I for Isobel

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF AMY WITTING

Amy Witting was born Joan Austral Fraser in 1918. She grew up in Annandale, Australia, a suburb of Sydney. Her childhood was marked by a strict Catholic upbringing and a struggle with tuberculosis, a disease that would recur in her early adulthood. Fraser studied languages at the University of Sydney, received her teaching certification, and began working as a schoolteacher, writing only in her free time and only ever under a pen name. The name Amy Witting was derived from a promise Fraser made to herself to never be unwitting and to always be "witting"—both in her life and in her writing career, which was kept separate from her work as a schoolteacher and did not take off in earnest until the late 1970s. Witting published *The Visit* in 1977, followed by *I for Isobel* in 1989—a novel described as "exceptionally autobiographical" by those who knew Witting personally. *Isobel* was followed by a sequel in 1999, and the 2001 publication of Witting's last book, *After Cynthia*, preceded her death from complications related to cancer at age 83 by just a few months.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The novel, which is set in the first half of the twentieth century, finds its fiery, intelligent, and headstrong protagonist Isobel coming up against the doubts others possess about her capabilities. In real life, Amy Witting herself—Joan Fraser Levick—found herself constantly battling the opinions of those who were uninterested in what women had to say and believed that writing was not a suitable career for a woman. These people urged her to follow a traditional path, fit into society, and focus on making a living rather than exploring her love of words. Witting, and other women of her generation, were forced to confront egregious sexism in the public sphere any time they made an attempt to have their voices heard. In the 1970s, Witting published a story about sex from a woman's point of view in a literary magazine, and the piece was deemed so dangerous and salacious that a state education minister excoriated her in parliament as a "scribbler on lavatory walls." Isobel's burning desire to live a life of letters—and the concessions she must make to her duties to make a living for herself, fit into the status quo, and develop "useful" skills such as typing despite her disinclination towards them—reflects Witting's real-life struggle to make her voice heard as a woman writing somewhat radically throughout the oft-repressed atmosphere of the mid—and even the late—twentieth century.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Isobel's story of abuse, escape, and, eventually, a kind of fulfillment despite the traumas which have calibrated her early adulthood is one which many writers of fiction have explored. Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*—like *Isobel*, a highly autobiographical text—tells the story of a young girl growing up in poverty who is desperate for connection with her childish, distant, and abusive mother, and longing for more than her birth has suggested she'll be able to achieve. Fraught or even dangerous mother-daughter relationships are found widely throughout literature—Rebecca Wells' *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*, Elizabeth Strout's *My Name is Lucy Barton*, and Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* each focus on tumultuous mother-daughter relationships. Many of these works also feature a protagonist whose burning but repressed desire to come into her own as a writer, or simply to gain her independence from her mother, adds strain to relationships which are already physically or emotionally violent.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *I for Isobel*
- **When Written:** Late 1970s
- **Where Written:** Sydney, Australia
- **When Published:** 1989
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Fiction
- **Setting:** Sydney, Australia
- **Climax:** Isobel, sick of living in a Sydney boarding house which does not suit her needs and overwhelmed by the betrayals and endless intellectual posturing of her newfound group of friends, packs her belongings and leaves the boarding house, striking out on her own at long last.
- **Antagonist:** Mrs. Callaghan
- **Point of View:** Third person

EXTRA CREDIT

An Aussie in "New York". Amy Witting is the only Australian short fiction writer to have been published twice by the prestigious *New Yorker* magazine, whose fiction pages have jumpstarted the careers of literary fiction writers like J.D. Salinger, Donald Barthelme, and Annie Proulx. After Witting submitted her second story to *New Yorker*, the piece was heavily edited before publication; in response, Witting famously joked, "What's the *New Yorker*, anyway?"

PLOT SUMMARY

Isobel Callaghan and her family are on holiday at a lakeside boarding house. It is January—summer in Australia—and it is almost Isobel's birthday. Her mother, however, has told her that there will be no presents this year. Isobel is unsurprised, as she has never gotten a present for her birthday; her mother always tells her that there is no money, or that it is "vulgar" to celebrate birthdays away from home, or that it is too close to Christmas for Isobel to expect anything. Last year, on their last visit to the lake house, Isobel told the other residents of the lake house that it was her birthday, and they showered her with coins as presents. Isobel's mother and father berated her for "begging," and this year, Isobel's mother has instructed her not to tell anyone at all that it is her birthday. To pass the time, Isobel takes a book off of the grown-up's shelf at the lake house's little library and begins reading *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*. Isobel is so transported by the book that she doesn't even care about her birthday, or presents, or her mean parents. The morning of her birthday, Isobel wakes up and runs out to the courtyard to whisper to the tree there that it is her birthday, but once she gets outside she sees another little girl, Caroline Mansell, sitting in the tree. Isobel blurts out to Caroline that it is her birthday, but that her birthday is a secret. Caroline insists that birthdays are never a secret, and returns inside. That afternoon at lunch, there is a small present wrapped in pink tissue waiting at Isobel's place. Stunned, she opens the present, which is from Mr. Mansell, Caroline's father. It is a beautiful enamel **brooch**. Isobel is so stunned she cannot even speak, and after the meal, takes the brooch up to her room to wrap and unwrap it over and over again. Her mother follows her up, and berates her for being an "ungrateful little bitch" and a "thankless little swine" while beating Isobel's legs, but does not take the brooch from her. After the beating is over, Isobel wonders why her mother left her with the brooch—and if there are things that not even her mother can do. Isobel pins the brooch to her dress and studies herself wearing it in the mirror, unaware that "in one way or another" she will be wearing it all her life.

At home, Isobel is regarded by both her mother and her sister, Margaret, as a "born liar." This stems from Isobel's insistence that once, on the way home from school, she saw a fireball. Though Isobel concedes that she does sometimes lie, she asserts that she truly did see a fireball, and is frustrated that no one will believe her.

Isobel gets into trouble with one of the nuns at school for neglecting to pay her school fees, but after briefly transferring to another school, she is sent back. Isobel and her mother go to visit some well-to-do cousins, and on the way to the bus, Margaret wonders whatever became of her little gold bracelet. Mrs. Callaghan tells Margaret that Isobel lost the bracelet, but Isobel remembers her mother surreptitiously telling one of her friends a while ago that she'd given—or sold—her diamond ring to her solicitor. Isobel wonders what the truth is, and what lies her mother has also spun over the years.

One hot summer Sunday, Isobel is sitting in Mass when she feels the grace of God descend upon her. She feels it has come to her by mistake, but she nonetheless decides to devote herself to inhabiting fully a calm and pious state of grace. She stops fighting with her sister Margaret over their duties and chores, arousing her mother's suspicions that she is up to something. Isobel's mother demands Isobel tell her why she's been "sulking" around so much, but when Isobel calmly states that she isn't sulking, her mother becomes enraged and tries to provoke Isobel into a fight. Isobel sees a wildness behind her mother's eyes and realizes that her mother's goal is always to get Isobel to lose her temper and scream. Isobel refuses to let her mother get a rise out of her, and though she wins the battle, she senses that the war has just begun. Margaret takes a part in a school production of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, and Mrs. Callaghan agrees to let her attend rehearsals. What Mrs. Callaghan doesn't know is that there are boys in the play—Margaret begs Isobel not to tell their mother. Isobel keeps Margaret's secret, but when Margaret comes home late from a couple of rehearsals in a row, their mother goes through Margaret's things and unearths a brown paper bag of makeup, which she accuses Margaret of using to "chase boys." Margaret tells their mother to stop going through her things, and it seems that Margaret, too, has won a crucial fight.

One afternoon, Margaret and Isobel come home from school to find their Aunt Noelene sitting in the kitchen. They love Noelene's visits because she brings them ten-shilling notes and hand-me-down pieces from her successful clothing factory. After Noelene and May (Isobel and Margaret's mother) get into a fight about May's sister's treatment of her late husband, Noelene leaves. It seems as if May has been defeated a third time. Isobel and Margaret go through the bag of hand-me-downs; Margaret finds a beautiful dress which is marked for Isobel. Isobel, though, wanting to be the image of grace, tells her sister she can have the dress. May insists that the dress was marked for Isobel and should be for Isobel, but Isobel takes Margaret up to their room and lets her try the dress on. While Margaret admires herself in the mirror, May comes into the room, approaches Margaret, and tears the dress off of her, ripping it in the process. Isobel at last breaks her promise to maintain a state of grace and begins screaming at her mother for being mean to Margaret. A look of relief at last washes over her mother's face.

Isobel and Margaret's mother has died, and their aunts Yvonne and Noelene consider what to do with the girls—particularly where to bring them up and how to dress them for the funeral, as the girls are poor and have no suitable clothes. As Isobel packs up her things, ready to set off for a job in the city the following day, she wishes she could feel even a little grief at her

mother's passing, but even during the funeral service she can only feel joy.

The following day, Yvonne takes Margaret out to the country to live with her but first drops off Isobel at a boarding house in the city where she will live while she works for an importer. Isobel is delighted to have a room of her own and no one to abuse her. She quickly gets to know the other residents of the boarding house, including the proprietor, Mrs. Bowers; her friend and assistant, Mrs. Prendergast; a kindly older woman named Betty; and an eccentric older man named Mr. Watkin. Isobel begins work the next morning—she has been hired due to her outstanding German skills but finds that she is lacking in her typing and shorthand skills. Nonetheless, most people at the office are kind, and the only person who rubs Isobel the wrong way is her boss, Mr. Richards, who often stands behind Isobel while she works and watches her struggle to type.

When Isobel visits Aunt Noelene's house, Noelene stresses the importance of money, keeping a steady job, and fighting for what one deserves in this world, urging Isobel to ask for a raise soon so that she can keep up with her expenses. Despite her newfound independence and success at work, Isobel feels that all she wants is to "be one of the crowd." Soon enough, she runs into a group of young, intellectual university students at a local café. She recognizes one of them as Vinnie Winters, a girl she and Margaret went to school with, and approaches the group. As Isobel begins to insert herself into the group, she finds herself pulling away from her odd but sweet friendships with Mrs. Bowers, Mrs. Prendergast, and Betty, and being drawn into the world of the pretentious and cliquish university students, whose social sphere is swirling with drama and intrigue. The most handsome and sensitive boy in the group, Nick, is being stalked by his ex-girlfriend, Diana, who seeks him out at the café and even at his home—a building managed by a woman named Helen, where the affable but superior Trevor also lives.

Things at the boarding house are disintegrating as Mrs. Bowers' daughter, Madge, has become engaged to a devout man from a religious cult, much to her mother's disappointment. As Madge moves out, Isobel realizes that she has been trying this whole time to replace Madge and at last become someone's favorite child. Disturbed by this knowledge of herself, Isobel again seeks refuge with her newfound friends, but at Fifty-one—the building where Nick and Trevor live—she finds only Diana, who has miserably come to try and get in touch with Nick. Talking with Diana, Isobel muses that anyone who's stuck in one position, or obsessed with only one thing, is "as good as dead," and worries that she will drive Diana to suicide. It is Nick, however, who dies unexpectedly in a bike accident in the city—Helen breaks the news to Isobel over the phone and begs her to go and tell Diana. When Isobel arrives at Diana's flat and shares the news, she watches a strange look of relief spread over Diana's face, and realizes it is the same kind of relief Isobel herself experienced when her mother died. Isobel takes a room in a new apartment building and tells Mrs. Bowers she's leaving. She packs up her room at the boarding house and reads a couple lines of poetry that warn her that nothing, not even a change of scenery, will be able to change her deep down.

Isobel wakes up at a strange man's apartment—she has had a one-night stand with someone named Michael whom she met at a party. Thinking Michael is asleep, Isobel inspects his bookshelves and finds a book called *Words of the Saints*, which she feels powerfully and inexplicably drawn to. Isobel steals the book from Michael's house when she leaves, determined to figure out why this book in particular called to her. Isobel returns to her dingy apartment and, struck by a sudden desire to spruce it up—and to avoid the "word factory" that has recently started churning to life in her mind, urging her to write—she goes to a shop and purchases supplies to embroider a square of fabric to place on the wall. Isobel feels pulled towards Michael's book, though, and as she reads it, she encounters guidelines for achieving a state of grace by sacrificing one's soul. Isobel decides to go back to the suburb where she grew up and retrace her steps in order to figure out what is drawing her to the book.

Back in her hometown, Isobel is assaulted by painful memories from her childhood as she walks the main road and visits her old church. Isobel decides to visit her childhood home, but on the way down the street, she hears a voice calling her—it is her old neighbor, Mrs. Adams. As a child, Isobel wrote a poem about Mrs. Adams's cat, Smoke, and the poem was published in the newspaper. Isobel's parents told her that Mrs. Adams would be angry with her and try to put her in jail for placing her name in the paper without her consent. Now, as Mrs. Adams calls Isobel's name, Isobel fights a familiar instinct to run away. Mrs. Adams invites Isobel in for tea and shows her an album in which she has kept Isobel's poem all these years. Mrs. Adams says that when Isobel was a little girl, she always tried to chase Isobel down to give her a notebook so that she could write more poems, but Isobel always ran away from her. Mrs. Adams intuits that Isobel's mother was behind Isobel's odd behavior and frightfulness. Isobel realizes that her parents never wanted a writer in the house—they never wanted anyone who could bear witness to or record their cruelties. As Isobel leaves Mrs. Adams's house, she breaks down in tears, sobbing for her lost childhood and the cruelties she's endured. She picks herself up, though, and resolves to completely dedicate herself to being a writer. She picks up a notebook on the way back into the city, and as soon as she gets home, she begins writing. The next morning at work, Isobel's friends ask her how her weekend was. Isobel replies that it was nice, but she smiles so happily that her coworkers tease her about having "met someone." Isobel smiles again, admits that she did indeed meet someone, and sets to work at her typewriter.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Isobel Callaghan – Isobel Callaghan is the novel's vain, capricious, and creative protagonist. She is Margaret's younger sister and May and Robert's daughter. After suffering a childhood marked by trauma, poverty, and violence, the sixteen-year-old Isobel greets the death of her abusive mother with joy and finally strikes out on her own, moving to Sydney to earn a living and find her place in the world. Isobel is tormented by memories of her past, doubts about her own morality (instilled in her by her derisive and cruel mother), and a desire to find belonging. Isobel is a voracious reader who, in childhood, used books as a way to escape the trauma of her reality. Now, Isobel harbors secret aspirations to become a writer herself. Isobel also longs for connection with those around her, deprived as she was in her childhood of any meaningful or stable connections. She seeks comfort in her relationship with her landlady, Mrs. Bowers; with her coworkers at her job translating German mail for a glassworks company; and with a cool, aloof group of intellectuals she meets at a local café, who she believes hold the key to her literary aspirations. Through the people she meets, Isobel comes to discover that she contains multitudes—she is recovering from the trauma of her past, and as such often acts cruelly to others, but in her heart, she knows she is good and worthy. With a sharp wit, a fierce sense of independence, and a desire, above all, to find herself, Isobel is a character full of contradictions and complexities.

Mrs. May Callaghan – Isobel and Margaret's mother and Robert's wife, May, is a violent and cruel woman who abused Isobel (and to a lesser extent, Margaret) throughout her childhood. May Callaghan is a woman possessed by a deep, dark, and unknowable rage—she seems to enjoy provoking her youngest daughter, and occasionally her eldest Margaret, into screaming matches, and systematically sets Isobel up for failure, harm, and misery. By denying Isobel birthday presents every year of her life and eventually going so far as to forbid Isobel from even telling anyone it is her birthday, May denies her child a simple happiness. When a kind stranger gives Isobel a pretty **brooch** for her birthday, May flies into an insane rage, beating Isobel severely and calling her unfathomable names. These patterns of denial, provocation, and abuse persist throughout Isobel's childhood, and Isobel comes to realize that she "does something" for her mother when she reacts to her rage, humiliation, and bullying. Isobel's longing for a viable maternal figure and to escape from the traumas of her past stems from the way her mother treated her. May dies when Isobel is sixteen, but even as Isobel moves through the world on her own, she is reminded again and again of the pervasiveness of her mother's influence. Isobel herself repeatedly remarks that she bears a strong resemblance to her mother, and will, in more ways than one, carry her mother with her throughout her life as she struggles to come into her own.

Margaret Callaghan – Isobel's sister, Margaret, is older, more sensitive, and without a doubt, May and Robert's favorite child. Despite this, she still suffers cruelty and abuse at the hands of her mother, most notably when she attempts to participate in the school play, thus leaving the nest and infuriating her mother to the point of insanity. Margaret is despondent after their mother's death, as opposed to Isobel who feels relief and even joy at the prospect of freedom. Rather than striking out on her own like Isobel, Margaret goes to live with Aunt Yvonne, and it seems that Isobel and Margaret lose touch with one another.

Mr. Robert Callaghan – Isobel and Margaret's father and May's husband, Robert, dies early on in the novel. At first, he seems to be a benign presence, tired of his wife's rage and desirous of peace and quiet, but as the novel progresses, it becomes clear that he largely enabled his wife's abuse and turned a blind eye to Isobel's suffering.

Aunt Noelene – Isobel and Margaret's wealthy Aunt Noelene is welcome presence in the girls' lives due to the monetary gifts and hand-me-downs from her clothing factory that she brings along on each visit—something that aggravates May. After May's death, Noelene is kind to Isobel and generous with the great wealth she has managed to "tame" over the years. She pays for Isobel to live in the boarding house and take classes in typing and shorthand, and she attempts to offer her niece advice about the ruthlessness of the world and the need to grab life by the horns to achieve success.

Mrs. Bowers – The landlady of the boarding house, Mrs. Bowers is an imposing but gentle woman who takes a liking to Isobel almost right away. Mrs. Bowers has a contentious relationship with her daughter, Madge, and Isobel's desire to be around Mrs. Bowers and, in effect, benefit from a mother figure, causes strain between the three women. This eventually results in Isobel leaving the boarding house.

Madge – Mrs. Bowers' daughter, Madge, is kind and soft spoken but has disappointed her mother by taking up with a religious cult. Madge becomes engaged to Arthur, a kind man she met through her new religion, but Mrs. Bowers is so disapproving of the pair that Madge and Arthur leave the boarding house hastily in the dead of night. In watching Madge and Mrs. Bowers' relationship suffer, Isobel comes to realizes that she has replaced Madge, to some extent, as Mrs. Bowers' daughter figure, and she feels both triumphant and contrite about that fact.

Nick – A quiet, studious, and attractive university student who is a member of the tight-knit, intellectual group of friends that Isobel hopes to be a part of. Nick is being stalked by a former girlfriend named Diana, and as a result, he is often withdrawn, jumpy, and morose. Nick is killed in a bike accident towards the novel's end, under a hazy and possibly nefarious set of circumstances.

Trevor – One of the university students whom Isobel befriends at a local café. Trevor is an intellectual, and he and Isobel spar and discuss literature at length. He lends her several books, and one time, attempts to embrace Isobel, but she refuses his advance and stops spending time with the clique of students.

Diana – A girl on the fringes of the university students' clique who is obsessed with Nick and stalks him throughout town. Isobel is often tasked with dealing with Diana, as the rest of the students (and Helen, Nick's landlady) are exhausted by her presence. Isobel worries that Diana will kill herself after Isobel, speaking thoughtlessly, implies that anyone who can't move on from something is "as good as dead." Isobel is tasked with breaking the news of Nick's death to Diana when it happens. However, Diana reacts coolly, and Isobel sees Diana experience the same kind of relief that Isobel herself felt when her mother died.

Caroline Mansell – A little girl staying at the lake house where the Callaghans are vacationing. Although Isobel is not allowed to tell anyone that it is her birthday, she shares the news with Caroline but warns her that it is a secret. Caroline promptly tells her father, Mr. Mansell, who gives Isobel a **brooch** for her birthday—much to May's horror.

