Frank Slovak's tractor overturns and pins him underneath, leaving him seriously injured and partially paralyzed. When Frank's wife, Mrs. Slovak, finds him and begins to help him, she notices the rare show of emotions playing out on her husband's face. This introduces the lack of communication that's plagued the Slovaks' marriage for nearly two decades—Frank is a cold, stoic man who rarely speak to or even acknowledges his wife, and it's only when he's in severe agony that his emotions begin "boiling and writing

across his face."

The story later shows how Frank's emotional repression and distance affects his wife: Mrs. Slovak feels underappreciated and alienated in their marriage to the point that she's become deeply resentful of Frank, even hoping he'll die in the hospital. This passage thus provides insight into the one of the story's central arguments: that a lack of communication can effectively destroy a relationship. The fact that it takes a severe tragedy like this farming accident to bring Frank's withheld emotions "rippling free and exorcised to the surface" suggests that, for couples like the Slovaks who lack open communication, it often takes a significant event or a paradigm shift to uncover unspoken, lurking conflict.

> The year she'd lost the baby, he'd driven her home from the hospital—the big hospital, half an hour away, so that not even the local nurses would know—and told her, looking straight ahead through the windscreen, 'We're putting this behind us.'
>
> No jars of jam then, no lavender soap, not a word spoken or confided, until she'd felt she might go mad with the denial of it. They put it behind them, alright. They harnessed themselves to it, and dragged it like a black deadweight at their backs. They became its beasts of burden. And not a neighbour in sight, then, to drop by with a crumb of pity or a listening ear. Frank had decided that nobody was to know.

Related Characters: Frank Slovak (speaker), Frank's Wife / Mrs. Slovak

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mrs. Slovak remembers when (years before the events of "Flexion") she lost a pregnancy. Her husband, Frank, took her to an out-of-town hospital and forbade her to talk about the miscarriage for fear of anyone finding out. His adamance that they're "putting this behind us" did the opposite of comforting Mrs. Slovak: rather than being able to healthily express and cope with her grief, she was forced to bottle up her emotions. She'd felt like "she might go mad with the denial of it," and even now, it seems like she and Frank are "beasts of burden" as they're weighed down by the unspoken trauma of the loss. This emphasizes how harmful a lack of open communication can be in a relationship—particularly one that's challenged by a tragedy—and sets up the story's examination of how a lack of proper support can exacerbate an already traumatic situation.

As such, after Frank's farming accident, Mrs. Slovak becomes deeply resentful when the community begins showing sympathy and bringing food and gifts for the Slovaks. Having been denied any support or opportunity to grieve in the wake of the miscarriage, Mrs. Slovak is bitter about the attention her husband is receiving—especially since he doesn't even appreciate it. "[N]ot a neighbour in sight, then, to drop by with a crumb of pity or a listening ear," she thinks, referring to how she had to shoulder the weight of her traumatic miscarriage alone. Through these contrasting experiences of trauma, "Flexion" shows how being denied support can worsen trauma and leave people feeling embittered and alienated even years after a tragedy.

> 'I'm not going to be a burden on anyone, is that clear?' he mutters to her when the physios finally leave them alone for the afternoon. And knocks her hand away, as she goes to wipe some gravy off his chin.
>
> That's Frank all over. Can't hold a fork, but can still find a way to smack her out of the way.

Related Characters: Frank Slovak (speaker), Frank's Wife / Mrs. Slovak

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

After an afternoon of learning how refeed himself, Frank unappreciatively slaps his wife's hand away when she tries to wipe food off of his face. Prior to this passage, the reader has likely intuited that Frank is verbally abusive toward Mrs. Slovak, as she's used to being ignored, belittled, and berated by him. But the word "still" in her reflection that Frank can "still find a way to smack her out of the way" implies that Frank is physically abusive as well, as this kind of behavior is seemingly habitual and expected. The story thus shows how an imbalanced marital dynamic, like the one between hyper-dominant Frank and hyper-submissive Mrs. Slovak, tends to enable an abuse of power that can manifest verbally and/or physically.

Further, Frank's adamance that "I'm not going to be a burden on anyone" suggests that he's afraid of becoming the submissive one in the relationship now that he's dependent upon others for help—and this fear is likely a partial reason for his lashing out at Mrs. Slovak. Just as Mrs. Slovak didn't receive the support she wanted after her miscarriage, the well-intentioned help people are providing Frank doesn't seem to be what he wants or needs, again showing the negative impact that improper support can have on a traumatized person.