Mrs. Adams – Isobel's childhood neighbor. Isobel once wrote a poem about Mrs. Adams's cat, Smoke, which was published in the local paper. The poem referred to Mrs. Adams by name, and after the poem's publication, May and Robert warned her that Mrs. Adams would hate Isobel and try to send her for jail for putting her name in the paper. When Isobel visits her hometown as a young woman, she meets Mrs. Adams in the street and goes into her house for tea. Mrs. Adams reveals that she was deeply touched by the poem—she has kept it in a photo album all these years. She reveals that when Isobel was a little girl, Mrs. Adams would often try to flag her down on the street in order to gift her with a notebook in which she could write down her poems. This conversation makes Isobel realize how deeply her parents ruined her childhood, but the encounter also spurs Isobel to accept that she is, and always has been, a writer.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Aunt Yvonne – One of Isobel's well-to-do aunts who lives off in the country. After May's death, Yvonne takes Margaret in.

Mrs. Prendergast – One of the women who helps Mrs. Bowers run the boarding house where Isobel lives. She is dreamy and aloof but kind, and always has a strange, remarkable story or dream to share.

Betty – A kind older woman who lives in Isobel's boarding house.

Norman – One of the boarders, and a brash and boisterous young man.

Tim – One of the boarders who is close friends with Norman.

Mr. Watkin – One of the boarders at the boarding house, Mr. Watkin is an elderly man who loves playing bridge and who spend his life collecting fortunes of dynasties of racing horses.

Olive – The head girl at Isobel's office. She is kind and helpful, and she genuinely wants to help Isobel learn the ropes, stay out of trouble, and advance through the work environment.

Rita – One of Isobel's coworkers—a sunny girl with a mischievous smile.

Nell – One of Isobel's coworkers. She is sweet and has an "agreeable" face.

Frank – One of Isobel's coworkers who works in the stockroom. Frank is an outgoing fellow who encourages Isobel to become a writer.

Mr. Walter – One of Isobel's bosses. He is a kind man who wants Isobel to do well at the office.

Mr. Richard – One of Isobel's bosses who frequently stands behind her while she works and watches her, causing her to feel self-conscious, slow, and ineffectual at her job.

Vinnie – A girl Isobel knows from school who hangs out with a cool clique of intellectuals. Isobel introduces herself to Vinnie in order to worm her way into the clique, but Vinnie does not spend much time with the group after that.

Kenneth – A university student obsessed with poetry who thinks his own verses are sensational.

Janet – One of the university students whom Isobel befriends at a café, Janet is a slightly cruel, gossipy girl.

Helen – The landlady at Fifty-one, the building where Nick and Trevor live.

Miss Halwood – A guest at the lake house where the Callaghans are spending their holiday. She is a kindly young woman who admires and encourages Isobel's love of books.

Mr. Mansell – Mr. Mansell, Caroline's father, is a kindly man staying at the lake house where Isobel and her parents are holidaying. He gives Isobel a **brooch** for her birthday—the first real birthday present she has ever received—much to her delight and her mother's dismay.

Michael – A man with whom Isobel has a one-night stand and steals a book from.

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.

MOTHERS, DAUGHTERS, AND SELF-DISCOVERY

At the heart of *I for Isobel* is the destructive, abusive, and codependent relationship between Isobel Callaghan and her mother, May Callaghan. May seems to hate her youngest daughter, Isobel, while preferring her older daughter Margaret, but as the first half of the novel unfolds, it becomes clear that there is something dark, unspeakable, and ineffable that May wants from her daughters. As she goads the fiery Isobel to outrage and attempts to keep Margaret firmly under her wing, May reveals herself to be a master manipulator and a brutal force who both seeks to repress her daughters and force them to explode. As the novel develops, and the fraught mother-daughter relationship of Isobel's childhood follows her into early adulthood—despite her mother's passing when Isobel is sixteen. As Isobel navigates the world alone in the wake of her mother's death, she has difficulty finding herself. It is not so much that parts of herself have been lost to abuse, but more that parts of herself were never unearthed in the first place. In this way, Witting argues that one of the most profound effects of maternal abuse is the estrangement of the self; Isobel's journey of self-discovery, then, is the journey of creating herself from the ground up in the wake of the destruction her mother caused.

Charlotte Wood begins her introduction to the novel by stating, "For a girl, to be hated by your mother is surely the most savage knowledge with which to begin your life." Indeed, much of the book is concerned with how the "savage" hatred May Callaghan shows toward her youngest daughter comes to calibrate Isobel's life. The first chapter unfolds over the course of a few days at a lake house where the Callaghans are spending a holiday. It is Isobel's ninth birthday, but as usual, her mother has told her that she will not be getting any presents. Her mother makes Isobel swear not to tell anyone that it is her birthday, but Isobel quickly breaks her promise by telling Caroline, another little girl staying at the lake house. Caroline then tells her father, Mr. Mansell, who surprises Isobel that afternoon at lunch with a lovely **brooch**. After the meal, Isobel's mother beats her and calls her an "ungrateful little bitch" and a "swine," smacking her while telling her daughter not to cry. May attempts to shame and humiliate her daughter and make her feel worthless. After the beating, when Isobel pins the brooch to her dress, the chapter concludes with the sentence, "In one way or another, she would be wearing it all her life." Isobel was only allowed to keep the brooch after enduring a veritable hailstorm of physical and emotional violence. In this sense, the brooch is a symbol and a physical embodiment of Isobel's journey of self-discovery in the wake of a horrific childhood. She will have to endure unimaginable pain as she searches for her sense of self, but in the end, she will ultimately find that her mother cannot take it from her, and that it is hers alone to admire.

One of Isobel's early attempts at discovering herself, and at asserting what she has found to her mother, occurs when she hears a sermon given by a visiting priest and decides to try and inhabit a "state of grace." Isobel feels herself bathed in calm after the sermon—a contrast to the fiery anger and agitation her mother inspires in her daughter again and again. Over the next several days, Isobel goes out of her way to be helpful, speak kindly, and refuse to rise to her mother's baiting, and it becomes "unthinkable" for her to return to the tumultuous attitude she'd previously inhabited. A few days into Isobel's stoic "state," her mother tries to get a rise out of her, insulting her for acting superior and being a "nasty little beast" and a "brazen little liar." Isobel notices for the first time her mother's blatant determination to upset and anger her daughter. "I do something for her when I scream," Isobel thinks, seeing her mother's anger personified as "a live animal tormenting her," and Isobel's anger as an "outlet" for her mother's own. In this scenario, Isobel is shown to again have discovered a small bit of herself that exists separately from her mother's influence—and again, her mother attempts to take it from her or shame her for it. Isobel refuses to give in, though, prioritizing her own self-discovery over behaviors that allow her mother to take her further from the new self she is striving to become.

Towards the end of the novel, Isobel returns to her hometown as an independent young woman to try to encounter some of her "lost self." She runs into an old neighbor, Mrs. Adams. As a young child, Isobel had published a poem about Mrs. Adams's cat in the local paper—rather than being proud of her, Isobel's mother convinced her that the neighbor would be furious that Isobel had put her name in the paper. When Isobel meets Mrs. Adams as an adult, however, Mrs. Adams tells Isobel how delighted she always was by the poem, and even wanted to thank the young Isobel by giving her a book to paste poems in, but the young, frightened Isobel always ran away. After this visit, Isobel walks back into town, crying and cursing both her parents for being "spiteful tormenting bastards." Isobel tries to remind herself that she is a writer—that she has come far from the world of her childhood, and that she can choose to be whatever she wants to be now.

At the end of the novel, Isobel's coworkers gather around her on a Monday morning to ask her about her weekend—from her coy response, they begin to believe that she has met someone. Isobel smiles to herself, thinking that she has indeed "met someone"—she has finally encountered herself. Throughout the course of the novel, Witting examines Isobel's relentless journey toward self-discovery in the face of the traumatic estrangement from herself that her mother inflicted upon her in her childhood. Now, at last, Isobel has begun to encounter herself, and is filled with hope and even joy for one of the first times in her life.

POVERTY, ABUSE, AND VIOLENCE

One of the great accomplishments of Amy Witting's writing in *I for Isobel* is the restraint and economy of the language. In a very short space, with very few words, Witting effectively conveys the shame and desolation of poverty, the terror of abuse, and the devastating claustrophobia of physical and emotional violence. Though Witting makes it clear that the atmosphere in the Callaghan house is one of near-constant tyranny, tension, and anger, she uses great restraint in displaying the kind of violence and abuse that characterized Isobel and Margaret's childhood. Through these selective glimpses into the Callaghan house, Witting conveys mood and horror by leaving much unseen, and through the unseen, she suggests just how frequent the instances of violence and abuse are in the Callaghan home. In doing so, Witting conveys both how trauma and violence often largely center around repression and avoidance, and also how Isobel's mother uses secrecy and omission to increase her power over her daughter. Witting argues that the things we cannot know or see about the horrors of poverty or depths of the human psyche—and the pain and compulsions often lodged there—are just as telling as the things we can.

Isobel's mother, May, is portrayed as a volatile, angry, controlling woman. Humiliated by her poor financial standing, jealous of her two sisters' financial success, and desperate to elicit not just obedience but fear from her own daughters, May is spurred by some unseen and unexplained impulse to create chaos, pain, and suffering in her house that mirrors the turmoil she is clearly experiencing within. Isobel, as a child and even as an adult, cannot make sense of the unseen forces that motivate her mother's cruelty, though she catches frightening and unsettling glimpses of the "animal" that lives behind her mother's eyes. In filtering May's rage through the eyes of a young child, Witting creates a darker, deeper sense of suffering that is all the more frightening for its unknowability—its hidden roots, confusing motivations, and seemingly fruitless endgame.

By the novel's fourth chapter, May has died of a cause that is never more than hinted at. Mrs. Prendergast at the boarding house attempts to ask Isobel about her mother's death, asking if May's death was "sudden" and because of "her heart," but another proprietor quickly changes the subject to avoid Isobel's having to ruminate on the subject. Like everything else in May's life and persona, her death is alluded to only in shadowy terms that prevent the reader from ever really knowing its root cause. The unseen reasoning behind May's life and death alike speak to the chaos and lack of reason she exhibited throughout her life.

Just as May's rage is depicted only briefly, so too is the Callaghan family's poverty only hinted at, its roots and depths both unknown. At the start of the novel, Isobel's mother tells her there is no money for presents—and yet the family is on holiday at a lake house. Witting hints at the fact that May has been discreetly selling her jewelry, but whether she's doing so to make ends meet or to rustle up funds for some unknown or nefarious purpose is left unclear. In keeping Isobel—and thus her readers—in the dark about the true machinations behind May's actions and the actual state of financial affairs in the Callaghan family, Witting leaves the potential for two scenarios open. Claiming poverty and being sneaky about funds might be another one of May's methods of wrestling for control over her family and squeezing charity from her well-to-do sisters. On the other hand, perhaps the family is in such a state of financial collapse that the threat of ruin is part and parcel of May's, and thus her daughters', suffering.

Through her veiled but vivid portrait of Isobel and Margaret's childhood suffering under the tyranny of their abusive mother, Witting uses the glimpses and isolated incidents of abuse, shaming, and violence to suggest that what readers don't see is perhaps even worse than what they do. The unseen becomes a presence in and of itself, taking on a huge, foreboding weight. What Witting shows her readers of Isobel and Margaret's suffering is just the tip of the iceberg, and what she holds back is just as evocative as the episodes she chooses to include.

STORYTELLING, FICTION, NARRATIVE, AND ESCAPE

Isobel Callaghan's childhood is portrayed as frightening, claustrophobic, and violent. The terror of the abuse she suffers is compounded by the fact that her mother's frightful rages seem to make no sense—they only occasionally follow a pattern, and Isobel and her sister, Margaret, never quite know what will set their volatile mother off. It follows naturally, then, that Isobel becomes obsessed with stories and fiction: with tales that have rules, plots, themes, and reasons for the events that occur within them. In creating a character who is such a ravenous reader, hungry for stories about the world around her and desperate to escape inside of them, Witting argues that a lack of sense or reason in one's childhood can inspire a desperate search for narrative, meaning, and coherence in one's adult life.

When Isobel picks up a copy of *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* on the day before her ninth birthday—yet another birthday on which her mother has denied her a present—she is absorbed in the story, and feels that "birthdays, injustices, parents all vanish" next to the world of Holmes and Watson. She has found a "new place in time" between the pages of the book, and she is able to escape the "injustices" of her fractured home life and the verbal abuse of her controlling mother, if only for a little while—her mother has a strict rule about no reading in bed at night. Isobel knows that reading itself is a kind of defiance, and as almost anything can set her mother off, she is afraid of engaging in a behavior that could aggravate her mother and land her in trouble. She fears that books and stories are "all lies," but even so, she refuses to give up her

newfound love—"there [is] no living" without the joy they bring her. The escape books offer her is not total, since the fear her mother instills in her is so strong. Rather than functioning simply as an escape from reality, books become a tool Isobel uses to reassure herself that meaning, narrative, and structure have a place in the world—and that despite the confusion and desperation of her current situation, there are rules that govern the larger world, and thus there is hope that one day Isobel will no longer be subject to her mother's tyrannical whims.

Importantly, Isobel eventually becomes a writer herself. A trip back to her hometown reveals the depths of her mother's deception and cruelty—again, for no discernable reason, seemingly for sport or out of some esoteric need to see her own rage and pain reflected in her children. After grappling with this rehashed pain, Isobel reminds herself that she is meant to be a writer as a balm against resurfacing childhood traumas. Isobel goes straight to a shop to buy herself a notebook so she can begin to write down the stories that reside in the "word factory" in her head. Choosing an identity as a writer allows Isobel the chance to wrangle her experiences into narratives that have meaning and make sense on the page, or at least get her experiences and memories out of her head, where they threaten her sense of self, her newfound independence, and her emotional well-being. She becomes a writer not out of the desire to escape her past, but out of the need to reshape it into terms she can understand and live with. As a child, Isobel used stories to escape the trauma of her reality, but as an adult, she uses them to face that trauma and find a sense of agency within it.

As a result of the abuse and resulting trauma she experienced in her childhood, the young Isobel retreated into the world of books—both as a way to escape her fraught surroundings, and as a way of finding solace in stories that had purpose, meaning, and narrative. Isobel finds the power to reclaim her own destiny and make sense of the horrible things that have happened to her through the world of books, and in doing so is able to make a more hopeful future for herself.

TRANSIENCE AND THE SEARCH FOR BELONGING

The trauma Isobel suffered in her childhood has served not only to estrange her from herself, but also to make her feel as if there is nowhere she really belongs. Unsure of who she is, unlearned in social cues and graces, and without the foundation of even one truly healthy, nurturing relationship, Isobel is launched into adulthood at the age of sixteen when her mother dies of an unmentioned disease. Isobel receives a modicum of support from her wealthy Aunt Noelene, but she is largely left to her own devices, taking up residence in a boarding house and struggling to understand and connect with those around her. Through Isobel's search for belonging, Witting argues that without knowing oneself in the first place, forging meaningful connections and developing healthy relationships is nearly impossible. The gap left in Isobel's social consciousness by the years of abuse she suffered at the hands of her mother, Witting argues, is what holds her back now from feeling as if she belongs and threatens to turn her life into a transient, rootless existence.

Isobel feels desperately out of place throughout her childhood—the first time she feels a semblance of belonging is in the company of Miss Halwood, a fellow guest at a lake house where the Callaghans are spending their holidays, who encourages Isobel to read despite her mother's objections. Isobel begins to search for belonging in books at a very young age, and even as she grows older, she feels out of place among real people and only like herself in the company of a good book. At the boarding house where she lives following her mother's death, Isobel wishes every night for dinner conversation to end so that she can curl up peacefully with a book; her inhibited social skills, largely as a result of her mother's constant abuse and degradation of her character, are malformed, and Isobel's only way of feeling like she has friends or like she can understand other people's lives and emotions is through the sense of belonging she encounters in literature. Isobel searches for belonging in the books she reads, and will come to also search for belonging in the well-read people she meets throughout her life, seeing them as kindred spirits despite the fact that they may be very different from her. After she moves to the city, she meets a group of young, literary-minded intellectuals at a nearby café and sees them as the friends she has always wanted to have—despite their occasional cruelty or indifference toward her and their highly dramatic interpersonal conflicts. When Nick, one of the members of the café group, dies in a freak accident, Isobel is devastated. As she cries over Nick's death, she feels uncertain as to whether she is feeling the right thing—or whether she ever "belonged" in their group in the first place. Ultimately, Isobel thinks that her tears "were for Nick, for whom she hadn't felt entitled to grieve—but she was entitled; she was one of them."

More than achieving a sense of belonging is overcoming the "impostor syndrome" that comes with achievement—the feeling that one's accomplishments are never truly one's own or never enough. Isobel believed herself unlovable and unlikable for so long due to her mother's abuse, that even when she achieves a sense of belonging, she constantly questions it and undermines the progress and friendships she has made. Isobel is aloof and rootless to begin with, and this constant second-guessing of her own sense of belonging further threatens to propel her towards a life of loneliness and transience. In the end, Isobel finds her sense of belonging not in a group of people or in a fantasy world that isolates her totally, but instead in the simple self-satisfaction—and hopefulness—that she is meant to be a writer. At the end of the novel, as Isobel finally begins

putting words to paper, she feels she has at last encountered herself and found "where" she belongs, though it is more a state of mind than a physical place.

The painful journey of self-discovery Isobel goes on throughout the novel runs parallel to the search for belonging—the two are entwined, but different, and as Isobel searches for the place where she belongs, she ultimately finds that she doesn't have to isolate herself from others just because it is difficult to feel at home in the world. Though the novel is based on Isobel's difficult upbringing and the rough start she's had in the city, it ends on a hopeful note, as readers see Isobel throwing herself into writing, in pursuit of finding an identity to which she belongs and a world she can make her own.

SYMBOLS

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

THE BROOCH

The brooch that Mr. Mansell gives to Isobel for her ninth birthday is a symbol of Isobel's loneliness and pitifulness in childhood, as well as her burning desire for more than what she has been dealt in life. When Isobel pins the brooch to her dress, the novel reveals that in one way or another, Isobel will wear the brooch her whole life. Similarly, Isobel's pain will follow her "all her life." The brooch, which is Isobel's first-ever birthday present, is the first instance in which Isobel is offered a glimpse of what a normal life as a normal little girl could look like. In this way, it also symbolizes hope and the chance for things to turn around for poor Isobel. Her fascination with the brooch will transform throughout her childhood into a fascination with all things forbidden, beautiful, and reflective of what her life could be like if only she could escape her mother's tyranny.

THE BABY IN THE BAKING DISH

Mrs. Prendergast's story about the baby in the baking dish represents Isobel's own traumatic childhood. Mrs. Prendergast tells Isobel about the time when her neighbor's husband walked into the kitchen to see his wife casually seasoning their greased and trussed-up baby in a baking dish, ready to place it into the preheated oven. The neighbor's nonchalant desire to cook her baby alive echoes the blatant cruelty and violent anger that Isobel's mother constantly unleashed upon Isobel while she was growing up. Isobel must accept the fact that perhaps she will never be able to fully understand or explain what happened to her in her childhood—perhaps one day, her own trauma will be an absurd, dark anecdote told over tea just like the baby in the baking dish.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Text Publishing edition of *I for Isobel* published in 1989.

Chapter 1 Quotes

Mrs. Callaghan, too, kept [Isobel's] birthday in mind and spoke of it now and then.

"January," she said, "is too close to Christmas for birthday presents," and later, serenely, "it is vulgar to celebrate birthdays away from home."

Whenever she found a new argument against birthday presents for Isobel, a strange look of relief would appear on her face, and Isobel would be forced to accept, for the moment, that there would be no present."

Related Characters: Mrs. May Callaghan (speaker), Isobel Callaghan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

The novel begins with Isobel Callaghan's mother warning her daughter that she will not receive any presents for her birthday. It is Isobel's ninth birthday, and for every year as far back as she can remember, she has been denied the chance to celebrate her birthday and receive presents. This cruel pattern of behavior, and the reeling, nonsensical justifications behind it, foreshadow the abusive, volatile, and often insane ways in which Mrs. Callaghan will treat Isobel as the novel unfolds. In this passage, Isobel describes the "strange look of relief" her mother gets when she has successfully employed the mental gymnastics necessary to deny Isobel the chance of a happy celebration. The "look of relief" that spreads across May's face also foreshadows Isobel's later realization that her mother feels a sense of relief or satisfaction when Isobel lashes out at her.

> Birthdays, injustices, parents all vanished. [Isobel] sat on the floor reading till the noise of cups and saucers in the kitchen warned her that the grown-ups would be coming in for afternoon tea, then she went to the little room where she and Margaret slept, next to their parents' bedroom. It was too hot there, but if she went outside to the cool shade of the fig tree, Caroline and Joanne Mansell would come asking her to play with them, or Margaret would want her to go for a swim. Besides, it wasn't hot in Baker Street. What a lucky thing that she had found this new place in time to spend the birthday there. Presents didn't matter so much, if life had these enchanting surprises that were free to everyone.

Related Characters: Margaret Callaghan, Caroline Mansell, Isobel Callaghan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 7-8

Explanation and Analysis

Isobel, distraught over the unhappy news that not only will she not be receiving any presents this year, but will be forbidden from even telling anyone that it is her ninth birthday, seeks refuge in a book from the grown-up shelf at the lake house library. She picks up *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* and is immediately engrossed. Isobel has always enjoyed reading, but this is her first foray into the world of immersive adult literature, and she finds herself feeling completely transported, lucky, and even hopeful about her future. She feels she can handle anything as long as the "enchanting" world of books is available to her—this invincibility is a newfound sensation and a bolstering one. Here, Isobel begins using books both for pleasure and for escapism, as literature allows her to feel a sense of connection and belonging that she can't find in real life.

> Isobel was living in two worlds. Miss Halwood's, where she belonged and things were solid and predictable, and the other one, where she was exulting at making her mother uncomfortable. That was a great pleasure but it was like gobbling sweets—she expected some sickness from it. Meanwhile there was the world of Sherlock Holmes, which was better than both of them. She said, "May I be excused, please?" and hurried back to her chair. She fished out the book from under the seat and went back to Baker Street.

Related Characters: Isobel Callaghan (speaker), Mrs. May Callaghan, Miss Halwood

Related Themes:

Page Number: 12-13

Explanation and Analysis

At breakfast, Isobel is forced to defend her reading habits to her disdainful mother. One of the other guests at the lake house, Miss Halwood, encourages Isobel to pursue her love of books, but Isobel's mother tries to end the conversation. As breakfast wears on, Isobel feels torn between "two worlds." She wants solidity and predictability, but she cannot resist the temptation to make herself "sick" by indulging in resistance against her mother's cruel tyranny. This is the first time readers see Isobel engaging in a behavior which she knows will actively hurt her and provoke her mother. The young Isobel doesn't know which world to linger in, and so chooses a third—the world of books, where no one can harm her, and where her mother's intentions to destroy her passions, relationships, and self-confidence cannot reach her.

> The sound of her mother's quick, foreboding tread made her push the box in a panic under her pillow. Now, she remembered: she had been told not to tell, and she had told. She had told Caroline, who had told Mr. Mansell, and retribution was coming, as her mother advanced with set face and luminous glare and began to slap her, muttering, "Don't you dare to cry. Ungrateful little bitch. Don't you dare to cry. You little swine, thankless little swine, you couldn't say thank you, couldn't even say thank you." Slap, slap. "Don't open your mouth, don't you dare to cry." There was not much to cry about, for her mother's intentions were far more violent than her blows. Her hands flapped weakly as if she was fighting against a cage of air.

Related Characters: Mrs. May Callaghan (speaker), Mr. Mansell, Caroline Mansell, Isobel Callaghan

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

Despite her mother's warnings that she shouldn't tell anyone, Isobel told Caroline Mansell that it was her birthday. Caroline told her father, Mr. Mansell, and Mr. Mansell bought Isobel a present. Flustered by receiving

such an unexpected gift from a kind stranger, Isobel can't manage to choke out the words to say thank you for her first-ever birthday present. The present, a beautiful, ornate brooch, enrages Isobel's controlling and cruel mother. Mrs. Callaghan's violent rage is on full display for the first time in the novel, and as May beats her daughter, Isobel knows that the physical violence isn't even the worst of the punishment. When Isobel notes, "he mother's intentions were far more violent than her blows," Isobel underscores that her mother wants to inflict more than physical pain on Isobel and longs to degrade and humiliate her daughter so profoundly that she comes under her complete and total control.

❝ Isobel took the box from under the pillow, took out the brooch and looked at it while she rubbed her stinging legs. Why hadn't her mother taken the brooch? It would have been so easy. Isobel could even supply the words she had dreaded to hear: "Give me that, you don't deserve to have it. Come on, give it to me." Why hadn't she said them? Could it be that there were things her mother couldn't do?

That idea was too large to be coped with. She put it away from her, but she took the brooch and pinned it care- fully to the neck of her dress. It was hers now, all right. She went and looked at it in the glass and stood admiring it. In one way or another, she would be wearing it all her life.

Related Characters: Mrs. May Callaghan, Isobel Callaghan

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

In the aftermath of the beating, Isobel's mother flees the room, leaving young Isobel alone with her brooch, her thoughts, and her confusion about what has just transpired. Isobel realizes that her mother would not—or possibly could not—take the brooch from her, and she begins to wonder if there are indeed limits to her mother's seemingly boundless power. The brooch symbolizes the beginning of Isobel's accrual of a kind of power over her mother, despite the totalitarian aura of their home life. In addition, the brooch also represents the burden of pain and trauma that Isobel will, despite all her best efforts, have to carry around with her "all her life."

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ There was a pause, so long that she thought it might be safe to pick up her knife and fork again, but as she stirred her mother said, "I want you to tell me what you are sulking about, Isobel."

She was really frightened now, wondering how long she would hold out, foreseeing the moment when she would begin to scream and scream. She wasn't going to, not ever. She would think of grace and be still.

"Tell me." Her mother's voice, which had been rising to a scream, turned calm and gracious again. Like somebody getting dressed. Isobel looked up and saw that her eyes were frantic bright. She doesn't want me to tell her, she wants me to scream. I do something for her when I scream.

Then she saw that her mother's anger was a live animal tormenting her, that she Isobel was an outlet that gave some relief and she was torturing her by withholding it.

Related Characters: Isobel Callaghan, Mrs. May Callaghan (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

After Isobel is struck with a religious fervor during Sunday mass, she resolves to inhabit a state of grace—she tries to be calm, civil, gracious, and let her mother's moods and verbal abuses roll right off of her. Mrs. Callaghan grows agitated by Isobel's heightened state of calm, however, and in this passage, violently demands Isobel reveal what she is "sulking" about. Here, Isobel at last comes to understand that her mother takes pleasure in provoking her daughters. It seems that there is something Isobel's mother needs from Isobel and Margaret that she can only get when they are as angry, as loud, and as violently temperamental as she is. Isobel's description of a "live animal" torturing her mother seems to imply that Isobel can intuit that her mother is not fully in control of these violent outbursts, or of her strange and unsettling needs.

Isobel was left to witness her mother's sufferings, which were real and ludicrous. She walked about white-faced, repeating, "Who'd be a mother? Who'd be a mother? You do everything for them, you give up everything for them and what do you get for it? Forgotten as soon as it suits them, they're gone without a thought. Heartless ungrateful children."

She spoke not to Isobel, but in her hearing, wanting her perhaps to repeat the lament to Margaret, or inviting her to a new alliance. Isobel kept her mind averted, but thought it was strange, as she speeded up her polishing of the kitchen floor, that she should be hurrying through the chores in order to desert this misery and go and read about saintliness and brotherly love. She could not help it; grace told her to withdraw and she did what grace demanded, though it was more of a holding position now than an inner joy.

Related Characters: Mrs. May Callaghan (speaker), Isobel Callaghan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 43

Explanation and Analysis

After Margaret and Mrs. Callaghan get into a series of fights over Margaret's participation in a school play, Margaret spends most of her time at a friend's house and leaves Isobel and Mrs. Callaghan alone in the house together. As Mrs. Callaghan wanders the rooms muttering to herself about her "heartless ungrateful children," Isobel realizes that her mother is provoking her in a new way—not to anger, but to solidarity. Isobel, however, is more motivated by the pursuit of her state of grace than by her mother's call to arms. Although the allure of grace has grown somewhat diminished, Isobel remains determined to do "what grace demand[s]" of her despite her mother's attempts at distraction. In this way, Isobel preserves her blossoming sense of self and doesn't let her mother take it from her.

"Take that dress off, Margaret," said their mother from the doorway. "It belongs to Isobel."

"But Isobel said I could have it."

Isobel said, "Aunt Noelene will never know."

Her mother gave her a look of hate as she walked

towards Margaret, who did not know what was happening and stood like a good little girl having a dress fitted till she heard the dull snap of threads and the tearing noise. She cried out then as if she had been hit.

"Damn you," screamed Isobel. "Damn you, damn you, it was mine. It wasn't yours to tear. It was mine and I gave it to Margaret. Damn you!"

She saw the look of peace and relief on her mother's face as she walked away and she knew what she had done. The old sick closeness was back and she was the same old Isobel.

Margaret was sitting on her bed dressed in her slip, stroking the torn yoke and sobbing.

"It's only a dress," said Isobel. She had lost more.

"Oh, you shut up. You didn't want it, anyhow."

It wasn't only a dress. It was much more, and it was gone, and so was the state of grace.

At that moment, Isobel thought such things were not for either of them.

Related Characters: Isobel Callaghan, Margaret Callaghan, Mrs. May Callaghan (speaker), Aunt Noelene

Related Themes:

Page Number: 38

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Isobel's mother—having been thrice defeated in this chapter in spats with Isobel, Margaret, and finally Aunt Noelene—reaches a breaking point and decides to commit an act that will allow her to take revenge on all three individuals who she feels have wronged her. By violently, senselessly tearing the beautiful dress that Aunt Noelene brought for the girls as a gift, May deprives Margaret of the dress, dredges Isobel up out of her hard-earned state of grace, and takes a dig at her sister, whose job in a clothing factory and the success it has brought her May deeply envies. May is more than self-satisfied at the end of this passage—by provoking Isobel to rage and Margaret to tears, May has fed the thing deep within her that will only let her have peace when she secures rage and sadness from her children. This incident is so demoralizing that at the end of it, Isobel feels that she and Margaret are not even meant for beautiful things, or for grace, or for any

kind of goodness at all.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ Dead, thought Isobel, trying the word again. It still meant only silenced. There was no hope of calling up any decent feeling from her evil heart, which was rejoicing in the prospect of freedom and even of new shoes. She picked up Shakespeare, Byron, Keats and Shelley and carried them into the bedroom, where Margaret was sitting on her bed, dazed and weeping, silently and slowly tears dripping like blood from a cut finger.

"Do you mind if I take the Shakespeare? It isn't mine but I'd like to have it."

Margaret shook her head, sending two tears running quickly down her cheeks. It wouldn't do to tell her to cheer up. Somebody should be giving Isobel the opposite advice. Yet there was in her, deeper than her relief, a paralyzing sorrow, not at her mother's death but at being unable to grieve at it. That one was going to stay with her; she looked for distraction from it in the cheerful business of packing and buying new shoes, but knew that any cheerfulness was, in the situation, shocking. She feared she had shocked Aunt Yvonne already. Perhaps the funeral would touch her feeling and make her a member of the human race.

Related Characters: Isobel Callaghan (speaker), Aunt Yvonne, Margaret Callaghan, Mrs. May Callaghan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

The novel's fourth chapter opens with Isobel's mother having died very suddenly. Though Margaret is distraught, Isobel feels joyful and free. She knows that what she is feeling is wrong, and that if other people would be shocked if they discovered the truth of her emotions. Isobel longs to experience the things she knows she is supposed to be feeling—grief, sorrow, love. She wonders why she is not able to get in touch with the emotions that should "make her a member of the human race." She hopes that at the funeral, she will be able to feel something other than glee at her tormentor's death, but for now, goes about the business of packing up her life and preparing for a new one with a quiet happiness and an enormous sense of relief.

❝ It was a commonplace little room but she was prepared to love everything in it: bed (slightly sagging), chair (straight), faded floral curtains at the window (her own window), combination wardrobe and dressing-table (lucky she didn't have many clothes), a grate in the corner, with a vase of paper flowers delivering the message that it was no longer used for fires, above it a shelf for her books. She unpacked them first: Keats, Shelley, Byron, Shakespeare, *The Last Chronicle of Barset*, from the library. She looked with regret at that. She had been reading the novels of Trollope and whenever she wasn't reading, no matter what was happening in the outside world, she was conscious of being in exile from Barsetshire. She resisted temptation and went on with her unpacking, having a modest ambition to meet life, to be adequate. She had an idea of a life of her own, like the room of her own, where she chose the furniture-no rages' no black passions, no buffeting from the world. […] Putting her clothes away in a drawer she saw her face in the glass, so happy and hopeful that the likeness to her mother, which seemed to her usually to be a curse from birth, seemed unimportant.

Related Characters: Mrs. May Callaghan, Isobel Callaghan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 56

Explanation and Analysis

As Isobel arrives at the boarding house where she is going to start a new life, she is completely enchanted and delighted by everything in her little room. The drab details do not bother her—in fact, they excite her, because they are hers despite all their imperfections. Isobel is so happy to be free of her mother's crushing influence and striking out on her own, that when she catches her face in the mirror in her new room, she is not even bothered by the stark resemblance she bears to the woman who tortured and degraded her for so many years. Her past is "unimportant" in light of her exciting new life, which belongs only and totally to her.

"When do you plan to be married, Rita?"

"In September. We don't want a long engagement. Stephen's firm are sending him to Melbourne and we want to be married and go together."

Isobel heard this with dismay. This was the opportunity Aunt Noelene would expect her to grasp, seizing that wild horse money by the bridle as it passed. She lacked courage for the deed. If she did manage it, she would have to take dictation from Mr. Walter instead of checking invoices with Frank. This was life: no sooner had you built yourself your little raft and felt secure than it came to pieces under you and you were swimming again.

Related Characters: Rita, Olive (speaker), Aunt Noelene, Mr. Walter, Frank, Isobel Callaghan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 86

Explanation and Analysis

As Isobel celebrates Rita's happy news with all of their coworkers, a twinge of fear and sadness rears up in the back of Isobel's mind. Isobel likes the way things are—she does not want them to change because she is afraid of what will happen if successfully navigating it. At this point in the novel, Isobel is sick of constantly being tossed around, completely ineffective in controlling her own fate. As readers will come to see in the next several passages, Isobel is exhausted by her journey of self-discovery and instead wants things to be decided for her. She no longer has the will to keep treading water just to keep herself afloat.

"Do you ever think about being a writer?"

"What made you think of that?"

"Well. No need to bite my head off! You nearly made me drop a week's wages." He brushed the packing away from a molded iridescent fruit bowl and set it on the table. [...]

"I'm sorry I snapped." She could offer no explanation either for the panic reaction.

"Well. You have this way of putting things. I thought of it when you said that about your little number fours. Summed it up in six words and made me mad, what's more. Made Olive madder, I'm thinking. Everyone can't do that."

"I wish you'd drop it, Frank."

"OK. But, to come back to it, what do you want out of life? What do you want to be? If you say Mr. Walter's secretary, I'll award myself a big horse laugh."

'I want to be one of the crowd.'"

Related Characters: Isobel Callaghan, Frank (speaker), Olive

Related Themes:

Page Number: 88

Explanation and Analysis

In this encounter with her coworker Frank, Isobel is forced to confront the fact that other people have recognized a certain perceptiveness, quickness, and ingenuity in her that lends itself to life as a writer. Isobel wants to deny this part of herself, though, and she insists that all she wants out of life is to be "one of the crowd." Isobel has felt lonely, isolated, vulnerable, and singled out all her life. She has spent so long at attempting self-discovery that she is exhausted by it, and at this point in the novel, she doesn't want to spend any more time trying to become acquainted with herself. She just wants to be one of the masses—she wants to disappear into what other people like, what other people think, and what other people expect of her.

"Went very funny after the baby was born. Not the first one either, the third. Joe that would have been, got grown-up sons himself now. She was very bad for a while. She came out of it all right in the end."

"I'm glad to hear that." Mrs. Bowers' tone admitted that Mrs. Prendergast was not often the bringer of good news.

"It can take you in funny ways. There was the woman lived opposite us in Mudgee. Six weeks old the baby was and they were getting ready to go out. Her husband called out from the door, 'Are you coming, Dorrie?' 'I won't be a minute, dear, I'm just popping the baby in the oven.' He came running in and there was the baby greased all over and trussed up in the baking dish and the oven hot. He just got to it in time."

Mrs. Bowers shrieked, 'Oh, my God!'

Related Characters: Mrs. Bowers, Mrs. Prendergast (speaker), Isobel Callaghan

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 98

Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. Prendergast often shares her slightly unsettling dreams and stories with Mrs. Bowers and Isobel during their days and nights in the boarding house kitchen. This tale—involving two of Mrs. Prendergast's former neighbors—stands out as the most upsetting and outlandish one of all. As Isobel listens to the story, it becomes apparent that the baby in the baking dish represents Isobel's own painful, confusing childhood—a childhood in which her mother threatened her safety and well-being daily. Isobel's mother's violence was as strange, uncanny, and seemingly second-nature as that of the woman in the story. It was an almost unthinking, or at least poorly calculated, series of verbal and physical assaults and betrayals that left Isobel feeling as abandoned, vulnerable, and deceived as a newborn baby in a baking dish.

She said to Joseph—in bed at night she humped her pillow to the shape of a shoulder and unpacked her thoughts for Joseph—"Suppose one is born bad—not by choice—the hand of the potter shook, you might say—why can't one choose to be different? I thought I could. I thought I could make my life into a room and choose what came into it. I was a bit above myself, wasn't I? That's what monks and nuns do, with God and prayer and fasting and all that stuff. No job for an amateur. Besides, life isn't like that. It's more like swimming in a sea, with currents and undertows carrying you where you don't want to go."

The currents and the undertows were mysterious evil passions, rage and envy; most of all an unconquerable sadness—no matter how willingly they accepted her—at being somehow disqualified, never to be truly one of them.

Related Characters: Isobel Callaghan (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 105

Explanation and Analysis

Isobel, obsessed with the clique of university students she has met at the local café, spends her nights pretending that the group's favorite instructor, Joseph, who they often mention, is her own nighttime companion. She poses important but possibly unanswerable questions to the imaginary Joseph and wonders aloud whether it will be possible for her to ever change her circumstances, place in life, and actions, or whether she will be carried along by the unseen, unpredictable "currents and undertows" that repeatedly bring her to places that she doesn't want to go. Isobel feels that something keeps her apart from the crowd of cool, intellectual students, despite how badly she longs to be a part of it. She cannot understand why she seems unable, despite all her efforts, to overcome the lonely fate that has seemed to be hers from birth.

> You left the house thinking of freedom, of being a different person, seeing the world ahead of you, but you didn't go on, you went back. To fight the old fight and this time to win, to have the verdict set aside, to be the favored child.
>
> Any rag will make a doll for the idiot in the attic.
>
> Auden had a general in his head. ("But they've severed all the wires, and I don't know what the general desires.'"
>
> Isobel had an idiot in the attic.
>
> [...]
>
> Back in her room, she sat on her bed and reflected. She was in a different position from Auden; she knew what the idiot desired, all right, and had to watch to see it didn't get it.
>
> [...]
>
> The idiot played its games with the real world and- and what was worse-it played them behind Isobel's back. Not any more, now that she knew. Could she do this, watch a part of herself and control it, fight against it all her life?
>
> She was not too discouraged, the new knowledge giving her a feeling of strength. At least she knew where she was going wrong-no wonder the others disliked her, watching her suck up to Mrs. Bowers, taking what ought to be Madge's.
>
> Idiot wants a mother.
>
> Idiot can't have one.
>
> Life is very difficult.