❝ Because now any fool can see how it's going to be. Frank unable to sit at the desk, standing over her telling her how to do the books, ordering her round and snapping at her. In the ute beside her as she drives, sighing with contempt every time she crunches the gears, unable even to get out and open the gates for her, Frank hovering over her entire working day, badgering her and criticising her and depending on her for everything. And her, running the gauntlet outside church and in town, having to dutifully tell everyone how lucky they'd been.

Related Characters: Frank Slovak, Frank's Wife / Mrs. Slovak

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

While Frank is hospitalized, people from the Slovaks' small, rural community begin doing favors for Frank around the house and on the farm. After a local plumber installs a handicap-accessible shower and sink for free, Mrs. Slovak feigns gratitude while secretly seething with rage, as she's come to resent Frank to the point that she wishes he'd die instead of recover and come home from the hospital. She dreads going back to a life of Frank "ordering her round and snapping at her […] badgering her and criticising her and depending on her for everything." This deep-seated hatred shows how deeply a power imbalance in a relationship, like the one that plagues the Slovaks' relationship, can affect a person psychologically.

Though wishing death on another person—particularly one's spouse—is cruel, Mrs. Slovak feels this way because Frank has so thoroughly belittled and abused her over the years. Now, their marriage is all but destroyed—Mrs. Slovak would rather lose her husband altogether than continue to live under his domineering authority. And even though Frank will now be the submissive one by default, since he's handicapped and dependent upon his wife, Mrs. Slovak correctly senses that having more power over him will not mend their relationship or make her feel any better about how he treats her. Thus, the story makes the case that a power imbalance in a relationship is never healthy; a role reversal will not bring the formerly submissive person any lasting empowerment or happiness.

❝ Limited mobility is actually going to suit Frank, she thinks; he's been minimising all his movements for years, barely turning his head to her when she speaks, sitting there stonily in the kitchen, immoveable as a mountain. Unbending.

Related Characters: Frank Slovak, Frank's Wife / Mrs. Slovak

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

Though Frank recovers more functionality after his accident than the doctors originally thought possible, he'll still be handicapped when he returns home from the hospital. As Mrs. Slovak ponders Frank's limited mobility, she likens this lack of movement to his lack of communication and emotional expression in their relationship. Throughout the story, Frank's injuries symbolize the Slovaks' fraught marriage, and Mrs. Slovak seems to recognize this on some level: just as Frank is now frail, wasted away, and partially paralyzed, so too is their relationship damaged and emotionally stunted. Mrs. Slovak thus comes to see Frank's physical disability as an extension of his emotional stoicism.

With this, the story shows how devastating a lack of communication can be within a relationship, as it's seemingly damaged the Slovaks' marriage nearly as much as Frank's outright abuse has—Frank is "immovable" and "unbending," and Mrs. Slovak feels unacknowledged and belittled as a result. The fact that Mrs. Slovak believes an injury as debilitating as Frank's will essentially have no effect on their relationship shows just how dire their situation already is, and it drives home how lost and helpless people can become when they're caught in a relationship that lacks any openness or intimacy.

‘Bob Wilkes did it,’ she calls, but he doesn’t turn or respond. She imagines him giving up and toppling, curled there on the ground. She’s never seen him curled up, not even when she sat there with him in the dirt, waiting for the ambulance. He’d stayed in control then too, sprawled there licking his lips every now and again, his eyes losing focus with something like bewilderment as he stared up into the blue, something almost innocent.

Related Characters: Frank’s Wife / Mrs. Slovak (speaker), Frank Slovak

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

After Frank returns home from his long stay in the hospital, he’s critical rather than appreciative of the favors people did for him and his wife while he was recovering from his accident. Seeing their bathroom that a plumber remodeled for free and the hay that another man baled up and stacked, Frank is unresponsive and seemingly ashamed. This attitude further develops the story’s argument that in the aftermath of trauma, people often require different kinds of support than what others assume is best for them. This is certainly the case for Frank: as a lifelong hard worker who’s adamant that he doesn’t want to be a burden, having other people perform tasks for him is likely discouraging and infantilizing. Despite people’s kind intentions, the wrong kind of support can do more harm than good for a suffering person’s mental health.

This quote also speaks to the role reversal that Frank and Mrs. Slovak are experiencing now that Frank is home. Frank has always been the dominant one in their marriage, physically and verbally abusing Mrs. Slovak and exerting control over her. Now, though, Frank is disabled and is thus submissive and dependent upon Mrs. Slovak by default. However, realizing that the formerly in-control and poised Frank could fall down and lie “curled there on the ground” is actually disturbing rather than empowering for Mrs. Slovak. Though Mrs. Slovak has loathed Frank and actively wished for his death up until this point, she now seems to feel some sympathy for him. This reinforces the idea that power imbalances in relationships are never a positive thing—even when a formerly subjugated person gains power over their abuser.

God, the flesh is hanging off him. His knuckles are white and waxy as they cling to the handles; he’s as scared and frail as an old, old man. Scared to turn his head or take one hand off the rail. One misstep away from a nursing home. His hair needs a cut and she decides she’ll do it later at the kitchen table.

‘That’s better,’ he says as she adjusts the hot tap.

And she can hear that he’s about to say thank you, then stops and swallows. Even without the thanks, though, she thinks it’s probably the longest conversation they’ve had for months.

Related Characters: Frank Slovak (speaker), Frank’s Wife / Mrs. Slovak

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

On Frank’s first day home from the hospital, Mrs. Slovak helps him shower. She notices Frank’s weakened body after being partially paralyzed for months: “he’s as scared and frail as an old, old man.” Frank’s body is a symbol of the Slovaks’ fraught marriage, as his physical injuries and weakness parallel the emotional damage and fragility of their relationship. Frank and Mrs. Slovak’s broken dynamic is largely due to the power imbalance that’s long existed between them—but now, the roles are reversed. Mrs. Slovak has newfound power over Frank now that he’s dependent upon her for help, yet this doesn’t leave her feeling empowered or yearning to abuse Frank the way he’s always abused her. Rather, she actually pities Frank spite of the resentment and hatred she’s long felt for him, which suggests that gaining power over another person doesn’t result in any lasting sense of empowerment or fulfillment.

Also significant is the increased communication between Frank and Mrs. Slovak in this passage. The Slovaks’ relationship has lacked openness and vulnerability for nearly two decades, yet both Frank and Mrs. Slovak have seemingly come to realize that better communication will be necessary for them to weather the changes that Frank’s accident has brought about. This is the first time Frank has openly shown gratitude toward his wife, and Mrs. Slovak’s reflection that this is “probably the longest conversation they’ve had for months” suggests that the Slovaks are gradually realizing how vital open communication is to a functional relationship and how they’ll need to lean on each other to make it through this adjustment period.

She thinks about the physiotherapist at the hospital, lifting Frank's legs and folding them against his body, turning him on his side and gently bending his arms from shoulder to hip. Flexion, she'd called it. Exercises to flex the muscles and keep the memory of limber movement alive in the body, to stop those ligaments and tendons tightening and atrophying away.

'Just like this, Mr Slovak,' she'd said, that calm and cheerful young woman. 'You can do these yourself, just keep at it,' and she'd taken Frank's hand and made his arm describe a slow circle, then flexed the elbow to make it touch his chest. Down and back again, over and over; a gesture like a woodenly acted entreaty.

Related Characters: Frank Slovak, Frank's Wife / Mrs. Slovak

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 13-14

Explanation and Analysis

As Frank and Mrs. Slovak lie in bed together on Frank's first night home from the hospital, Mrs. Slovak recalls the "flexion" exercises that a physical therapist performed on Frank. Intended to "keep the memory of limber movement alive," the repeated flexing of different body parts was intended to prevent muscle atrophy. Frank's injuries are an ongoing symbol of the Slovaks' broken marriage, and so Mrs. Slovak's focus on this memory suggests a revelation on her part about the relationship. Frank and Mrs. Slovak have long struggled to be open with each other, which has had a devastating effect on their relationship. Now, though, each of them have realized the importance of keeping lines of communication open and embracing vulnerability. As such, the parallel between Frank's body and the Slovaks' marriage takes on new significance: just as Frank's body needed repeated physical "flexion" to be healed and strengthened, so does a broken relationship like the Slovaks' need a kind of emotional flexion—consistent communication and effort—to become healthier.

She's never seen this, and it's mortifying. They'd warned her about acute pain; she wonders about getting up and giving him some tablets, but she's so shocked all she can do is turn her head back to look up at the ceiling and spare him the shame of her scrutiny. They lie rigidly side by side.

'When you stood up to run home and call the ambulance,' he says, 'I thought, well, now I've got ten minutes. Now would be the good time to die, while you weren't there. That's what I could give you.'

Lying there, she has a sense of how it is, suddenly: willing your limbs to move but being unable to lift them. The terrible treasonous distance between them that must be traversed, the numbed heaviness of her arm.