Related Characters: Madge, Mrs. Bowers, Isobel Callaghan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 120-121

Explanation and Analysis

One night at dinner, Mrs. Bowers and her daughter Madge have a fight in front of Isobel and all the other boarders. Isobel experiences the sinking realization that she has been attempting to ingratiate herself to Mrs. Bowers, take Madge's place, and become the "favored child" at last, since she has such a violent, volatile relationship with her own mother. Isobel likens the dark drive within her, desperate for love, attention, and affection, to an "idiot in the attic," whose desires, actions, and impulses make "games" of the real world and do not account for the suffering of others. Isobel self-deprecatingly berates herself for being an "idiot" who makes her own life more difficult through her desperate need for a mother figure. She sinks into a pit of self-hatred as she considers how foolish and reckless she has been in dealing with the lives and feelings of those around her.

> The idea of losing a job was so alarming to Isobel that she could not leave the subject. "But what are you going to do? You have to have a job. You have to eat!"
>
> Diana considered that idea carefully, then shrugged. "I've got some money saved."
>
> "And when that's gone?"
>
> She sounded quite belligerent. Interesting. Here was someone feeble enough to bring out the bully in Isobel.
>
> "What do I care? I don't care about anything. I'm finished. I'm as good as dead."
>
> Isobel reflected. "You know, I think that's right. I mean, if you take life as change and development—and I think it must be, life must be always changing... if you had a life without change, it might be as good as death, I suppose... well, when you can't change, I suppose you are as good as dead."
>
> She was so interested in this idea that she forgot Diana and spoke with detachment, then was startled at the fury in Diana's eyes. True to form, she made a note: masochists prefer to devise their own sufferings.

Related Characters: Diana, Isobel Callaghan (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 126-127

Explanation and Analysis

When Diana comes to Nick and Trevor's house looking for Nick, the landlady, Helen, urges Isobel to talk with Diana on her behalf. Helen is sick of dealing with Nick's gloomy, obsessive stalker of an ex-girlfriend. In her conversation with Diana, however, Isobel finds herself musing aloud, and saying words that obviously hurt and anger Diana. Isobel, thinking perhaps of her mother and perhaps even of herself as well as Diana, posits aloud that anyone who can't change is as good as dead. Isobel realizes too late the cruel impact her words must have on the morose, vulnerable, unstable Diana, and Isobel notes that Diana is the type of person who wants to devise her own suffering. Diana does not want to suffer due to other people's words or actions, and yet Isobel has, inadvertently, inspired even more suffering within Diana.

Later, she thought wistfully of the vanished prospect of being Trevor's girlfriend, of belonging... Couldn't she have pretended? Would it have been enough, if she had done everything he wanted? That would have been no trouble; she would have been quite ready always to do what Trevor wanted. But she would have had to know what he did want. It would be like being a spy in a foreign country, having to pass for a native. She would be found out. The penalty for being found out appeared as Diana, walking and watching, obsessed with suffering. That moment when you found out they hated you and you did not know why—any deprivation was better than that.

Related Characters: Trevor, Diana, Isobel Callaghan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 134

Explanation and Analysis

After Isobel rejects her new friend Trevor's advances while the two of them are up in her room looking over books of Russian literature, she instantly feels that she has made the wrong choice. She knows that by rejecting Trevor, she has ruined her chance at fully "belonging" to the clique that she has so long admired. She berates herself for not having been able to simply pretend, go with the flow, and give herself up in order to attain the sense of belonging she has pursued all her life. Headstrong as Isobel is, she longs for comfort, safety, and community above all, deprived of it as she was in her abusive childhood.

"It was an accident, on his bike. I don't know much about it; he was badly hurt and he died this morning in hospital. Helen asked me to come and tell you."

Absent-mindedly Diana pulled open the drawer of the bedside table, got out a hairbrush and began to brush her hair.

Shock. People do very funny things when they're shocked. But the feeling that was coming over Diana did not seem like shock. It was profound; she was thinking hard and breathing deeply. She dropped the hairbrush and steadied herself with one hand on the pillow.

This must be what they called being in travail. It was a private process; Isobel should go away and let her get on with it, but she did not know how to do that.

The feeling was appearing now: relief. Isobel was the prison governor who had brought her news of her reprieve. She said, "Can I get you something? Make you a cup of tea?'

What falsehood. I am thinking of what she ought to

be feeling.

Diana too thought Isobel had made a social error. "No, thank you. I'm quite all right." She looked with surprise at the hairbrush and put it back in the drawer.

All right is no word for it. She's glad he's dead. She feels the way I felt when my mother died. He wasn't a human being to her, he was a thorn in her side, a stone in her shoe.

Related Characters: Diana, Isobel Callaghan (speaker), Mrs. May Callaghan, Nick

Related Themes:

Page Number: 140

Explanation and Analysis

After Nick is killed in an accident on his motorbike, his landlady, Helen, charges Isobel with the difficult task of breaking the news to Nick's ex-girlfriend and longtime stalker, Diana. Isobel fears that Diana will react badly, unstable and obsessive as she is. However, Isobel is surprised to see Diana espouse a reaction to the news that is both unsettling and familiar to Isobel. It seems that Diana is experiencing a wave of "relief" now that Nick—her obsession and constant "thorn"—is removed from the face of the earth. Isobel picks up on this reaction because Isobel herself experienced an overwhelming sense of relief when her mother passed away.

You could change your name, have your face altered, change your country and your language, but in the end you would resurrect your self.

Nevertheless, she felt cheerful as she packed her belongings. She was glad to be escaping from a grief not her own, she looked forward to the foolish pleasure of buying a saucepan and a frying pan, a cup and saucer and a plate, a knife, a fork and a spoon and two tea towels. Into the suitcase she put Shakespeare, Keats, Byron (now known as facile), Shelley, Auden. Though she knew the passage of Auden well, she found the place and read it with a grin.

"It's no use turning nasty

It's no use turning good.

You're what you are and nothing you do

will get you out of the wood."

She shut the book and put it in the suitcase. One is never quite alone.

Related Characters: Isobel Callaghan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 146

Explanation and Analysis

As Isobel prepares to leave the boarding house, she reflects on the mistakes she has made and the strife she has endured during her time there. Between the botched attempt at inserting herself into the clique of university students and the ways in which that attempt affected her relationship with the other boarders—not to mention her intentions to become Mrs. Bowers' "favored child" at any cost—Isobel knows that the only thing to do is move on. She is cognizant, however, of the fact that a change of scenery will not enable to escape herself. She fears that she will perpetually be in "the wood" of herself. However, as she packs her books and prepares to leave, she takes comfort in the fact that at least they will provide her with company and wisdom, and prevent her from ever being truly alone.

Chapter 5 Quotes

The tears were coming slowly. How could tears come from so deep, as if she was a tree with tears welling up from its roots? Then they came in a roaring flood that drowned thought; she put her cheek against the rock, which was as rough as a cat's tongue and unyielding, but she was too far gone to feel any perverse pleasure in that. Her sobs were so loud that even in this wasteland she had to put her hands over her mouth to muffle them; when her mind sobered up her body went on snuffling and heaving along ten years of roadway.

I am a writer. I am a writer.

Too late. It must be too late. The poor little bugger in the baking dish; nobody came in time.

Suppose I tried? Suppose I went through the motions? The writer might come back.

You've tried that with love. It doesn't work.

But that was other people, too. This is me.

The crying had slackened. There was such a feeling of limbs stretching, of hands unbound, she knew she could choose to be a writer. A pen and an exercise book, that was all it took, to be a rotten writer, anyhow. Good or rotten' that came later.

It meant giving in to the word factory. That frightened her, because the word factory was such a menace. Now she understood why the idea of being press-ganged was so alarming.

Oh, well. If you can't lick 'em join 'em.

Maybe that was what the word factory was all about, the poor little bugger trying to get out of the baking dish.

Related Characters: Mrs. Adams , Isobel Callaghan

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 178

Explanation and Analysis

When Isobel returns to her hometown for an afternoon, she runs into an old neighbor, Mrs. Adams, who unknowingly shows Isobel how severely her parents ruined her childhood. After this visit, Isobel is emotionally wrecked, forced to confront the extent to which her parents filled her with fear and demoralized her to the point of self-loathing. Isobel breaks down as she leaves Mrs. Adams's house, and she experiences a vast range of emotions as she sinks to the depths of her sorrow and then attempts to pull herself out by finally conceding to give into the "word factory"—the swirling canvas of her expressive mind—and try her hand as

a writer. Isobel feels that maybe she can still rescue the baby from the baking dish—in other words, she feels that she can still save herself from a terrible fate and rise up from her horrific childhood.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

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

CHAPTER 1: THE BIRTHDAY PRESENT

A week before Isobel Callaghan's ninth birthday, her mother tells her that there will be no presents this year, seeing as their family has to be "very careful about money." Isobel's mother says this every year, and every year, Isobel chooses not to believe it—but every year, there is no present.

The first sentences of the book speak of deprivation, withholding, poverty, control, and disappointment—major motifs throughout Isobel's childhood, as well as the forces that will form her worldview and calibrate the rest of her life.

Isobel's family arrives for their summer holiday at a lakeside boarding house. The Callaghans always spend their holidays on this "flat reedy shore," which is shabby and somewhat desolate. Each day of the vacation, Isobel watches to see if her mother or father will head across the lake into town to purchase a present for her from the one tiny shop there.

Despite Isobel's mother's claim that their family has no money for presents, they are all on a vacation, which must cost some money. The atmosphere of deceit and uncertainty is palpable in these early passages, and as a result, Isobel constantly believes that her parents will surprise her.

It is January—summer in Australia—and Mrs. Callaghan believes that it is too close to Christmas for birthday presents. Moreover, she tells Isobel, "it is vulgar to celebrate birthdays away from home." Mrs. Callaghan is constantly coming up with new arguments against a birthday present for Isobel, and with each one, "a strange look of relief" comes over her.

Mrs. Callaghan scrounges for any argument that will allow her to deny her daughter a birthday present. It's clear that Mrs. Callaghan wants to deprive Isobel of joy, but the truth of the Callaghan's financial situation and the reasons behind Mrs. Callaghan's tyranny both remain unclear.

This year, Isobel's mother has warned her not to go around the lake house telling people it's her birthday. Last year, Isobel "disgraced the family" by running into the garden shouting that it was her birthday—the other guests at the lake house promptly began showering her with coins and money. When the delighted Isobel returned inside with her "treasure," her mother was standing there, and forced Isobel to drop all the money. Isobel still doesn't know what happened to it. Isobel's mother and father berated her for "begging," and the day was a terrible one.

Isobel is a child, which means that birthdays are incredibly exciting—a chance to be celebrated, spend time with loved ones, and experience unbridled joy for one day. Isobel is being deprived of these chances, and as a result, she can barely contain her wild desire to be noticed and acknowledged. Her enthusiasm, however, shames her parents and causes them to worry about how others perceive them. They blame it on Isobel's "disgrace," but in reality, they probably just don't want anyone to see the way they abuse and manipulate their children.

Isobel is timid by nature, but still she doesn't know how she'll be able to resist telling people that it is her birthday. She plans on telling the tree in the yard tomorrow to feed the impulse. Thinking of this plan, Isobel feels a pain in her throat, "as if she [were] reading *The Little Match Girl*."

Isobel knows that her situation is sad and wrong, but because there is no one to take pity on her, she takes pity on herself.

Now in a "reading mood," Isobel goes to the boarding house's lounge, where there are bookshelves full of books. Isobel has already finished all the children's books, and now she moves on to *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*. As she reads the mystery, "birthdays, injustices, parents all vanish." She sits on the floor reading until the adults come in for tea, and then heads up to her and Margaret's bedroom, the book in tow.

Isobel seeks refuge in the world of books and finds herself even more entranced and delighted than she expected to be. Through literature, she is able to encounter a new world, which is free of the trappings of Isobel's miserable childhood.

As Isobel reads, she feels infinitely lucky to have found a "new place in time" where she can spend her birthday. Presents don't matter so much, Isobel thinks, when there are books like this one in the world. She reads until Margaret comes in to tell her to wash her hands before dinner. Isobel asks if she can have the light on for a while after dinner—Margaret protests that the girls aren't allowed to read in bed. Isobel insists that rule only applies at home, not on holidays. Still, she hides the book beneath her pillow. Margaret tells Isobel that she can read as long as she puts the light out before their parents come up to bed—they can see it beneath the door. Isobel is grateful for her sister's kindness and heads off to wash her hands.

Isobel wishes she could read in peace forever, deep in the new world she has found within the pages of Sherlock Holmes. However, her family is determined to pull her out of her new world and bring her back to reality. Her older sister, Margaret, seems to be somewhat looking out for Isobel's well-being and half condescending to her younger sister.

Despite the glory of the Holmes book, Isobel can't help but think how nice it would be if she woke up to a present in the morning—she wishes someone would give her the complete works of Arthur Conan Doyle. After dinner, she plays a game with Margaret, but longs the whole time to go to bed and read. After the girls go up to their room, Isobel puts her clothes on the floor in front of the crack in the door, gets into bed, and reads until she is nearly asleep.

Though Isobel has found a new world for herself in books, she still longs for the things that make the real world worth living in—like the pure, childlike excitement of birthdays and presents. She wants to be a normal girl with a loving family.

In the morning, Isobel wakes up early, and runs out to the tree to tell it that it is her birthday. When she reaches it, she sees another one of the lake house's guests—a little girl named Caroline Mansell. Isobel, unable to contain herself, asks Caroline if she can tell her a secret. She then confesses that it is her birthday. Caroline replies that birthdays aren't secrets, except perhaps in the case of Moses. Caroline saunters off, wishing Isobel "many happy returns." Isobel wishes she had just told the tree.

Isobel spills the secret about her birthday because she longs to connect with other people, be appreciated, and experience friendship. Starved for affection within her own family, Isobel jumps at the chance to connect with a girl her own age.

Isobel washes her face, combs her hair, and heads to one of her special spots—an old chair on the back verandah of the boarding house. She reads until breakfast, and then when the bell calls everyone to the meal, she joins her family and the other guests. As the other patrons of the boarding house ask Isobel what she's reading, she knows that discussing books in front of her mother is "dangerous ground." Sure enough, once Isobel tells a young teacher named Miss Halwood that she is reading Sherlock Holmes, her mother reprimands her for taking a "grown-up book" from the library without permission. Miss Halwood attempts to defend Isobel, proclaiming how advanced and special she is, but Mrs. Callaghan orders Isobel to leave the table and go find Margaret. Just at that moment, Margaret enters the room and takes her place at the table.

Isobel's mother is so controlling that even a normal, pleasant conversation with another guest at the lake house is "dangerous ground." Isobel is grateful for Miss Halwood's kindness and for the fact that Miss Halwood gives her the only thing she wants—to be recognized and celebrated for who she is. Isobel's mother cannot abide anyone speaking kindly to her daughter, however, and attempts to remove Isobel from the table and control her by sending her on an arbitrary errand.

Miss Halwood continues asking Isobel about her reading habits and urges her to look up any words she doesn't understand in the dictionary. She tells Isobel that she, too, is a bookworm, and wishes she could be Isobel's age again so that she could read "all the wonderful books" in the world for the first time. Miss Halwood turns to Mrs. Callaghan and asks how old Isobel is. Isobel sees her mother's face grow red—Isobel has at last, she thinks, caught her parents in a trap. Isobel's mother only answers, however, that Isobel is nine.

Isobel sees herself reflected in Miss Halwood, who is kind, generous, and understanding. Isobel longs for someone to recognize how her mother is abusing her and for there to be proof of her profound suffering, but her mother is skilled at hiding the depths of her violence and abuse of her daughter.

Isobel feels she is living in two different worlds—one is Miss Halwood's, where Isobel belongs and things are "solid and predictable," and the other is a pleasurable but somewhat sickening world in which she is constantly trying to make her mother uncomfortable. The world of Sherlock Holmes, however, is better than both of the other two worlds, and so Isobel excuses herself from the table and returns to the verandah to finish the novel.

Isobel is drawn toward literature and escapism as a result of the tension and anxiety she feels about being caught between two poles. Isobel knows that it is wrong to oppose her mother, but she also knows her mother is wrong. Sherlock Holmes allows her a reprieve from the constant struggle against the woman who is supposed to be her protector.

On the way back to the library to exchange the first Sherlock Holmes book for the second one, Isobel runs into her mother. Mrs. Callaghan instructs Isobel to go down to the shop and buy her a writing pad—she hands Isobel a two-shilling piece and tells her that because it is her birthday, she may keep the change. Isobel goes to the shop and purchases the pad, but the change she gets is so small, that there's not enough left to buy herself even a little something. As Isobel runs from the shop, she thinks that no matter how she tries, she cannot make herself safe. Isobel prays to the Virgin Mary to stop her from crying and returns to the lake house.

Isobel's mother attempts to control her daughter in a cruel, new way by forcing her to purchase something on her behalf on her birthday. The family clearly has enough money to buy Isobel a small present—this is perhaps the greatest slight of all. Isobel is devastated but determined not to show weakness by crying—to lose her temper is to let her mother win.

At lunch, everyone else in the lake house is seated—only Isobel's place is empty, and there is a small parcel wrapped in pink paper and tied with gold string at her place. Isobel sits down warily. Mr. Mansell, Caroline's father, asks Isobel if she'd like to open her present—she asks Mr. Mansell if the gift is really for her. She hears her mother draw in "a long breath of rage."

Isobel is delighted by the sight of the first present of her young life—from a stranger, nonetheless—but she knows that because she has broken her promise about revealing her birthday, she has also enraged her mother.

Isobel opens the present. Inside the box is a gold **brooch** shaped like a basket filled with colored flowers. Isobel is amazed by the gift—"it [is] a present for a real girl," she thinks. She has hoped for a present year after year, and now that one has finally come, it is "better than anything she could have imagined." Isobel stares at the brooch as she begins eating, stunned and speechless. Her mother tells the Mansells how kind of them it was to purchase something for Isobel but insists that they shouldn't have—she is "spoilt enough already." At these words, Isobel notices that all of the grown-ups at the table are glaring at her mother with "indignation," except for Mr. Mansell, who is looking right at Isobel with a "bright, soft look." Isobel wonders what is wrong with what her mother has said.

Isobel is mesmerized by her beautiful present and is so overwhelmed with gratitude that she cannot manage any words, or even a thank you. Isobel's mother speaks on her behalf, and when she tells the others that Isobel is "spoilt," an audible surprise runs through the room—this makes it clear that the others know, to some degree at least, that Isobel is mistreated by her parents. It's clear that Mr. Mansell takes pity on Isobel and wanted to do something small to brighten her day in the face of the evident pain she is in at the hands of her mother.

When Isobel is finished eating, she asks to be excused, and runs away to her bedroom with the **brooch**. She sits on her bed reading, unwrapping and rewrapping the brooch periodically. After a little while, Isobel hears her mother coming toward her room, and she pushes the box underneath her pillow. She realizes that she is going to be in trouble for having told someone that it was her birthday. She knows that "retribution [is] coming." Her mother enters the room, advances on Isobel, and begins to slap her violently, calling her an "ungrateful little bitch" and a "thankless little swine," berating Isobel for not even saying thank you for the brooch and bringing disgrace on their family wherever they go.

Isobel clearly suffers horrific physical violence in this passage, but her mother's string of insults seem to sting even more. Isobel was of course grateful for the brooch, but having never received a present before, she is unsure of the etiquette around the act. Her mother's cruelty has resulted in this response in her daughter, and now her mother is punishing her for it—a violent and dangerous cycle.

When Mrs. Callaghan finishes beating Isobel, she leaves the room. Isobel takes the box back out from beneath the pillow and looks at the **brooch**, rubbing her stinging legs. She wonders why her mother hadn't taken the brooch from her, and wonders briefly if there are things that even her mother cannot do. That idea, though, is "too large to be coped with." Isobel pins the brooch to her dress, marveling at the fact that it is hers. She goes over to the mirror and admires the brooch—"in one way or another," Isobel will wear the brooch "all her life."