Related Characters: Frank Slovak (speaker), Frank's Wife / Mrs. Slovak

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

After Mrs. Slovak notices Frank crying in bed next to her, a rare show of emotion on his part, she decides to "spare him the shame of her scrutiny" and pretend not to notice rather than making any grand gesture to help him. Prior to this, people's attempts to support Frank have made him feel ashamed and useless, as he's a highly self-sufficient person who hates burdening others. Thus, Mrs. Slovak's decision not to acknowledge Frank's pain is a compassionate one, as she's giving him space rather than assuming what he needs or forcing her version of support onto him.

Then, Frank confesses that he'd wanted to die during his accident when Mrs. Slovak went to call the ambulance. This admission is significant because it gives insight into how Frank responded to Mrs. Slovak's miscarriage years ago. His comment, "That's what I could give you," suggests that he wanted to die to save his wife the pain of watching him suffer and of caring for him if he survived. Thus, it's likely that his adamance about keeping the miscarriage a secret and forgetting about it was his way of trying to make Mrs. Slovak's suffering go away. By now acknowledging her pain, Frank also legitimizes her trauma for the first time—and this, the story suggests, is an important first step in supporting a person who's experienced a tragedy.

Finally, Mrs. Slovak's empathy with the paralysis Frank experienced after his accident implies that she, too, has felt paralyzed—albeit emotionally rather than physically. Having

long suffered Frank's belittlement and abuse, she now sympathizes with what it's like to feel weak, powerless, and trapped. As such, she's come to realize one of the story's central arguments: that extending compassion is healthier and more fulfilling than lording power over another person.

She lies there feeling the pulse in her husband's pitifully thin wrist under her little finger. She understands better than anyone, she thinks, the painful stretch of sinew, the crack of dislocation. Remembers herself running back over the paddocks, flying barefoot over stones and earth, looking down distractedly in the ambulance later to notice the dried blood on her feet. How fast she'd run, and how much faster she'd run back. Now, in the dark bed, she raises her arm with Frank's and gently flexes both their elbows together. She places his hand wordlessly, determinedly, over his heart, and holds it there.

Related Characters: Frank Slovak, Frank's Wife / Mrs. Slovak

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 15-16

Explanation and Analysis

In the final passage of "Flexion," as Frank and Mrs. Slovak lie in bed together, Mrs. Slovak recalls how terrified she felt during Frank's farming accident. She thinks that she knows what "the painful stretch of sinew, the crack of dislocation feels like." Throughout the story, Frank's physical injuries have served as a metaphor for the emotional damage that Frank and Mrs. Slovak's marriage has incurred over the years. Having been ignored, belittled, and outright abused by Frank for nearly two decades, Mrs. Slovak certainly does know what it's like to feel helpless and broken like Frank has felt since his accident. But rather than taking advantage of Frank's suffering and giving him a taste of his own medicine now that he's dependent upon her, Mrs. Slovak is empathetic toward him. Just prior to this, Frank and Mrs. Slovak acknowledged and legitimized each other's respective traumas for the first time, and the story suggests that Mrs. Slovak's attitude here is the way forward. Rather than trying to abuse, control, or ignore each other, the only path to a healthier marriage is one of compassion and gentle, openminded support.

Further, the physical movement that Frank and Mrs. Slovak perform together is highly symbolic. Mrs. Slovak is mimicking one of the titular "flexion" exercises that a physical therapist performed on Frank in the hospital, which were intended to prevent muscle atrophy. And given the ongoing symbolism of Frank's body, the flexion in this passage is twofold: both physical and emotional. Just as a body requires habitual movement to maintain, a relationship requires consistent mutual effort to sustain and improve. Thus, Mrs. Slovak's gesture of taking Frank's hand, flexing their arms together, and holding Frank's hand over his heart is an act of solidarity—and significantly, Frank doesn't slap her hand away as he did earlier in the story. By ending on this note, the story suggests that the Slovaks are entering into a new chapter of their marriage in which they communicate openly, show vulnerability, and work as a team. Readers are thus left with the optimistic message that even a relationship as toxic and damaged as the Slovaks' can be mended with enough "flexion."

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.

FLEXION

People gossip about Frank Slovak, who was recently **injured** in a farm accident. They say that Frank misjudged a turn and flipped his tractor over, pinning him under the heavy machine. He may as well be dead, people say, since the tractor landed directly on his spine. Frank's wife was the one who found him—at this point in recounting the story, whomever is telling it pauses to let the listener envision "a nightmare they'd all had." All the women in town have imagined hearing the roll of a tractor's engine or looking up from doing laundry to see the machine already overturned. They've visualized running across the paddocks, frenzied and helpless, feeling the eerie silence of the still air and trying to prepare for what they'd find.

By beginning the narrative with a secondhand story recounted by townspeople, Kennedy sets "Flexion" up as a story concerned with how both individuals and communities react to tragedy. The fact that Frank's accident is "a nightmare they'd all had" hints at how traumatic Frank's accident was and how the community will likely try to extend support to Frank's wife. But given that the townspeople are just gossiping at this point, it remains to be seen whether any help they offer will be genuine or effective.

Yes, people say, Frank's wife—"the quiet one"—is the one who found him. The day of the accident, as Frank's wife is returning home after grocery shopping, she sees a dust cloud eerily floating in the distance. Eventually spotting the rear wheel of the overturned tractor on the horizon, Frank's wife kicks off her nice shoes and feels the earth crumbling under her feet as she rushes over to Frank and calls out his name. As Frank turns toward her, she can see that the shirt she ironed for him last night is ripped, and there's broken glass all around him.

The townspeople's reference to Frank's wife as "the quiet one" characterizes her as someone who's docile and unassuming. The fact that she's almost always referred to as "Frank's wife" in the story (as opposed to Mrs. Slovak or her first name) further hints that she's submissive to the point of losing any sense of identity outside of her role as a housewife.

In a labored, muffled voice, "like a bad phone connection," Frank tells his wife to turn the tractor off. His wife does so slowly, shaken up as she feels the familiar keys in her hand. Just as she smells diesel dripping from the fuel tank cap, she hears Frank say, "Phone." Frank's wife realizes she left her cell phone on the passenger seat of the car, and she tells Frank she's going to go call an ambulance. At that moment, she notices that Frank swallows and closes his eyes instead of yelling at her—a sign of how serious his **injuries** are.

The fact that Mrs. Slovak expects Frank to yell at her, even in a dire moment like this, implies that there's some level of verbal abuse regularly occurring in their relationship. It's possible, then, that Frank's wife is submissive and quiet because she's afraid of upsetting Frank. Further, the description of Frank's voice as "a bad phone connection" is the story's first hint that the Slovaks also have an issue with communication. Frank's injuries are an ongoing symbol of the couple's strained relationship, so their stilted communication during the accident is indicative of their deeper marital issues.

As Frank's wife pulls Frank's shirt over his face to shade his eyes, she thinks she can see the 18 years' worth of emotions he's hidden from her brought to the surface as he writhes in distress. It takes Frank's wife 15 minutes to run home, call an ambulance, and run back. In that time, Frank's spasms stop, and his face appears empty and drained—but he pants and struggles to breathe.

This passage gives deeper insight into the Slovaks' marriage: Frank has kept his emotions entirely hidden for nearly two decades, which is certain to have caused strain between him and his wife. Frank's inability or unwillingness to express himself also likely contributes to why he lashes out at his wife.

After the accident, people gossip about how the tractor's safety roll bar ironically caused the worst of Frank's **injuries**. Some have heard that his pelvis is crushed, while others have heard that he's a quadriplegic—regardless, everyone agrees that his life is ruined since no one bounces back from that kind of accident. Frank is known as a hot-tempered man who craves hard work and whose wife is timid and submissive. Now, Frank is in the hospital hooked up to tubes, and the next 48 hours will determine his prognosis. People disagree as to whether he's been there for one week or two. They struggle to remember what's wrong with Frank: His vertebrae? His nerves? Either way, they say that he's unable to feel anything.

The townspeople give an outside perspective on the Slovaks' marriage, confirming that there's an imbalanced dynamic between the dominant, volatile Frank and his submissive, soft-spoken wife. The reader can intuit that such a power imbalance is what allows Frank to verbally abuse Mrs. Slovak while she tiptoes around him. On another note, given Frank's penchant for hard work, the severity of his injuries are likely to cause a great deal of emotional strife for him in additional to physical damage. The effects of this trauma on the Slovaks' already strained marriage remain to be seen.

Frank's wife senses other women's pitying stares when she's at the supermarket, but none of them say anything to her for fear of prying. Frank's wife has felt invisible for nearly two decades, and now Frank's accident has made her strangely famous—people anonymously leave casseroles and gifts on the Slovaks' front porch. Frank's wife thinks these gestures are too late, like flowers honoring someone at a funeral. She's bitter that all of this is for Frank, who's always been withdrawn and hostile to others.

Frank's closed-off nature seems to be a character flaw that extends beyond the Slovaks' marriage, as he's antagonistic to outsiders as well. This passage makes clear how the couple's unhealthy dynamic affects Frank's wife: she feels overlooked and unimportant to others, likely because this is how Frank treats her. The women in town are clearly unsure of how best to support the Slovaks: while they offer help in practical ways (food and gifts), they stop short of offering the emotional comfort that the struggling, alienated Mrs. Slovak likely needs.