In the wake of the beating, Isobel seems almost nonplussed, implying that violent events like this one are commonplace in the Callaghan family. As Isobel admires the brooch in the mirror, she wonders whether there are limits to what her mother can do to her. As she studies her reflection, Isobel does not yet know that she'll be wearing the brooch—and all the emotional baggage it symbolizes—for her entire life.

CHAPTER 2: FALSE IDOLS AND A FIREBALL

Isobel swears that once, when she was younger, she saw a fireball. One afternoon, locked out of the house during a rainstorm, she saw the sky crack open and a pink ball streak past. Despite Isobel's vivid memory of the event, the fireball has, over the years, become another word for a lie. Mrs. Callaghan refuses to believe Isobel and endlessly questions her about the veracity of the fireball story.

Whether or not Isobel truly saw the fireball, she firmly believes that she did. Even though the story is a little outlandish, it seems that Mrs. Callaghan's distrust and dislike of her daughter causes her to instantaneously write Isobel off as a liar, regardless of the circumstances.

Isobel concedes that she is indeed a liar—she often feels that a lie is often "the only contribution she [can] make." Isobel knows she is cowardly, dishonest, and greedy, but she still tries to "protect" those around her from this knowledge. Despite her track record as a liar, Isobel continues to insist that the fireball existed.

Isobel's claim to have seen the fireball is strengthened by the admission that she does *often lie, but this isn't one of those times.*

One day, at Isobel's school, she forgets her composition book. One of the nuns tells Isobel she is "not surprised," as Isobel forgets a lot of things, most noticeably her school money every couple of weeks. Isobel has not been keeping track of her school money, but she is unsurprised by the nun's accusation. At home, she notes, there is a "wild beast of poverty." That afternoon, when Isobel relates the nun's statement to her mother, Mrs. Callaghan lets out a brief whimper before asking Isobel to elaborate on the nun's tone of voice, and whether anyone overheard the conversation. Isobel tries to answer her mother, but her mother tells her that she doesn't ever know what she's talking about. Isobel has been making an "earnest effort" to tell the truth, but in light of her mother's dismissal of her, she accepts herself as a "born liar."

This passage is intentionally written to bewilder the reader just as Isobel is bewildered by the nun's accusations that she has somehow been lying or cheating her school. Mrs. Callaghan is obsessed with knowing exactly what transpired at school. Clearly, Mrs. Callaghan is worried about how the nun perceives her. However, Mrs. Callaghan ultimately uses the attempt to wring information from her daughter as yet another opportunity to degrade and humiliate Isobel.

Isobel believes that she has a "lying sort of voice," and cannot make herself sound trustworthy even when she is telling the truth. As Isobel obsesses over whether she properly relayed the nun's words to her mother, second-guessing herself and every aspect of the story, she notes that her mental preoccupation is "useless and fatiguing" but good for passing the time. When it is time for bed, Isobel is grateful for the chance to snuggle into bed and slip "behind the curtain of the dark into her private world," in which she tells herself elaborate bedtime stories.

Isobel has an overactive imagination that is constantly at work. This is problematic because it forces her to fall down holes of self-deprecation and anxiety, but it is also beneficial because each night it grants her the reprieve of disappearing into a world of her own and escaping the trauma of her daily life.

Isobel gets caught up in her latest story but abruptly stops it when she suddenly realizes that her private world is "all lies." Nevertheless, she does not want to give her stories up—there is "no living" without them. The "lies" of Isobel's stories are not ordinary, common lies like the ones Isobel tells when she's stolen chocolate or kept her mission money. The people she thinks up have become as monumental to her as the Virgin Mary and the Baby Jesus and are thus "false idols." Isobel realizes that "her people" have taken the place of Mary and Jesus, and wonders whether she will be "doomed […] to eternal hellfire," or whether things are not so simple.

Isobel fears that the dream-world or story-world that brings her so much comfort is really just another one of her lies. In this passage, she tries to distinguish between the lies that are "common" and have turned her into a liar, and these "lies" she tells herself that nourish her. The atmosphere of degradation in Isobel's house, however, is so pervasive that she cannot stop coming up with reasons that her imagination is in some way evil or immoral.

Isobel cannot get back to the story in her head after so much deep, tumultuous thought, so instead she lies awake in the dark, hating her mother. She thinks of all the times her mother has asked, "Do you love me?" and begged Isobel to tell her that she does. Isobel wonders why, if she is "such a born liar," her mother wants to hear these things from her. Isobel slowly drifts off to sleep.

Even though Mrs. Callaghan hates her daughter and abuses her constantly, she still longs to hear that Isobel loves her. This foreshadows Isobel's later understanding that her mother looks to Isobel and Margaret to find satisfaction—whether that means successfully roping them into a screaming match or forcing them to declare their love for her.

The next day, Isobel is not sent back to school, and after a few days, she is transferred to a convent in the next suburb over. Isobel enjoys her new school and even comes to appreciate the long and slightly obstacle-laced walk there and back each day. That Sunday after Mass, the parish priest takes Mrs. Callaghan aside for a talk—afterward, Mrs. Callaghan is "blushing with satisfied pride," and the next day, Isobel goes back to the local convent. Nothing much has changed, except that Isobel now thinks of herself as a "knowing sinner."

In this passage Witting introduces the theme of the seen and unseen—it is not seen or known what happens between the priest and Mrs. Callaghan, but whatever it is, it works to Isobel's benefit. Perhaps the two of them have struck a deal, or perhaps he has taken pity on the Callaghans for not being able to afford school fees.

One day, Isobel, Margaret, and Mrs. Callaghan dress in their best clothes and head to the bus to visit some well-to-do cousins. Margaret wonders aloud on the way to the bus what became of a gold chain bracelet she had once. Mrs. Callaghan reminds her that Isobel put it on and went for a walk and lost it. Isobel wants to scream "in her lying voice" that she didn't, but knows better than to break the silence. Isobel remembers how a while ago, when one of her mother's friends asked Mrs. Callaghan whatever become of her diamond, her mother answered, "My solicitor," and made a "strange, shamefaced smile." Isobel feels that whoever the solicitor is, he has the bracelet as well. Isobel does not believe for a second that she is responsible for the bracelet's loss. Isobel breathes quietly, knowing for sure that she once saw a fireball.

This passage demonstrates to the reader that it is not Isobel who is a born liar—it is her mother. Mrs. Callaghan has either been selling off jewelry or making some other deal with her "solicitor," and blaming Isobel when precious things disappear. This realization strengthens Isobel's belief in her fireball sighting and restores in her the confidence that she is not as bad as her mother has been telling her she is.

CHAPTER 3: THE GRACE OF GOD AND THE HAND-ME-DOWN

One hot summer Sunday during Mass, "the grace of God" descends upon Isobel. She feels it has come to her by mistake. Isobel has hardly been paying attention to the service at all, but when a visiting priest begins delivering a sermon, Isobel finds herself engrossed. The priest describes the "sinful human soul" as unbeautiful, dark, and, outfitted with only one little grime-coated window. The priest says that if the light of the Holy Spirit could penetrate that window, a "glorious change" would take place. Isobel hears these words and feels her soul "bathed in a calm, delightful sunlight." After service, she feels she has acquired a new treasure, and as she walks home with Margaret and her mother, she wonders how she will preserve it.

Religion is yet another means of escape for Isobel, in addition to storytelling, by which she can flee the strange rules and unpredictable violence of her home life and exist in a realm where the rules are more clearly defined. Isobel's desire to enter a state of grace and have something all to herself stems from the abuse she faces at home, and as she devotes herself to grace, she is really devoting herself to finding a way to exist, even for a little while, outside of her mother's influence.

Isobel decides to try to stop fighting with Margaret, talking back, and being lazy. She knows it will be hard, but she wants to be virtuous. Isobel remembers a previous Mass, when a priest came up to Mrs. Callaghan to compliment her on Isobel and Margaret's good behavior. On the way home, Mrs. Callaghan called Isobel a "street angel, home devil." Isobel thinks, though, that one must be allowed to be good if one wants to be.

Isobel's mother's hatred and condescension toward Isobel is so deep that not even a priest's word can convince Mrs. Callaghan that there is something good in her daughter. Mrs. Callaghan can't even let Isobel be good—any goodness is seen as masquerading or lying, furthering Isobel's inability to foster self-confidence.

That afternoon, Isobel dutifully sets the table for lunch. Margaret comes in and reminds Isobel that it's her turn to clean up afterward, and that she can't get out of it by trying to take the easy job instead. Isobel insists she'll clean up afterwards, too. During the meal, Isobel's mother tells her that she'll have to go over to their Auntie Ann's house—Isobel knows her mother is waiting for her to start screaming that she won't go, but instead Isobel says nothing. She realizes that she in fact likes going to Aunt Ann's. She looks forward to the shelf of children's books there and a glass of lemonade. Mrs. Callaghan asks what's come over Isobel; Margaret giggles that perhaps she's been "converted." Isobel tells her mother she doesn't mind going to Auntie Ann's and decides her mother will have to "make do" with her newfound peace.

As Isobel enters her state of grace, her goodness becomes almost a shield or a weapon against all the things she hates, especially her mother. Routines that were once odious to Isobel become tolerable, and despite her mother's questioning of why Isobel is suddenly so agreeable and peaceful, Isobel refuses to explain herself or rise to her mother's probing provocations.

At Auntie Ann's, Isobel drinks lemonade and reads. She is ready for a lovely afternoon, but soon realizes that "she [is] never again going to be happier in one place than another." Grace, after all, is eternal sunshine and makes everything it touches "nice but dull."

Isobel finds her state of grace quite boring once she is in it, but she is resigned to the fact that this is how her life is going to be now—always a little bit detached but safer than the violence she must endure when she rises to her mother's conflicts.

After dinner back at home, Isobel prepares to clear the plates, but her mother snaps at her, insisting she let Margaret do her share. Margaret is so shocked that Isobel grins in triumph, but she soon realizes that part of achieving grace is practicing humility. She knows it will be hard, but she resolves to try.

Isobel is encountering all the ways in which she can slip up within her state of grace—the constant second-guessing mirrors the anxious self-loathing her mother has instilled in her.

The days pass quietly as Isobel feels the "inward light" of grace within her. In the middle of the week, over dinner, Isobel's mother confronts her, asking Isobel what she's sulking about. Isobel insists she's not sulking. Isobel's mother accuses her of lying, and of acting superior, and demands Isobel answer her. Isobel, feeling grace wash over her, feels it doesn't matter if her mother doesn't believe her—she alone knows she is being truthful.

In this passage, the struggles from the previous chapter come to light again—Isobel's mother believes Isobel is a liar, but now rather than believing her mother, Isobel stands resolute in the light of her own truth, confident that knowing in her heart that she is good and honest is enough.

As Isobel's mother continues to urge her to tell the truth, Isobel fears she will lose her temper and begin to scream. She looks into her mother's eyes and realizes that they are "frantic bright"—her mother wants her to scream. "I do something for her when I scream," thinks Isobel, realizing that her mother's anger is a "live animal" that torments her and demands Isobel's temper as a method of attaining relief. Isobel is "torturing" her mother by withholding her own anger.

This passage cracks open a lot of the pain and violence between Isobel and her mother—there is something Mrs. Callaghan needs from her children that she can only get by angering them. The ineffability of this dark desire is unsettling to the reader as it is to Isobel, but it also reveals that Isobel does indeed have a kind of power over her mother.

Isobel insists, once and for all, that she isn't sulking. Her mother leaves the table and goes to her bedroom. Margaret and Isobel finish eating and clear the plates, trying to ignore the "strange yawning noises" coming from their mother's room.

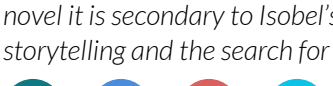
Something dark has a hold of Mrs. Callaghan, and this passage is symbolic of the ways in which her daughters try to ignore it even as it grows to be, quite literally, the loudest thing in their house.

Margaret comes home from school one day "dizzy with delight" and announces that her school is putting on the Shakespearean play *Twelfth Night*. She asks Mrs. Callaghan if it is all right if she stays for practice after school twice a week. Mrs. Callaghan reluctantly agrees, but tells Margaret she must come home at a decent hour. Isobel knows that there are boys in the play—the girls go to all-girls' school, but for *Twelfth Night*, boys from the boys' high school are working on the material alongside Margaret and her friends. As Isobel watches Margaret come home from play practice week after week "full of private joy," she feels her own grace wearing thin.

Something as innocent and benign as taking part in a school play is something the girls both immediately recognize as yet another danger zone. Isobel is aware of what her mother would think if she found out there were boys in the production, and yet does not want to spoil her sister's fun despite her straining against her own state of grace.

One night, Margaret goes to bed early. When Isobel comes up to the room she finds her sister in bed propped against pillows, practicing her lines. Isobel feels that Shakespeare belongs to her—she is angry to see her beautiful sister "taking his words [for] herself." Isobel reminds herself of her promise to remain in a state of grace and climbs into bed. Margaret timidly asks Isobel to not tell their mother about the boys. Isobel promises that she won't.

The play is a story that Margaret is using as an escape—this precious survival tactic is something she holds dear, and begs Isobel to help her in keeping. Margaret is on her own journey, though in the novel it is secondary to Isobel's, and her coping mechanisms involve storytelling and the search for belonging, too.



As the weeks pass by, Isobel feels bad for Margaret, as her sister does not sense the impending danger as she becomes more and more involved in the play. One evening, Margaret comes home later than usual. Mrs. Callaghan confronts her, but Margaret insists that their drama teacher kept them late to practice a tricky scene, and that Margaret didn't think it would be a problem to stay late. Mrs. Callaghan berates Margaret for never thinking, but Margaret counters that Mrs. Callaghan had told her that doing the play would be allowed, and that if it wasn't, she should have said so in the first place. Isobel thinks her mother looks "as if she [has] walked into a wall."

Isobel knows that her sister is tempting fate, but she keeps her vow to protect Margaret's secret and by proxy Margaret herself. Nevertheless, Mrs. Callaghan invents reasons to torment her daughters—Margaret takes a stand against her mother for perhaps the very first time, judging by how shocked Mrs. Callaghan is, and Mrs. Callaghan seems to realize that she is losing the control over her daughters that nourishes her.

The next rehearsal day, Margaret comes home late again. Mrs. Callaghan confronts her at the door with a small brown paper bag. Margaret pales at the sight of it. It is full of makeup, which she insists is just for the play, but Mrs. Callaghan accuses her of chasing boys. Margaret demands her mother stop going through her belongings, and Mrs. Callaghan explodes into a tirade, asking why she ever had children. Isobel thinks her mother's voice sounds funny, and a laugh escapes her. She is afraid she has broken out of her state of grace, and waits for a moment of retribution from on high, but it does not come.

Mrs. Callaghan, unwilling to be defeated, makes yet another grab at ensnaring Margaret and coming up with reasons to excoriate and punish her. Isobel, safe in her state of grace, finds the drama ridiculous, and can't stifle a laugh. In her "divine state," Isobel is able to see for the first time how ridiculous her mother's constant crusades against them are.

Isobel begins studying the saints on Saturday afternoons in order to learn more about the "rules" of grace. She notes that the consistent message in achieving grace is sacrifice: giving up one's possessions. Isobel has very few belongings, though, and she doesn't think that anyone would want the small things she does have. She can't feed the poor, either—she and her family *are* the poor.

Isobel is obsessed with achieving grace, but she is also a young girl—she is by nature a little selfish. The idea that she must sacrifice, when she already has so little, is almost more than she can bear, but she resolves to do everything she can to maintain her brief escape.

Play rehearsals aren't going so well, and Margaret's school decides to have the classes present them at their separate schools rather than in a public performance. After the play is over, Margaret spends more and more time at the house of a new friend named Louise—the alliance between Margaret and Mrs. Callaghan, Isobel notes, is "gone for ever." Isobel is left alone with her mother often and is the only witness to her private suffering and "ludicrous" ravings about how thankless it is to be a mother. Isobel tries to maintain her state of grace and stay out of her mother's way, never rising to her anger or her taunts.

As things continue to deteriorate at the Callaghan house, Isobel tries her best to resist her mother's more subtle provocations. She knows that though her mother mutters about the thankless job of motherhood, she wants to form an alliance with Isobel in Margaret's absence, but Isobel is not about to let her mother rope her into such a situation.

One afternoon, Isobel and Margaret come home from school to see their Aunt Noelene's car parked in the drive. The girls are excited—every time she visits, she gives them ten shillings each and a big bags of hand-me-downs, which are always beautiful, as Noelene is the manager of a dress factory. Mrs. Callaghan is annoyed by her sister's success and sees it as an injustice.

The girls see their Aunt Noelene as exotic and exciting—she is successful, generous, and glamorous, whereas their mother is poor, plain, and cruel. The girls are desperate for any reprieve they can get from their mother's tyranny, and Noelene's visits offer that to them.

Isobel and Margaret enter the house—their mother and their aunt are at the kitchen table, and Mrs. Callaghan looks cheerful for the first time since Margaret's "desertion." Aunt Noelene is dressed beautifully, and asks the girls how they're doing in school. They notice that next to her on the chair is a large parcel of clothing. Noelene remarks that Margaret is looking more and more like their third sister, Aunt Yvonne, whom Noelene notes she hasn't seen since Mr. Callaghan's funeral. Mrs. Callaghan says that Yvonne's family is doing well and is focused on keeping their farm. Noelene laments aloud that Mr. Callaghan would have enjoyed the country "if he had had the chance."

The girls are thrilled by their aunt's visit for several reasons. It is a break from routine, a distraction that will take their mother's hatred and anger off of them for a while, and it is a chance for them to receive money and clothing. Mrs. Callaghan probably hates her sister's visits for all these same reasons, desperate as she is to deprive her daughters at every turn.

Isobel and Margaret realize that "disaster [is] coming." They exchange a worried glance. Mrs. Callaghan says aloud that when she wrote to Yvonne, asking if they could come stay as her husband's doctor had said that a change of air might do him good, Yvonne sent back five pounds toward a holiday rather than invite them to come stay. Noelene begs Mrs. Callaghan to drop the matter, buts Mrs. Callaghan reminds Noelene that she didn't visit Mr. Callaghan, either, when he was dying. Noelene tells Mrs. Callaghan that she hasn't always been an angel. Mrs. Callaghan urges her sister to say what she means.

Margaret and Isobel, who never receive presents and rarely get to experience moments of real joy, are concerned that their mother is going to ruin their opportunity to receive a couple of gifts. Mrs. Callaghan berates her sister for her indifference to Mr. Callaghan's suffering, but Noelene wins by threatening to expose a nefarious bit—or bits—of her sister's past in front of the children.

Noelene reaches into her handbag and takes out two ten-shilling notes. She places them on the table and tells Mrs. Callaghan that they are for the girls, then takes her leave. Mrs. Callaghan sits staring into space. After a few moments, Margaret asks if she and Isobel can look at the clothes; their mother tells them they can do what they like. The girls open it excitedly and rifle through the clothes inside. There is a beautiful yellow dress—Margaret holds it up lovingly before seeing that there is a note pinned to it which says "ISOBEL."

Mrs. Callaghan has been defeated a third time, this time by her sister. Noelene has given Isobel and Margaret's gifts in spite of her hatred of her sister, forcing Mrs. Callaghan to confront the fact that despite how hard she tries, she will never be able to fully control or isolate her children.

Isobel knows that she must give up the dress and make a sacrifice in order to achieve true grace. She tells Margaret that she can have the dress if she wants—Margaret is very grateful. Their mother, though, remarks that the dress must be for Isobel and leaves the room.

Isobel's mother seems hell-bent on interrupting Isobel's journey towards a state of grace, and here attempts to curb her daughter's efforts to be kind to her older sister. This betrays Mrs. Callaghan's deep hatred of both her daughters—she does not want either of them to feel happy or safe.

Once Mrs. Callaghan has gone, Margaret asks if she can really have the dress. Though it is hard for her to do, Isobel says that she can, and urges her to take it upstairs and try it on. Isobel follows Margaret up, helps her into the dress, and tells her sister that she looks lovely. Their mother is in the doorway, though, and she demands Margaret take off the dress. The girls protest. Mrs. Callaghan tears the dress off of Margaret, ripping the fabric.