Some time ago, Frank's wife lost a pregnancy. Frank took her to a hospital out of town so that none of their acquaintances or the local nurses would find out. He'd been adamant about putting the miscarriage behind them. Now, Frank's wife thinks that they're "beasts of burden" dragging the loss around like a dark, heavy weight. There were no gifts or sympathy then—Frank had decided that no one could know.

This passage reveals Frank's wife's personal trauma, as well as the extent of their communication issues. Frank essentially denied his wife the opportunity to grieve in a healthy manner after her miscarriage, and so the couple has become "beasts of burden" to their tragedy over the years rather than leaning on each other to cope and move on. In forcing his wife to keep the miscarriage a secret, Frank also prevented her from seeking comfort from others. This lack of familial and community support has clearly left Mrs. Slovak feeling embittered by her grief.

Presently, Frank's wife freezes the casseroles and goes to eat at the visitor's lounge in the hospital. It's the first meal she's eaten in years that someone else has prepared for her, and she has to stop herself from feeling like she's on a luxurious vacation. The doctors inform her that Frank's condition is a waiting game now. Then, suddenly, he comes down with pneumonia. Frank's wife sits with him in the afternoons, listening to his labored breathing and thinking that the illness must be like drowning. She imagines one would almost be glad to finally die after so much suffering, and she's surprised how resigned she feels at the idea of Frank passing away—it seems like the best outcome given the doctor's initial prognosis for Frank's **injuries**.

The pleasure Frank's wife takes in something as basic as a hospital cafeteria meal indicates how joyless and run-down she feels in her role as a housewife. Her subjugation under Frank's domineering authority has left her so miserable in her marriage that she's actually relieved at the possibility of Frank dying. Frank's wife also seems to resonate with the feeling of drowning that can accompany pneumonia, suggesting that she feels figuratively drowned and trapped in their relationship.

Frank's wife imagines delivering the news of Frank's death to people after church: she'd tell them it's for the best since Frank wouldn't have wanted to live "that way." She'd hold a modest funeral in the church hall. Presently, as she drives home from the hospital, she reminders herself that she's only 45—still young enough to continue on with her life. Back at the farm, a kindly neighbor gets Frank's tractor upright and tows it to town for repairs. Another takes the Slovaks' lambs to market for them. Frank's wife fantasizes about telling the doctor to take Frank off life support, and she's surprised at how easily she's begun to think of him in the past tense.

Again, the abuse Frank's wife has suffered and the couple's lack of communication over the years has created so much unspoken bitterness that Frank's wife is comforted by the idea of Frank dying. The favors that men in the community do for Frank only exacerbate Mrs. Slovak's resentment, as Frank is receiving the kind of support that she wanted but was forbidden to receive after her miscarriage.

However, Frank ends up recovering from the pneumonia—the doctors say that he may even make a partial recovery and regain limited movement. Frank's wife pretends to be relieved, but she feels cheated as she watches Frank determinately and vengefully relearn to feed himself. He's adamant that he won't be a burden on anyone. When Frank and his wife are alone in the room, he smacks her hand away when she goes to wipe his face. Frank's wife thinks that this just like him—barely able to function yet still able to hit her.

Here, the way Frank slaps his wife's hand (and Mrs. Slovak's reflection that this behavior is characteristic of Frank) implies that their marriage is physically abusive as well as verbally. It's arguably understandable, then, that Frank's wife is disheartened by his recovery, as it means she'll have to incur more abuse when Frank is released from the hospital.

Throughout Frank's recovery, his wife takes the easiest possible route: she agrees with whatever he says and pretends to take his advice about managing the farm. Two months after the accident, Frank's wife holds out hope that one of the physical therapists will tell Frank he'll never be able to work on the farm again. Though Frank will survive and come home, his wife thinks that at least they'll have to move into a bungalow in town. She'll be able to take breaks and walk into town for errands. Frank's wife thinks she might get a caretaker pension on top of the insurance payout and the money from selling the farm—maybe she'll even get a new car that's handicap-accessible.

The Slovaks are undergoing a shift in their dynamic: with Frank immobile in the hospital, Frank's wife is no longer beholden to her husband's demands. She also looks forward to the possibility of receiving support that will help her cope with their new life—something she was never able to get after her own trauma.

But once again, Frank puts a damper on his wife's fantasies. One day at physical therapy, he struggles, growling animalistically and swearing, until he manages to stand and take a step with his left **leg**. The doctors reexamine Frank's X-rays and tell Frank's wife that they have good news: Frank has regained much more function than they originally expected. Frank's wife just nods, staying silent to hide how much she loathes her husband.