Isobel is so committed to her state of grace, which she believes can only be achieved through self-sacrifice, that she gives the beautiful dress to Margaret. It is no matter—Mrs. Callaghan has spoken her rules and will not be defied.

Isobel begins screaming at her mother, breaking her state of grace. She notices that a look of peace and relief washes over her mother's face. Isobel realizes that she is her same old self—she never changed, and never achieved grace. Margaret sits sobbing on the floor, and Isobel tries to comfort her by telling her it was only a dress. Isobel knows, though, that it was much more—and that it is now gone forever, just like her state of grace. She thinks that perhaps "such things [are] not for either of them."

Isobel finally gives in and rises to her mother's provoking—she does so on behalf of her sister, in an attempt to defend the poor Margaret. Isobel's mother has won at last, but it is relief, not triumph, which passes over her face as she leaves her despondent daughters in the wake of her destruction.

CHAPTER 4: GLASSWARE AND OTHER BREAKABLE ITEMS

Aunt Yvonne and Aunt Noelene are in the kitchen, talking about what Margaret and Isobel will wear to their mother's funeral. The girls need new clothes and shoes, and Noelene is happy to buy them, but she thinks purchasing them something black is a waste of money. Aunt Yvonne is scandalized by the thought of the girls wearing something other than black to the funeral, but she is not the one paying for the new clothes.

Isobel's mother has died, and before readers are able to see the emotions surrounding the event, they are plunged into the "business" of grief—the arrangements that must be made and the social niceties which must be observed in the wake of loss.

Isobel is packing her books up into a box which will be stored at Aunt Noelene's—she is sad to be parting with them. As Isobel thinks about her mother's death, she cannot call up "any decent feeling from her evil heart"—she is only full of joy at the thought of freedom and new shoes. Isobel goes into the bedroom and asks Margaret, who is sitting on the bed "dazed and weeping," if she can take the Shakespeare. Isobel wishes she could tell her sister to cheer up, and notes that somebody should be giving Isobel herself the opposite advice. Isobel is sorrowful at not being able to grieve her mother's death—she wonders if at the funeral, she will feel something, and become "a member of the human race."

The first glimpse of Isobel after her mother's death reveals that Isobel is positively gleeful at her mother's passing. Isobel is free at last—free from abuse, free from the house that served as a cage of poverty and trauma, free from having to hide her love of books and her desire for escape into another world. Despite Isobel's relief and joy, she knows that what she is feeling is technically "wrong," and it makes her feel separate from the entire "human race."

At the funeral, though, things are no better. As the coffin is lowered into the ground, Isobel urges herself to "feel something," but only feels joy "flaring like a great red flower" within her. On the way back to the house after the service, Isobel is more depressed by the fact that ritual has failed her than by the fact of her mother's death.

It's hard to blame Isobel for feeling relief at her mother's death, but Isobel, the victim of intense trauma and abuse, is still finding ways to blame herself for feeling nothing.

Back at the house, Aunt Yvonne and Aunt Noelene discuss with Margaret and Isobel what the girls are going to do. Isobel has a job interview lined up for the following day—her prospective employers need someone to translate German, and because Isobel received honors in the subject, she believes they will take her on even without shorthand and typing skills. When the aunts ask Isobel where she plans to live, she tells them she can board somewhere. Aunt Yvonne offers to help Isobel secure a room before she returns to the country with Margaret.

Isobel has a plan for her future already—her organization and determination imply that she has been waiting for the day in which she can finally be free and strike out on her own without fear of being pulled back into the dark world of her childhood.

Aunt Yvonne, Margaret, and Isobel take a taxi ride to the boarding house where Isobel will be staying. Aunt Yvonne has paid Isobel's board for the week, and as the two say an awkward goodbye, Yvonne tells Isobel that Noelene will soon be in touch about the money from the furniture. Margaret bids Isobel goodbye, and Isobel says goodbye back—it is not a last word, she thinks, but a first word. She picks up her suitcase, goes to the door, and rings the bell.

Isobel's aunts are helpful and generous in getting her out of her hometown and settled in the city. Margaret, who is more devastated by the loss, leans on her family, while Isobel, unburdened by grief, is free at last to begin her journey towards independence and self-discovery.

A tall elderly woman with ginger hair opens the door—Mrs. Bowers, the landlady. She tells Isobel she's been expecting her and invites her in. She offers Isobel a cup of tea and bids her to follow her into the kitchen. In the kitchen, an old woman named Mrs. Prendergast is slicing beans. Mrs. Bowers introduces Isobel to Mrs. Prendergast as a "poor little thing" who has just lost her mother—Isobel is still in her funeral clothes, but then again, as they are the only nice clothes she owns, she hasn't "much choice." Isobel drinks tea and eats cake while the two women chat, and when she is finished, Mrs. Bowers tells her that dinner is at six, residents must change their linens on Sundays, and that her daughter, Madge, will show her around.

The boarding house, like Isobel's childhood home, is dominated by women. Though the others take pity on Isobel for her unfortunate circumstances, they do not know how happy Isobel is to be out of her home and out from other her mother's thumb, safe in a new place where abuse and trauma cannot touch her.

Mrs. Prendergast asks if Madge is "still in with those people," and Mrs. Bowers answers only that it "doesn't do any harm." As Isobel carries her case upstairs, she wonders who "those people" are. Isobel decides that Madge must be a flighty "mod." Isobel enters her room, which is commonplace and small; nonetheless, she loves every single thing in it because it is her own. She unpacks her books and sets them on a shelf, grateful for the chance to choose for herself the way her room will be laid out.

Isobel is completely overcome with joy—she is free at last, and everything around her is all her own. She does not have to hide anymore—she can display her books, rearrange her things, and decide who she wants to be and what kind of place she wants to make for herself in this home and in the world.

Isobel catches sight of her face in the mirror, and notes that she looks so happy that the strong resemblance to her mother doesn't even matter. She considers changing her name to Maeve, believing it to be a poised and confident name. The dinner bell rings, and Isobel hurries downstairs.

Isobel is so happy to be free that the fact that she carries her mother around with her on her own face doesn't even matter to her. She feels so detached from her mother now that she even considers changing the name her parents gave her to something else.

Isobel watches as three men and two women take their seats around the dinner table. A beautiful older woman asks Isobel if she is the new boarder, and what her name is. She considers introducing herself as Maeve, but decides against it. Isobel sits between the older woman and Madge, who does not look at all flighty. An elderly gentleman sits at the end of the table—the older woman introduces herself as Betty and the man as Mr. Watkin, and then points out the two younger men as Tim and Norman. Tim seems cheerful, while Norman seems serious.

Isobel meets the people who will be her neighbors and, she hopes, her friends with a new kind of self-confidence. She can be anyone she wants to be here—she does not have to be the frightened little girl she once was. The opportunity to reinvent herself, re-discover herself, and find a place where she belongs is all Isobel has ever wanted.

As dinner goes on, Isobel attempts to jump into the conversation, but she finds that her remarks are slightly off-putting and seem to silence the other boarders. After dinner, Betty offers to show Isobel around so that Madge can "get away," and Madge nods gratefully. Betty shows Isobel the ropes, giving her tips on how to avoid a busy bathroom in the mornings and advising her that ironing will cost her and sitting up in her room at night with the lights on will run up the electricity bill and anger Mrs. Bowers. Betty then heads downstairs to play cards with Mr. Watkin.

Despite her hopes that she will be able to reinvent herself as charming and likable, Isobel realizes for the first time that due to the isolation and trauma of her upbringing, she has trouble connecting with other people. She longed to be a "member of the human race" when her mother died, and her feelings of separation from other people will follow her throughout this new chapter of her life.

Isobel stays upstairs and continues unpacking, slightly sad that she can't stay up reading in her room all night. When she's finished, she wonders if she should bring her book down to the common room, but decides it would be bad manners on the first night; in the name of "right behavior," Isobel heads down to watch the card game. After just a little while, though, Isobel is exhausted, and goes back upstairs to bed.

Isobel is so used to there being strict rules and regulations on her behavior that she denies herself her deepest pleasure—reading—in favor of appearing likable to her fellow boarders.

At 8:30 A.M. the next morning, Isobel—pretending in her head, for purposes of self-confidence, that she is Maeve Callaghan—strides into the office of Lingard Brothers Importers, a glassworks company, to start work. A young woman named Olive leads her back to the office of Mr. Walter, the boss, who explains that her duties will be first and foremost to translate the German mail. He instructs her not to worry about her other duties until the backlog is cleared, except for handling petty cash. After giving her instructions on how to manage the cash box, Isobel attempts to make a joke, asking if at the end of the week she can take home whatever's left over, but the moment falls flat, and Mr. Walter does not understand her lighthearted quip.

As Isobel enters her new work atmosphere, she does so with confidence; but once again she finds that her interpersonal skills are somewhat lacking, or at least just a little bit "off" from the accepted norm. Nonetheless, Isobel is grateful to have a new place to find herself—to throw herself into work and further her connection to other people.

Olive returns to take Isobel from Mr. Walter's office and bring her back to the small room at the front, where two other girls are uncovering their typewriters and sitting down to work. Olive introduces them as Rita and Nell—Rita has a "gypsy smile" while Nell has an "agreeable" face. Olive shows Isobel to her typewriter, but Isobel says she can't type. Olive tells her to do her best and offers to put some paper in it for her.

Isobel's new coworkers are friendly and welcoming and show her grace, help, and acceptance despite the fact that they don't know her at all.

As Isobel gets to work, she enjoys losing herself in the "stories" of the letters she is translating, picturing all the details as if she is reading one of her books. Soon, though, it is time to face the typewriter. Isobel asks Rita for help, and Rita briefly shows her how to use the machine. Isobel is not proficient with the typewriter, but finds that working on it is "endurable but disappointing." Isobel loses herself in focus, and is jarred when a voice behind her suddenly asks if she can type any faster. It is Mr. Richard, another of the bosses at the company. He stands behind her, watching as she works. Isobel, frustrated, tells herself that she is not at the office—she is in Czechoslovakia, within the pages of the letter.

As always, Isobel is eager to lose herself in a story. She escapes the stresses of her job through the best aspect of it—being able to read other people's words and understand their lives just a little bit through what they share. Isobel is, however, introduced to the odd behaviors of an overbearing boss—his hovering over her is no doubt reminiscent of the feeling of claustrophobia her mother inspired in her, and just as Isobel lost herself in books to escape that trauma, she loses herself in her work to escape this new uncomfortable development.

Mr. Richard eventually walks away, but soon after, Isobel finds herself up against some German words she does not know, and realizes she does not have a German dictionary with her. Isobel is afraid of how badly she has failed at her first day. Olive suggests Isobel go out and buy a dictionary at her lunch break—Isobel has a little money from Aunt Noelene.

Isobel's first day at work is not an easy one, but with the support of her coworkers—and the unseen support from her Aunt Noelene—she is determined to make it through.

At lunch, Isobel visits a bookshop and picks up a German dictionary. She brings it to the register to purchase it, but the shop proprietor tells her she can have it for free. This makes the book precious to Isobel, and she carries it back to work as if it was a talisman. After lunch, work is easier—her typing improves slightly, and the German dictionary helps greatly. At the end of the day, she places it in the drawer and gives it a pat before heading home. That night, Isobel falls asleep right after dinner. The next day at work is "peaceful," and the work goes fast. That night, at dinner, Betty is not present, and after dinner Madge disappears and only Mr. Watkin remains downstairs. Isobel finally gets the chance to read for pleasure in the common room, and she is delighted.

The rest of Isobel's day passes much more smoothly than the first half of it did—she settles into a rhythm at work, she is buoyed by the shopkeeper's generosity, and now, at nights at the boarding house, she at last feels comfortable enough to lose herself in a book at the end of the day. Isobel is feeling a little bit more like she belongs, both at work and in her brand-new home.

Isobel visits Aunt Noelene, and the two discuss Isobel's finances. Aunt Noelene offers to pay for Isobel to take classes in typing and shorthand—she is afraid that without these skills, Isobel will lose her job, and if this job folds, she won't be able to get another. Isobel tells Noelene that she doesn't want to be a burden, but Noelene asks Isobel who else is supposed to look after her. Noelene tells Isobel to come visit the first Sunday of every month and she will give her four pounds for the week until Isobel earns a pay raise. Isobel wants to know if she will have to ask Mr. Walter personally for a raise; Noelene tells Isobel that she will get "nothing out of this world unless [she] fight[s] for it."

Isobel has been feeling confident and capable, but her visit to Aunt Noelene reminds her that she still has a long way to go. The world is run by money, Aunt Noelene reminds her, and Isobel must fight tooth and nail for the things she deserves in the world. Isobel, struggling to overcome deep personal trauma and a crisis of self-confidence, will need help in this department. Noelene's staunch words remind Isobel that there is a lot more to self-discovery than she realized.

Noelene fears that Isobel has started off on the wrong foot at her company and is not being compensated fairly for her skills in German. Noelene urges Isobel to find out what the other girls at the firm are making. Noelene fixes herself a drink and then says determinedly that she doesn't think Isobel will make it—she's not a "fighter." She urges Isobel to be a teacher—Isobel replies that she hates school. Noelene tells Isobel that she can stay at the company until the end of the year, but should start looking for other work.

Noelene's words are both encouraging and discouraging. She is supportive of Isobel and wants the best for her niece, but in trying to look out for her, is inadvertently invalidating all the hard work Isobel has done to get herself a job and strike out on her own.

Aunt Noelene takes a phone call, and Isobel sits alone in the kitchen, marveling at how her aunt has "tamed money" and made it into a "kind of playmate." Isobel wishes she could give Noelene something in return, though she knows she can't. After lunch, Isobel returns to the boarding house with a knew belt, handbag, sweater, and coat from Aunt Noelene's stash of clothes. In spite of the new clothes, Isobel feels that the visit was "depressing," as it focused mostly on the "frightening living nature of money."

Isobel is worried by a lot of what transpired during her visit with Noelene, but she is nonetheless determined to continue on her journey towards independence and self-discovery. Just as she was as a child, Isobel is further bolstered by Noelene's gifts of clothes.

Isobel returns to work and is off put by how frequently Mr. Richard comes to stand behind her and watch her work. The store man, Frank, tells Isobel she should say something polite but dismissive to Richard in order to get him to move along. Frank tells Isobel that Richard has hardly any work of his own and is largely incompetent. Despite Frank's urgings, Isobel decides to handle Mr. Richard with inner calm alone, choosing to ignore him when he stands behind her.

Isobel is practicing the skills she learned during her years of battle with her mother to survive at work. Rather than rising to Mr. Richard's provocations or giving him any cause to escalate things, she is focusing on maintaining a new kind of "state of grace" in the workplace.

At the boarding house, Isobel is more at home in the kitchen most nights than the drawing room, and enjoys listening to Mrs. Bowers and Mrs. Prendergast discuss death and sex and reminisce about their own lives. Isobel thinks of the two women as the Fates, and listens with interest to their every word as they dissect their dreams and gripe about their friends, knowing that within her mind there is a "collector intent at information at all costs."

Isobel is forging new connections in her personal life with two older women she sees as Fates—divine beings with the answers she needs in order to solve her problems. The maternal figures bolster Isobel and help her inch closer to self-discovery through the stories and wisdom they share.

Isobel takes a typing class but finds it miserable. She is better in shorthand and dictation, but typing frustrates her endlessly. One afternoon, coming back from typing class, Mrs. Bowers calls her into the kitchen for some sweets. Isobel joins her, and Mrs. Bowers tells her all about her daughter Madge's fascination with a "strange religion." Mrs. Bowers has told Madge that she cannot practice the religion in the boarding house, though she supposes that it doesn't do any harm for Madge to practice it elsewhere. She also reveals that Betty had been "the guilty party" in a scandalous divorce, while Mr. Watkins spent his life recording the fortunes of dynasties of race horses. As Mrs. Bowers tells Isobel about all the other boarders, Isobel mentally "trie[s] on each life" to see if it suits her.

Isobel's search for self-discovery and a sense of the place where she belongs deepens as she listens to Mrs. Bowers' stories about other people's lives. Isobel is fascinated by how each person is so unique and has made a life for themselves despite setbacks and unfortunate circumstances. Isobel wonders what the story of her life will look like, and she tries to imagine herself as different versions of all the people around her.

Going to the college for her typing classes has brought Isobel the "pleasure of eating out," and she frequents a nearby café where she eats fish and chips and reads quietly—on these outings, she feels at home for the first time. One Saturday, Isobel visits a new café, a coffee shop, and reads for a while before returning to the boarding house to sit with the Fates. Isobel is grateful for her easy, pleasant Saturdays.

Isobel is now striking out on her own even further than the bounds of the boarding house, exploring the city and contemplating all that it is has to offer her as she searches for her place in the world.

Rita shows up to the office on Monday and announces that she is engaged. At lunchtime, Isobel joins Rita and the other girls in the showroom, where the staff eats their sandwiches at a corner table, and Rita waltzes around, dizzy with glee. Rita wonders who amongst the girls will be next to get married—Isobel jokes that it will be she and Mr. Richard. Rita tells the others that she and her husband want to move to Melbourne together. Isobel hears this news "with dismay," knowing that Aunt Noelene will expect her to seize the moment of Rita's departure and wrangle more pay from her bosses. Isobel doesn't feel she has enough courage, though, and laments that life works this way: "no sooner had you built yourself your little raft and felt secure than it came to pieces under you and you were swimming again."

Isobel has been doing well the last several weeks, but the news of Rita's marriage—and thus the news that a new spot will be opening up in the company, and that Isobel will need to seize the opportunity to advance or be left behind—fills her with dread. She is working so hard just to get herself to a place of stability and self-acceptance, and as she realizes that the struggle to be one's best self is a lifelong journey, she is daunted by all she has ahead of her.

After the others go back to work, Olive holds Isobel back. She advises her not to be so friendly with Frank, who is a communist, and not to make any jokes about Richard;. she could have Rita's job when she leaves and get a "big promotion" if only she keeps her head down and stays out of trouble. Later, Isobel tells Frank what Olive told her, and the two commiserate over how difficult the work environment is. Isobel confesses that she always thought she would just do her work and take her money and not have to worry about anything else. Frank asks Isobel what she wants out of life, and asks her if she ever thinks of being a writer—she has a certain "way of putting things," he notes. Isobel asks Frank to drop the subject. When he asks her again what she wants, she tells him that all she desires is to "be one of the crowd."

Isobel's simple desires are not in harmony with how complicated and stressful the world can be. All she wants is to do her work, make money, feel at home in the world, and go quietly throughout her life—but life presents obstacles which must be overcome, interpersonal dramas large and small which must be navigated, and, in Isobel's case, callings to some larger purpose or bigger dream which, despite one's best efforts, cannot always be ignored.

Two days later, Isobel's "crowd" appears. She is sitting in a coffee shop in town when a group of six young people come in and push a bunch of tables together. Isobel is annoyed that they are making so much noise, but when they start talking about schoolwork and poetry, Isobel can't help but pay attention to their conversation and wish she could be a part of them. She believes they are "living as she long[s] to," and is sure none of them has any idea just how lucky they are.

All Isobel wants is a group of friends that meet her ideals of what it will mean to be part of a crowd, or a group. When Isobel notices some high-minded university students, she is so filled with envy and longing that she knows she must somehow insert herself into their social circle.

Isobel thinks she recognizes one of the girls from somewhere, and wishes she could remember her name so that she could go up to her and insert herself into the group. She thinks that the girl looks bored, and Isobel wishes she could take her place. Suddenly, Isobel remembers the girl's name—it is Vinnie Winters, and Isobel knows her from school. Isobel at last approaches the table and introduces herself to Vinnie—she asks if Vinnie remembers either her or Margaret, but Vinnie doesn't seem to.

Isobel, by chance, does indeed have a "way in" with these alluring new people, though the connection does not earn her quite as warm a welcome as she'd hoped it would. Nonetheless, Isobel is determined to join this group, and to find the cool literary friends she's always dreamed of having.