Again, this passage makes clear how the Slovaks' imbalanced, unhealthy dynamic has damaged their relationship. Rather than being happy for her husband, Frank's wife is distraught at the idea of Frank being mobile enough for them to go back to their normal life, as this will mean she's subject to the same abuse that Frank has inflicted upon her for years.

That afternoon, when Frank's wife goes home, there's a plumber at the Slovaks' house. Last year, the same plumber gave Frank's wife an outrageous quote when she'd inquired about moving the toilet inside the house. Now, he installs a brand new shower and sink with safety rails for free—it's no trouble for Frank, he says. On his way out, the plumber tells Frank's wife that Frank doesn't have to worry about his hay because Bob Wilkes will bale it and put it in the shed for him. Again, Frank's wife puts on a show of gratitude, all the while seething with rage.

The community continues to step up and provide support in response to Frank's accident, which only makes Frank's wife feel more overlooked and bitter about not receiving the same kind of help after her miscarriage. This is especially hurtful to her given how withdrawn and rude Frank is to others—Mrs. Slovak likely feels that Frank hasn't earned the support he's getting.

Frank's wife thinks that this is how things will be now: she'll wait on Frank while he orders her around and berates her, and she'll have to pretend to be thankful that he survived. Limited mobility won't be hard for Frank, his wife thinks, since he's long been stoic and rarely even turns to acknowledge her when she speaks. They won't receive any home help because Frank will refuse it, saying his wife is all the help he needs.

The lack of communication in the Slovaks' marriage has clearly taken a toll on Mrs. Slovak, as Frank is stoic to the point that his wife has come to expect being ignored and having no one to confide in. This seems to contribute to the couple's imbalanced dynamic, as Mrs. Slovak likely feels that even if she objects to being dominated and mistreated, her concerns won't be heard. Additionally, Mrs. Slovak's bitterness over not receiving home help is another example of how she feels ignored and unsupported in the wake of tragedy.

When Frank comes home from the hospital, he complains about the how much the remodeled bathroom will cost them, but his wife assures him that the plumber did it as a courtesy. Frank merely brushes her off and tells her to get out of the way. He slams out the back door, down the new handicap ramp that someone from Rotary installed, replacing the back step that's been broken for over a decade. He stops and stares at the bales of hay neatly stacked in the shed, and Frank's wife tells him that Bob Wilkes did it. Frank doesn't respond, and his wife imagines him falling onto the ground and lying there, his **body** curled up. She's never seen him helpless like that—even when they waited for the ambulance, Frank seemed in control, staring up at the sky with a kind of confused innocence.

Frank's disapproval of the remodeled bathroom, as well as the way he stares at the baled hay, imply that he's not happy about the favors people did while he was hospitalized. This is likely because Frank, whom others describe as obsessed with hard work, feels infantilized and incompetent now that others are doing things for him. His reaction shows that even well-intentioned support can do more harm than good if it isn't the kind of individualized help a person needs—and his unresponsiveness suggests that he's not willing to voice what he does need. Meanwhile, Frank's wife's pondering about Frank falling and looking helpless for the first time suggests that there's been a total shift in their dynamic—formerly dominant Frank is now submissive and dependent, and his wife isn't sure of how to handle their new normal.

When it's time for a shower, Frank grumbles about only needing his wife's help until he's able to get in and out himself. Frank's wife ignores him, instructing him on how to hold onto the rails, turn on the tap, and get back out onto his walker. She notices how Frank's **body** looks like frail and withered now, like an old man. She adjusts the water temperature for him, and she can tell he wants to thank her. This is the longest conversation they've had in months. Frank's wife then cautions Frank about making sure to put on his walker's breaks, and he snaps that he's not stupid.

Frank's injuries are symbolic of the Slovaks' marriage: just like their relationship is damaged and decayed, Frank's body is frail and prematurely aged. Their roles have clearly reversed, as Frank's wife is now responsible for taking care of him—and this unfamiliar situation has made increased communication unavoidable. Though Frank is rude to his wife, his obvious gratitude and the couple's uncharacteristically long conversation suggests that their relationship has the potential to be more open and vulnerable if they're both willing to make the effort.

After the shower, Frank's wife dresses him, gives him a shave and a haircut, and serves him some casserole. Then, she presents Frank with the phone and a list of numbers: people to call and thank now that he's home. Frank protests, but his wife insists that she's not going to argue with him. He's going to need favors if they want to keep the farm from going under, and he's not going to get them unless he reaches out to those who've helped the Slovaks over the past few months. Noticing how pathetic and small Frank looks, his wife takes the hand mirror she used for the haircut and angles it toward him, telling him to look at himself and then make the calls.