The boy opposite Vinnie asks Isobel to come and join them, and offers to bring her things over to their table for her. Once Isobel sits down, one of the boys—Kenneth—asks Isobel if she were a part of speech, which part she would be. He is a very, he says; their friend Janet is a conjunction; Vinnie is an adjective, and Trevor is a noun. Isobel tells them that she is a preposition—she likes "only small common objects." One of the other girls smiles at her joke, and Isobel—whose jokes always fall flat—is astounded. Isobel banters with her clever new friends and feels at home.

These new friends play funny games and laugh at Isobel's jokes—at last, she feels that she is not on the fringes or the outside of a group, but is a member of the human race and a part of the crowd, just like she always wanted to be. It does not occur to Isobel that there might be demands to this new friendship that she cannot yet foresee, just as she was blind to the demands of work and living as a financially independent person in the world.

One of the young men asks what part of speech his friends think he is—his name is Nick, and Kenneth tells him that he is an adverb. He tells Nick jokingly that someone named Diana, who is not present, is a "past participle." As the game goes on, and the students assign parts of speech to teachers and people they know, such as a professor whom they refer to as Joseph, they soon grow bored. As silence falls upon the group, Isobel departs, bidding them all goodbye.

Isobel has had a taste of belonging and self-discovery, joking and making intellectual banter with these strange and exciting new friends. She is electrified by their world despite the fact that it seems that there are some underlying tensions within it.

Isobel returns to the boarding house, feeling as if she has finally found people who speak "her own language." When Mrs. Bowers greets her and asks where she's been, Isobel tells her she was out with a girlfriend—Isobel the "born liar" is back. Isobel spins lies about the imaginary "friend" she was out with while Mrs. Bowers serves her tea and cake. Isobel feels guilty—there is no place for lying in the beautiful kitchen—but she cannot stop telling lies about her friend "Emma."

Isobel is so protective of her new friends, and the new sense of belonging that she has found, that her instinct is to hide it from Mrs. Bowers. This comes from years and years of hiding everything good in her life from her mother—because Isobel sees Mrs. Bowers as a kind of maternal figure, she falls into the destructive patterns of her youth almost against her will.

Mrs. Prendergast remarks that she had a cousin named Emma who was "put a way for a while" after going "funny" after the birth of her third child. Mrs. Prendergast then tells the story of a woman who lived across from her in her old town. When the woman's baby was six weeks old, she and her husband were getting ready to go out one evening; he called for her, and she told him that she would be out in a minute—she was just "popping the baby in the oven." The husband ran to the kitchen to find their infant "greased all over and trussed up in the baking dish"—he got there just in time. Isobel is seized with "anguish" for the **baby** in the story.

As Isobel listens to the story of a woman whose postpartum state led her to begin the early stages of cooking her baby in the oven, Isobel is overcome with horror, seeing the dark impulses which drove her mother to abuse her for years and years reflected in the tale, and realizing that while someone came to save the baby in the baking dish, nobody ever came to save Isobel.

All week, Isobel thinks of the group she met in the café. She tries to find out the name of the poet they were discussing, and wonders who the teacher they were discussing, someone named Joseph, might be. On Saturday morning, Isobel arrives at the café early, hoping that the group will come by again. Sure enough, Trevor and Nick show up, and invite Isobel to their table. Janet and Kenneth come in next, arguing about an essay topic. Isobel struggles to keep up with their conversation. To ingratiate herself to her new friends, Isobel tells them about Mrs. Bowers and Mrs. Prendergast, but presents the women as ridiculous and strange, feeling a pit in her stomach as she does.

Isobel is completely obsessed by her new friends because of what they represent as a whole: a life devoted to literature and intellect, bolstered by solid friendships, and marked by a sense of belonging. Isobel finds herself doing whatever she can to ingratiate herself to these people so that they'll let her become one of them—even throwing her dear friends at the boarding house under the bus to earn some laughs from the students.

When Janet asks Kenneth whether he's bringing Vinnie to an upcoming ball, Kenneth recites a dark poem of his own composition in response. Isobel, confused and startled, tries not to laugh. Kenneth then begins telling a story about writers whose names Isobel doesn't know and can't keep track of. As he and Janet banter back and forth, Isobel resents the affection they have for one another.

Isobel realizes that perhaps there are some strange undercurrents to this group, but she chooses to ignore them. She is jealous of what the students have with one another, and wants it for herself.

Trevor walks Isobel nearly to the boarding house, and asks her why she doesn't attend university. She says plainly that she must earn her living, and adds that in the end she only wants to read books—she doesn't want to have to write essays about them. As they part ways, Trevor tells Isobel he'll see her next week.

Isobel can't deny that she is different from these people. They have a privilege and a lightness she will never have. Even in spite of this, Isobel chooses to continue taking up with them, grateful for their recurrent invitations to join them in friendship.

Isobel, for the first time, feels alive. On Sundays she goes to the library and checks out the books her new friends are talking about. Isobel stays away from the kitchen more and more often, avoiding Mrs. Bowers, and finds herself living for Saturdays. Though Isobel feels alive, she thinks that she is "morally as bad as ever." At nights, Isobel talks to her pillow as if it is Joseph, her new friends' faceless instructor, and unpacks her thoughts for him. She wonders whether someone born bad could choose to be different, and confesses that she thought she could "make [her] life into a room and chose what came into it." Isobel admits to her pillow, though, that life is actually more like a sea than a room—undertows carry you where you don't want to go.

Isobel has a lot of questions about herself and her place in the world, which come up when she realizes that she is unable to hold all the threads of her life together—she cannot be good to everyone at once. Isobel turns to the specter of her new friends' instructor for answers, believing that their cushy, intellectual life is the one she wants, and that their circumstances far outstrip hers in happiness and a sense of belonging. Isobel is afraid of being carried away in certain directions against her will, and wants to keep hold of the disorganized, disparate life she is making for herself despite the warning signs.

Madge has gotten engaged, and brings her fiancée Arthur to the boarding house to meet Mrs. Bowers. The two shake hands, and Mrs. Bowers retreats to the kitchen. Betty leaps up and congratulates Madge and Arthur, as do Mr. Watkin and Tim and Norman. Isobel tells Madge that she likes her ring—it is not a diamond, but a dark striped stone. Isobel watches with confusion while Betty plays hostess to Arthur; Mrs. Bowers stays in the kitchen. The next day, in the café, when Isobel's new friends ask about the boarding house, she tells them things are bad—Mrs. Bowers is angry about Madge's engagement.

As Isobel realizes that there are new tensions brewing in the boarding house, she longs even more to retreat in to the new world of her new friends. She is sensitive to mother-daughter struggles, and as a battle between Mrs. Bowers and Madge seems on the brink of unfolding, Isobel wants to get herself out of the crossfire.

Sure enough, when she returns to the boarding house, Isobel is lured into the kitchen, where she must sit and listen to Mrs. Bowers laments Madge's "folly." She calls Arthur a "religious crackpot" and believes that Madge, who has always been weak, is "possessed" by the religion and acting a fool for the first man who has said two words to her. Mrs. Bowers cannot believe that Madge has not even gotten a diamond engagement ring. Mrs. Prendergast attempts to soothe Mrs. Bowers while Isobel stays silent, but Mrs. Bowers does not want to be consoled.

Isobel realizes that there is more strife between Mrs. Bowers and Madge than she'd realized, but is unable to engage with Mrs. Bowers' laments—she is, again, very sensitive to fights and conflicts between mothers and daughters, and does not want to play any role at all in whatever conflict is newly brewing.

Moreover, the other boarders have begun to act with hostility towards Isobel and even making fun of her clothing. Isobel laments the cruel treatment to "Joseph" each night, wondering why the other boarders hate her, but Joseph has no answers—Joseph is "a listener only."

Isobel cannot yet see the reasons behind the newfound trouble she is having at the boarding house. She longs for the answers, but even the brilliant professor who has become her imaginary friend cannot give them to her.

At the café one afternoon, Janet notices a tall dark girl staring at their group from the window. When Janet mentions her, Nick stiffens and grows still. Janet scoffs that the girl at the window has "no self-respect at all," and urges Nick to go talk to her and tell her "it's no use." Nick sits at the table, playing with a match. Kenneth tells Nick that there's nothing he can do about it except to "wait until [the girl at the window] gets tired of it." Isobel realizes that the girl at the window is Diana—the "past participle." Isobel is curious about Diana. As the others talk derisively about Diana, Isobel thinks that she wishes just one of them had to stand "wrung in a doorway staring at someone [they] love, hopelessly."

Isobel has known that there is something brewing beneath the surface of her new group since she met them—and now she sees what it is. Diana is a presence which reminds Isobel of the lack of love she experienced in her own childhood. Despite the group's hatred and fear of Diana, Isobel recognizes that there is another side to the story, and that perhaps Diana is suffering in a way which she can understand but her new friends never will.

Nick and Trevor head home to their apartment, which the group colloquially calls Fifty-one, for its street address. They ask Isobel if she is coming along, and she goes with them. At Fifty-one, Janet introduces Isobel to Helen, the owner of the house who rents out the rooms. Janet tells Helen that they all had a "visitor" at the café. Helen tells Janet that Diana stopped by the house first, but that Helen didn't tell her where the group was. Isobel thinks that Diana had been beautiful except for her "obsessed eyes." Diana's plight frightens Isobel.

As Isobel is at last invited from the café to the true hub of her new group's friendship, she feels a sense of belonging. She is being inducted not only into their physical world, but their emotional one, as well, as she begins learning more about the drama and pain that lies just under the surface of their witty, happy exterior.

In the yard, a motorbike starts up, and the group remarks that Nick is "escaping." Apparently, Diana has not been seen for a fortnight until today—the last time anyone saw her was after she broke up Nick and his last girlfriend, Anthea. If he takes up with anyone else, Janet says, Diana will be "bad as ever." Isobel thinks of Nick as "an exiled prince," driven out of his own kingdom by a furious woman. The group laments how "dreadful" things must be for Nick, stalked as he is, but notes that he never talks about his feelings to any of them.

Isobel realizes that Diana's own form of abuse has calibrated Nick's life and made him fearful, shy, and detached from his friends—just as Isobel's mother's own abuse did to her.

Trevor invites Isobel upstairs to his bedroom to look at some books. Isobel is panicked by the invitation, but tells herself that if Trevor had any ulterior motives, he would not have asked her in front of everyone—Isobel tells herself that Trevor thinks of her only as a reader, not a girl. Upstairs, Trevor hands Isobel a series of Russian novels and they begin discussing literature but soon a clock chimes—Isobel realizes it is already six, and she is late for dinner at the boarding house. Isobel hurries from back to the boarding house and slides into her place, slightly late. The other boarders look up at Isobel and acknowledge her arrival "without affection." Isobel berates herself for having given in to forgetfulness, a "dangerous" pursuit. Isobel wishes she could know where she went wrong.

Isobel is using literature to escape in a much more practical way than ever before—she is neglecting her life at the boarding house in favor of this new life, steeped in books and discussions about literature with cool, intellectual people. Isobel is forgetting herself—a dangerous thing when her main mission in this part of her life is to discover herself. Isobel is finding it difficult to balance everything she has on her plate, and is struggling with who she wants to be in opposition to who she really is.

The next evening, Mrs. Bowers appears at the door, looking angry, and tells the boarders that one of them hasn't changed their sheets. Isobel realizes it is her, and offers to run up and do it straight away. Mrs. Bowers softens, though, and tells her the sheets can wait until after dinner. Mrs. Bowers returns to the kitchen, and the rest of the boarders—Madge included—can hear her talking to Mrs. Prendergast derisively about Arthur. Madge approaches the kitchen and tells her mother to say whatever she has to say to her face. Isobel is "awed" by Madge, and wishes she had been able to find the courage to talk to her own mother that way. As Madge and Mrs. Bowers argue, Isobel realizes that she has, in a way, taken Madge's place in the boarding house—she is at last "the favored child." Isobel laments that "any rag will make a doll for the idiot in the attic."

Things at the boarding house are slightly falling apart for Isobel. She has spent so much time absorbed in her new world with her new friends that she has forgotten her allegiances and responsibilities at home. There are also forces beyond her control that have been disturbed life at the boarding house—tensions between Madge and Mrs. Bowers have run high, and though at first Isobel thinks that their causes are isolated, she soon comes to see that she is more involved in the domestic drama than she would like to believe. When Isobel notes that she has an idiot in her attic, she means that she is so starved for affection that she has sought it from Mrs. Bowers and has consequently displaced Madge in her own home.

As Isobel returns to the room, she reflects on the ways in which the "idiot" has played games with Isobel's world, and has influenced her to move in certain directions. She wonders if she will be able to fight against this part of herself for the rest of her life. Isobel feels she now at least knows where she has been going wrong and why the other boarders must dislike her so much.

Isobel realizes that despite her best efforts, she has indeed been swept away by a force beyond her control. She laments the idea of having to "fight" something unseen within her for the rest of her life as she realizes that even more of her existence than she thought has been calibrated by her past traumas.

Isobel hears Madge's footsteps and voice outside, and decides to go and see what Madge is up to. The door of Madge's room is open, and she and Arthur are inside packing. Isobel offers to help, and Madge smiles kindly at Isobel. She asks Isobel to help Arthur take boxes down to the cars. Isobel consents, but is afraid of meeting Mrs. Bowers downstairs, and disappointing her and angering the "idiot." Once Madge's parcels are all loaded, Madge kisses Isobel goodbye—Isobel knows it is a "proxy kiss," but feels she is doing something good just by being there to receive it.

Isobel feels guilty for the role she has played in unseating Madge from Mrs. Bowers affections, and wants to, in her own small way, try to make amends however she can. However, the damage she has done, perhaps unwittingly, is palpable, and there is sadness and longing in Madge's proxy kiss—a kiss which is meant for Mrs. Bowers.

In the café, Kenneth and a boy named Mitch are bent over pages of manuscript while Janet watches them. The atmosphere inside is peaceful and buoyant, and as Isobel sits down with her friends, Janet tells her that Trevor and Nick have gone away for the weekend. Isobel and Janet look over the boys' pages, and then Isobel heads over to Fifty-one to pick up a book from Trevor's room.

Isobel is such a part of this group now that she gets to go to Fifty-one, their hangout, even when its main residents are not there. She feels that she at last belongs in a deep, meaningful way, and does not realize that this sense of belonging will soon become much more than she bargained for.

Once Isobel is upstairs, Helen comes to Trevor's door—she tells Isobel that Diana is at the front door, but she can't stand another minute of her. She asks Isobel to go downstairs and tell Diana that Helen is out, and that Nick is away. Isobel goes downstairs and opens the front door, finding herself face-to-face with Diana. She tells Diana that Helen is out. Diana surveys the living room, then pushes inside and sits down on the settee. She tells Isobel that she knows Helen is here, and avoiding her—she doesn't blame Helen, she says, and knows that she herself is "a curse and a bore." Isobel is shocked that Diana is talking to her this way when she doesn't even know her name.

Diana, who has until now only appeared as a looming specter representative of grief and obsession, shows herself to be remarkably self-aware about what she is doing and the effect her actions have on others. Isobel is shocked by how frank Diana is, and how conscious of the state of things she is in spite of her humiliating and even frightening behaviors.

Diana becomes irate, believing that Nick is here in the house. Isobel insists that Nick is away for the weekend. Diana collects herself and insists that though Isobel probably thinks she's shameless, she isn't. Isobel realizes that though she is a stranger to Diana, Diana must know that people talk about her, and that Isobel knows all about her. Diana confesses to Isobel that she does feel shame—that often it's all she ever feels. She tells Isobel that she has no pride and no self-respect, and on top of everything, has lost her job. Isobel realizes that Diana is using her as a messenger—Diana wants Nick to know how badly she is suffering. Diana then admits that she once thought Nick would come back to her when he saw what awful shape she was in—now that she knows he won't, though, it doesn't make any difference.

Diana has just met Isobel, but almost immediately begins pouring out her heart, soul, and fears to her. Diana knows that she is out of control, but admits that there is a manipulation to her actions which is intended to set things right for her against all odds. Diana has held out hope for so long that her embarrassing and shameful actions will eventually lead to her deliverance, but now she realizes that she has, in her own search for belonging and narrative, dug herself into a very deep hole from which there may be no escape.

Isobel asks Diana what she's going to do for money—Diana says that she doesn't care, though, as she is as good as dead. Isobel thinks to herself that perhaps when someone can't change, and knows that they can't, it's possible that they are as good as dead. Isobel realizes that she has been speaking her thoughts out loud when Diana looks at her with furious eyes. Isobel says she doesn't mean Diana specifically—just anyone who can't adapt. Isobel asks Diana if she wants to go somewhere together—Diana looks skeptically at the coffee cups on the table. Isobel assures her that Nick is not here, but tells her that Helen did get up and run from her—Isobel asks Diana what she expects when everyone knows they can't do anything for her.

This conversation about inertia and the inability to change rendering one "as good as dead" dredges up old fears and new inquiries for Isobel. She realizes that perhaps her mother was "as good as dead" because she was incapable of changing, and there is a part of Isobel which fears that underneath it all, she is the same. When Diana takes Isobel's absentminded musings to heart, Isobel attempts to smooth things over, but still laments aloud that Diana has rendered herself beyond help and thus undesirable to others. There is a part of Isobel which knows this very thing could,, under just slightly different circumstances, become her same fate.

Together, Diana and Isobel walk down the road. Diana invites Isobel to come over to her house and have a real meal, but Isobel declines. Diana smiles sadly and notes that everyone has dates on Saturday night. Diana and Isobel both get on the bus in silence, and Isobel sits down and opens up the book she's borrowed from Trevor: *The Brothers Karamazov*. Isobel reads all the way home and then at the boarding house, she opens the book up in her room, but finds she can't really focus—she can't stop thinking about Diana.

Isobel does not want to get too close to Diana—she knows that the others don't like her, and that striking up a friendship with Diana would threaten Isobel's inclusion in the group. Though this is just heaping one more cruelty on Diana, Isobel makes the choice to ignore her, despite Diana's honesty and kindness towards Isobel.

Isobel finds herself thinking that Diana lit up at the bus stop because she wanted to claim Isobel as her new "victim." Isobel realizes, though, that Diana is the victim, and berates herself for being "selfish and heartless." Isobel plunges herself into the novel and reads until the dinner bell. Downstairs, the boarders all move gingerly, afraid of upsetting Mrs. Bowers, who has been angry since Madge's departure.

Isobel goes back and forth between seeing Diana as a victim or victimizer. She has trouble admitting that the two identities can exist side-by-side: perhaps this was true for her mother, and perhaps it is true for Isobel herself.

After dinner, Isobel is hit with the fear that Diana herself has a "date" tonight—she fears Diana is going to kill herself, and that Isobel (and her spoken-aloud thoughts about inertia and being "as good as dead) is responsible. Isobel realizes it doesn't matter what she said or what her intentions were, even if they were good or curious—Diana heard her words and is now going to act on them. Isobel does not seek Diana out, and instead puts herself to sleep. Each day that week, she buys the paper and flips through it, looking for a paragraph headlined "GIRL FOUND DEAD IN FLAT."

Isobel realizes that Diana is unstable and buckling under the weight of her grief. Isobel is afraid that her words will be taken literally, when really Isobel was just speaking out loud and attempting to dissect an ideal born of her own pain and trauma. The guilt lingers around Isobel every moment of the day, as she does not want someone else to experience a similar kind of trauma and pain that Mrs. Callaghan instilled in Isobel.

Isobel wants to go to Fifty-One to see if she can find anything out about Diana, but does not dare—she does not want to be seen showing a special interest in the matter and thus seem guilty. Isobel cannot believe that she told Diana she was "as good as dead." Isobel vows to never speak without thinking again.

Isobel's her outsized guilt perhaps comes from having endured years of abuse herself. Her fixation on her guilt seems similar to her steadfast belief during her childhood that she was a liar.

Meanwhile, back at the boarding house, Mrs. Bowers is angry with Isobel. Isobel accepts her landlady's ire passively, thinking that after all, she wanted Madge's place—and now she has got it.