Though the Slovaks have undergone a role reversal, this doesn't mean that their relationship is now healthy. Mrs. Slovak's repulsion at Frank's weakened body and the way she cruelly orders him to look at himself shows that an imbalanced dynamic will inevitably lead to an abuse of power. Frank's wife is no longer going to bend to Frank's will, as shown by her unflinching demand for him to call and thank people who did them favors. This also shows how the couple's improved communication has affected Mrs. Slovak: having experienced how even a little openness can make someone feel appreciated, she recognizes the importance of extending that openness to others.

In bed that night, Frank's wife feels Frank's forgotten presence next to her. She remembers the physical therapist at the hospital who bent Frank's **arms** and legs for him. She'd called exercises "flexion," which were meant to preserve muscle memory and prevent atrophy. She'd instructed Frank how to perform the exercises himself, moving his arm in a circle and repeatedly flexing his elbow to his chest. Frank had rudely refused an instruction sheet on how to do the movements at home. Presently, his wife makes a note to send the hospital staff a thank-you card and present for their patience.

Here, the metaphor of Frank's body is deepened: Frank's wife recognizes that just as physical flexion is necessary to prevent atrophy of Frank's muscles, so is emotional flexion necessary to prevent atrophy of the Slovaks' relationship. Given the couple's new dynamic and their modest but significant increase in communication, this passage implies that their marriage will require mutual, consistent effort—much like a repeated therapeutic exercise—to repair and improve.

Frank's wife hears Frank exhale in bed next to her. She looks over and sees him illuminated in the moonlight, and she notices that he's crying silently. Frank's wife is mortified—she's never seen him like this. She wonders if she should give him a pain pill, but she finds she can only stare up at the ceiling to save him the humiliation. Out of the silence, Frank confesses to his wife that he'd wanted to die while she ran went to call the ambulance—"that's what I could give you," he says.

Frank's rare show of emotion implies that he, too, has likely come to recognize the importance of communicating openly and vulnerably as the couple navigates their new life. His wife's newfound sympathy for him in this moment suggests that she's realized bullying and hating Frank won't make her feel any more vindicated in the abuse she suffered. Additionally, Frank's revelation that he wanted to die while he was pinned under the tractor—that "that's what [he] could give" his wife—sheds light on his behavior after Mrs. Slovak wife lost her pregnancy. Frank clearly wanted to spare his wife the trauma of watching him suffer during the accident and of taking care of him afterward, and it's likely that he applied this same mindset to the miscarriage—minimizing it in hopes that his wife's pain would go away. For the first time then, Frank is taking the important step of recognizing and legitimizing Mrs. Slovak's trauma.

As the couple lies in bed together, Frank's wife thinks that she suddenly understands how Frank feels—what it's like to try and fail to move your limbs. She senses an immense distance between them and feels that her arm is numb and heavy. But she manages to reach out and take Frank's **hand**, which feels alien without its former strong grip and calluses from manual labor.

Frank's wife has come full circle: having gone from submissive to dominant in her relationship with Frank, she's now realized the importance of compassion. Frank's wife has experienced a kind of emotional paralysis in their marriage for years, and so she now empathizes with the physical paralysis, helplessness, and shame Frank is feeling. Thus, her gesture of taking Frank's hand is a symbolic offering of peace and solidarity that equalizes the two of them rather than furthering their power imbalance in her favor. And just as Frank recognized his wife's trauma, she acknowledges his.

Frank's wife feels Frank's pulse on his pathetically thin **wrist**, and she thinks that she understands "the painful stretch of sinew, the crack of dislocation" better than anyone. She remembers how fast she ran across the paddocks to call the ambulance and how she ran back even faster, only noticing the dried blood on her bare feet after the fact. Now, she raises Frank's arm up with hers and gently flexes their elbows together. She silently places Frank's hand over his own heart and holds it there.

Frank's wife's empathy for "the painful stretch of sinew, the crack of dislocation" that Frank experienced during his accident again likens Frank's physicals injuries to the emotional strife of the Slovaks' marriage. Her gesture of "flexion" with Frank thus opens the door to a tentative resolution, as it represents a joint effort to begin mending their relationship by communicating openly. Additionally, in silently supporting Frank and uniting with him in this way, Frank's wife demonstrates what the story implicitly suggests is the proper way to support someone who's experienced trauma. Rather than shaming them, silencing them, or assuming what they need, one should simply be there for the traumatized person, acknowledge their pain, and remain openminded about how to offer effective support.

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