Isobel wanted a maternal influence in her life, not realizing that there are problems in any mother-daughter relationship—just because her relationship with Mrs. Bowers is not traumatic or abusive doesn't mean it can't be dissatisfying and strained.

At the café that Saturday, there is no talk of Diana—Isobel figures that if she had died, the group would be talking about her. Trevor is there, but Nick is not—Nick, though, Isobel notes, is "never really there." After the café, Isobel and Trevor head back to Fifty-one, discussing writing as they go. Trevor tells Isobel that all he wants is to be a good critic. Back at Fifty-one, up in Trevor's room, Trevor puts his arms around Isobel. Isobel stiffens and struggles, and Trevor releases her, apologizing and urging her to forget anything happened. He walks over to his desk, sits down, opens a book, and begins to read. Isobel places *The Brothers Karamazov* on Trevor's bed and leaves, feeling that all the friendships she has worked for with the café crowd are now "gone in a second."

As Isobel finds herself swept up not only in the drama swirling around Nick, but now her own drama with Trevor, she realizes that the narrative she wanted to be a part of has escaped her. She wanted to belong so badly that she didn't ever stop to consider that perhaps she was not meant to belong with these people—now, all at once, the realization hits her.

Isobel wishes she could have pretended to want Trevor so that she could have been his girlfriend and at last "belonged"—but she felt she would be found out for being a fraud amongst them. The following Saturday is a lonely one, and Isobel wanders the streets feeling miserable and out of place. When she returns to the boarding house, no one talks to her, and she eats dinner in silence.

Isobel wishes she could squeeze herself into an easier narrative, but she has come to realize that what she wanted all along—the chance at self-discovery—keeps her from just folding into a crowd or sublimating herself to something only half-desired.

On Monday morning, at the office, there is a phone call for Isobel. She picks it up—it is Helen calling to tell her that Nick has died. Helen explains that Nick was in an accident on his bike the day before—a car hit him, and today he has passed away. Helen asks Isobel to go to Diana and break the news to her—Helen knows it's a terrible task, but can't think of anything else. Isobel tells Helen she won't be able to go till later, but Mr. Walter, having overheard, touches Isobel's shoulder and tells her she can leave work now. Isobel takes Diana's address down and promises Helen she'll go straight away.

The shady circumstances of Nick's death leave a lot to the imagination. Since he had a stalker, it's worth wondering whether Diana had some part in his death. Regardless, there is still a new grief that is now going to settle over Isobel's life. She has longed to be a part of the narrative and the world of the university students, and now she is—for better or worse, and despite her recent separation from them.

Isobel's coworkers bring her tea and help her look at maps to navigate her way to Diana's flat. Isobel takes comfort in her coworkers' kindness. Mr. Walter sends her on her way, telling her not to worry about getting back for the end of the day. As Isobel leaves the office, she rehearses what she'll say to Diana in her head.

Despite the chaos of her current situation, Isobel realizes that she is indeed surrounded by love, support, and a sense of belonging—she was looking for it everywhere, and did not realize it was blossoming right in front her.

Isobel gets off the train in Diana's neighborhood and finds her way to Diana's "narrow, dingy white, shabby" apartment building. She knocks at Diana's apartment door, and when Diana opens the door, Isobel finds her in a dirty nightgown, with tangled hair and bare feet. Diana's apartment is in disarray, and Isobel fears that Diana will not be able to bear the news. Nevertheless, she breaks it plain and simple, telling Diana straightforwardly that Nick has died. As Isobel goes briefly into the details, Diana picks up a hairbrush and begins brushing her hair. Isobel believes that Diana is in shock, but then watches as relief spreads over her face. Isobel realizes that Diana feels the way Isobel felt when her mother died. Diana thanks Isobel for coming to tell her, and asks Isobel to tell Helen she's sorry. Diana ushers Isobel toward the door and Isobel leaves.

Isobel has had a complicated relationship with Diana since the two met. She looks down on Diana but also pities her—she goes back and forth between feeling that Diana is a victimizer or a victim. As Isobel watches Diana experience a sense of relief upon hearing the news of Nick's death—the same reaction Isobel had when her mother died— she realizes that Diana is just as complicated as she is, and has lived a life riddled with grief, humiliation, and a sense of being unwanted. Just as many of those negative feelings evaporated for Isobel when her mother died, Diana is now free of Nick's influence over her, and Isobel realizes that she and Diana are more alike than she thought.

Isobel heads to Fifty-one, though she does not want to. Grief, she feels, is a terrible bore. She hates the shameful thought, but cannot suppress it. At Fifty-one, Helen greets Isobel and asks how Diana took the news. Isobel tells Helen that Diana didn't react much at all. Outside, there is the sound of a car door closing—Helen realizes it is Nick's mother coming to the house to collect his things. Helen offers her something to eat before offering to show her up to Nick's room, but Nick's mother insists on going up alone.

Isobel is sick of grief—it has dictated so much of her life. She thought that by making friends with the cool, interesting university students, she'd be flung into a narrative of heady joy, belonging, and intellectual stimulation, but instead she has encountered only more pain, trauma, and suffering.

Helen and Isobel sit quietly in the living room as they listen to Nick's mother's tortured screams coming from upstairs. Helen and Isobel run up the stairs; Isobel sees a bright bottle of pills in Nick's mother's handbag and gives her one to calm her. Together, Isobel and Helen take Nick's mother into Trevor's room and put her to bed. Isobel stays at Fifty-one until Trevor comes home, and then leaves, knowing that she does not belong with them. She does not go to the boarding house, but instead to a house where earlier in the week she'd seen a sign which read, "ROOM VACANT."

Isobel realizes that it is impossible to permanently escape the darker aspects of life, no matter hard she tries to. As she cuts ties with her university friends, Isobel also seems to want to cut ties with her boarding house friends, since she goes to look at a new building.

That night, Isobel tells Mrs. Bowers that she'll be leaving at the end of the week. Isobel thinks she can hear Mrs. Bowers say, "good riddance." Isobel comes into the dining room crying, and Betty comforts her.

Isobel realizes that she has ruined several of the relationships which once nourished her, and feels she has no one to blame but herself.

Isobel begins feeling cheerful as she packs up her belongings in her room. She is glad to be escaping from "a grief not her own," and is looking forward to outfitting her own apartment with her own little things. Isobel opens one of her books and reads a favorite passage of Auden before packing it. "You're what you are and nothing you do will get you out of the wood," the passage says. Isobel places the book in her suitcase and reflects on how "one is never quite alone."

Isobel has been through a lot in the last several months—she has tried to discover who she is and find where she belongs in places that are not quite right for her. Finally realizing this, she resolves to move along. She knows that wherever she goes, she will carry herself—and the burdens of her past—with her, but she takes comfort in the wisdom of books as she always has, and feels ready for whatever lies ahead.

CHAPTER 5: I FOR ISOBEL

Isobel wakes up from a pleasant dream to find herself staring at a strange, ornate ceiling with a stain in one corner. As Isobel thinks circuitously of ways to describe the ceiling, she laments that the "word factory" is already at work. Isobel knows that today is going to be a bad day—last night, she was thrown out of her friend Kate's house and forced to walk home after the two got into an argument when Isobel spaced out and acted superior while a mutual friend told a "repulsive" story. Kate told Isobel to leave, and derided her for only coming over to "see what [she could] pick up." Isobel notes that a lot of people only go to Kate's to pick other people up.

Since leaving the boarding house, it's clear that Isobel has continued to try and lose herself in a "crowd"—this one is even more unsavory, it seems, than the clique of students from the university. Nonetheless, Isobel craves both escape and belonging by any means. All the while, Isobel is being dogged by the "word factory," which is a repetitious mechanism in her head which seems to be trying to tell her something.

A man named Michael followed Isobel out of the party and asked if she wanted to come home with him—Isobel accepted, and it is his bed she's in now. As the word factory spins, Isobel runs to the bathroom to relieve herself and wash her face. There is a bookcase in the bedroom, and Isobel crouches in front of it to look through Michael's titles. Michael wakes up and tells Isobel that he didn't take her for the bookish type. Suddenly embarrassed by her nakedness, Isobel reaches for a book. Michael wonders aloud to himself why "girls like [Isobel] do things like this."

Isobel has gone home with a stranger who feels it is his right to examine her and question her motives as he sees fit. Isobel is searching for some kind of escape or belonging, but it seems to come at the price of her dignity.

Isobel lists reasons for doing "things like this"—meaning one-night stands. She thinks of the "dubious" connection with love; the choice to do it just because one can; the desire to join the human race; and a final, deeper reason, with no words, which can only be likened to inertia. Isobel coolly tells Michael that she might have wondered why *he* does things like this, but she wouldn't have asked. Isobel looks at the book she is holding—it is called *Words of the Saints*. After Michael accuses Isobel of disapproving of him, she decides to leave and to steal the book.

Isobel's main desire throughout the novel has been to join "the human race" and to be part of the "crowd"—the events of her childhood were so traumatic and so alienating that she has never felt normal, and she has always wondered what she is missing on the other side of the divide.

Isobel carefully places the book back on the shelf. Michael lies back and shuts his eyes; Isobel gets dressed and asks if Michael wants coffee. He tells her that there is stuff to make it in the kitchen, and she goes in to find it. While she looks for coffee in the cupboard, she hears the bathroom door shut, and the shower run; Isobel quickly runs back into the bedroom, steals the book, and leaves the house.

Isobel is, as always, drawn toward books and stories—this book in particular seems to have a very strong pull on her, and it is only later that she will discover why. The book's title, Words of the Saints, *seems to connect back to her childhood preoccupation with maintaining a "state of grace."*

Isobel runs for a city-bound bus. She walks to the back and lets the new book fall open to a random page—it opens on St. John of the Cross, whom Isobel knows is "not a fun character at all." She reads that for the soul to become enlightened and "possessed by the pure and simple light of God," it must first be cast away. Isobel closes the book, wishing she had a soul to cast away in the first place.

Isobel's childhood obsession with the saints has come back to her yet again. Whereas when she was small, she believed she could earn her place among the saints, Isobel now feels she is so unclean and far from grace that she doesn't even have a soul.

Isobel gets off the bus in the center of town, grabs a coffee, and then goes to a public restroom to do her hair. She looks at her face in the mirror and hates it, as "so much of it [is] from her mother." Isobel thinks she has "a face made for gloom." Isobel thinks of all the words her mouth has said and all the things her eyes have seen, and she considers how deeply she loves the wide, bright world around her. Isobel is so caught up in her reverie that when she leaves the bathroom, she nearly forgets her new book. As Isobel retrieves it and leaves, she thinks about how her love of the world comes from the books she has read over the nineteen years of her life.

Whereas Isobel's stark, strong resemblance to her mother bothered her very little when she first moved to the city and felt she had so much ahead of her, it now deeply unsettles her. Isobel has to remind herself that her face is her own—that just because it resembles her mother's it is not hers, and that Isobel is her own person with her own hard-won sense of agency.

Isobel returns to the rooming house where's she's staying, and tries to buoy herself as she enters the "squalor" of her room. "Squalor within," she thinks, "demand[s] squalor without," and sees the word factory in her brain as evidence of her internal decay and her descent into silence and solitude. Isobel begins cleaning up her room, putting clothes into a laundry bag, wishing she had a cause to live for—still, she knows whatever it will be will have to find her first.

Isobel is caught up in a cycle of self-hatred and degradation that has extended from within her to affect her living circumstances. Isobel is uncertain of her place in the world, and while she once longed to fit in and believed she could, she fears now that she will always be on the outskirts of things looking in.

Isobel looks around her dingy room, thinking of how she could spruce it up. There is a loose flap of wallpaper she longs to fix, or cover up with a panel of embroidery, but remembers her sewing teacher from years ago with hatred and misery. The teacher had humiliated Isobel for her subpar work in front of the entire class, berating her for her "vulgar bad taste." Isobel knows that her sewing teacher is, if not dead, at least very far away now, and that Isobel could take up sewing whenever she likes—this, she says, is "freedom."

There is so much trauma and pain in Isobel's childhood that even simple things like embroidery are tinged with a sense of pain and humiliation. Nevertheless, Isobel is able to remind herself that she is free—that she is her own person and is completely in charge of her life now.

Isobel runs out to the shop and purchases all the supplies she needs for embroidery work. As she gets her materials ready, she thinks absentmindedly about the stolen book. She wonders if religion is what gave the book its alluring power over her that caused her to need to steal it—she used to think a lot about God as a child, but now realizes that she uses God more as an imaginary friend than a moral compass. Isobel decides that the book does not symbolize religion to her, but instead communication and understanding.

It is easy for Isobel to conflate her desires to escape into religion and into stories as one, or confuse the impulses—but she steadfastly believes in this instance that it is the escape of words, not the desire to escape again into grace, which has pulled her towards Michael's book.

Isobel feels herself pulled back toward the book—she knows she must finish it. She opens it back up to Saint John of the Cross and begins reading the instructions "for entering the dark night of the senses," and giving away one's soul. The first rule is to "do those things which bring thee into contempt, and desire that others may do them." Isobel believes she does that quite all right. The second is to "speak disparagingly of thyself." Isobel notes that she does that plenty. The third is to "think humbly and contemptuously of thyself." Isobel thinks that these rules are a perfect picture of "Isobel the nuisance." She laughs at the fact that she is on her way to heaven, and didn't even know it.

Isobel amuses herself by realizing that the requirements of saintliness and grace are all things that she, due to her deep trauma and poor self-image, already practices unintentionally. This amuses Isobel, and certainly, to some degree, saddens her—even her arrival at a state of grace is not her own, but just another compounding side effect of all the suffering she has gone through over the years.

Isobel traces a pattern for her embroidery. She knows that tomorrow she must go home to the suburb she grew up in, and retrace her steps so as to find a memory that will give her a clue as to why the book holds such sway over her. She recalls a memory of being bullied by a girl in her class who barred the lavatory door to Isobel for so long that she peed her pants, and then had to waddle home soiled. Isobel looks back on this sad memory of herself with a "new tolerance"—she realizes she could be either the waddler or the bully, as one has "so little choice" in what one does as a child.

Isobel has spent so long running from the traumas of her childhood and trying to escape her past that she never considered that perhaps looking it straight in the face would provide her with clarity, purpose, and closure. Now, as she is struck by the idea of returning home, she realizes that much of her childhood was out of her control—so, too, were many other people's childhoods, and she must accept the truth of her past with grace in order to move on from it.

The next day, after lunch, Isobel gets ready to return to her hometown. It is only two miles away, but she feels that though it is a "short journey in space, it [is] a long one in time." She left less than a year ago, but still feels like her childhood suburb belongs to "earlier days" entirely. As Isobel boards the bus that will take her home, she thinks that though she is mortal, she must live as if she were immortal—otherwise, she wonders, what's the point?

Isobel's desire to move on from her past has created a strange disconnect within her—she is very close in both time and space, technically, from her mother's death and her journey to the city, but has filled that time with so much self-discovery and emotional weight that it feels like a great amount of time has passed and a lot of change has occurred.

Isobel gets off the bus at the main street of her home suburb. She is amazed by the quiet all around her. As she grows anxious, the word factory in her head starts up, but she clutches her book and feels protected. As she passes the church, she feels guilty for having skulked around the church without going in so often as a child, for fear of being seen and reported to her mother. Now, Isobel goes inside, and feels a sense of "shadowy peace," though above the confessional, she senses "guilt and unease" hovering. Things are different than she remembers them—the church is bigger than in her memory but the pulpit smaller.

Isobel's complicated relationship to religion—a thing she saw as a means of escape—comes back to the forefront of her mind as she encounters the church so soon after finding the book of writing on the saints in Michael's flat.

Isobel is assaulted by a memory of an arithmetic test in school. She got every question right, and so was allowed to sit while the rest of her classmates were forced to stand up against the wall and answer questions, and were beaten by the nuns when they were wrong. After class, an angry pack of classmates chased Isobel through the schoolyard, but when the leader of them finally caught up to her, he didn't do anything to her—he just ran away back into the crowd. Isobel considers how "in a true memory," one doesn't see oneself clearly—all of the "miserable self-images" are simply invention.

Even Isobel's memories of being bullied or taunted at school are not as bad as her memories of being punished and abused by her mother. The schoolchildren who were Isobel's classmates could not find the strength to actually attack her—but her own mother didn't even need courage, just the slightest provocation.

Isobel walks out of the church and experiences another memory—the moment she received her state of grace, unexpectedly, and struggled so hard to keep in it for a few weeks. She remembers struggling to understand the "rules" of a state of grace, reading obsessively about the saints and trying to discover the secret of grace itself. She doesn't recall reading the book she has now in her childhood, but concedes that she might have—at the very least, coming into possession of a book with the word "Saints" on the cover was "enough to bring back the calm of the season" of her childhood state of grace.

Isobel realizes that she was comforted by and drawn to Michael's book on saints because the state of grace she experienced in childhood was one of the only times during which she felt any sort of reprieve from her mother's intense control and abusive behavior.

Isobel is mildly disappointed that religious was, after all, the meaning behind her connection to the book. She continues wandering her hometown, walking the route from school to home. She thinks she should go by her house and "lay a ghost or two" down. As she approaches her house, she hears a voice calling her name. Her first instinct is to run—she remembers her mother telling her to run, as she had "put a lady's name in the paper," and that lady was going to have her put in jail. It is too late, though—Isobel is caught. She sees her old neighbor, Mrs. Adams, coming towards her and smiling brightly. Isobel is shocked.

Isobel wants to face her past and discover more about herself—she is haunted by "ghosts" which she wants to get rid of. As her neighbor approaches, Isobel confronts one of those "ghosts" directly—a woman from her past whom her parents had turned into a symbol fear and shame. Isobel is consequently surprised to see that Mrs. Adams is now approaching her with a sunny attitude and open joy at Isobel's presence.

Mrs. Adams asks Isobel what she's doing with herself, and Isobel answers that she's working at an importer's office. Mrs. Adams invites Isobel in for a cup of tea—Isobel remembers the old fear that Mrs. Adams would call the police on her before realizing "what rubbish" that fear is. As Isobel follows Mrs. Adams into her home, she laments the "years of misery" her mother and father caused her.

Isobel has escaped from many of the fears of her childhood, but the impulses which the trauma and paranoia of her youth instilled in her are difficult to ignore.

Mrs. Adams brings tea and biscuits to the table, and tells Isobel she has something she wants to show her. She leaves the room and returns with a photo album. She opens it to a picture of a newspaper cutting, and asks Isobel if she remembers it. Isobel reads the cutting—it is a poem Isobel wrote about Mrs. Adams and her cat Smoke when she was nine years old. Isobel recalls Mrs. Prendergast's story of the **baby in the baking dish.**

As the realization that Mrs. Adams lovingly kept Isobel's poem all these years washes over her, she is reminded of the baby in the baking dish—the baby in need of saving, the tormented child on the brink of extinction. Isobel's suffering as a child was so entrenched and so systematic that no one could save her—and yet Mrs. Adams's tenderness now provides the sense that perhaps there is still time to be saved.

Mrs. Adams tells Isobel that the poem "thrilled" her—she loved the cat very much, and when the poem was published in the newspaper, she delighted that Smoke was famous. The cat has since died, Mrs. Adams says, but when she wants to remember him, she looks at Isobel's poem. She tells Isobel that when the poem was published she was so happy that she bought Isobel a small book to paste her poems into, but that whenever she called Isobel in the street to come inside and get her present, Isobel ran away. Mrs. Adams adds that she tried to give the book to Mrs. Callaghan, who said that it would only encourage Isobel to "waste time" instead of completing her schoolwork.

Isobel always believed that she had committed some egregious act of betrayal against Mrs. Adams by putting her name in the paper—Isobel now sees how ridiculous the lie was, how devastating its effects were, and how her parents, through their machinations, effectively cut Isobel off from having any good, nourishing, or healthy relationships in her life.

Isobel realizes that her parents never wanted a writer in the house—they never wanted anyone who could record what went on there or allow other people to bear witness to it. Isobel says meekly that she had always thought Mrs. Adams was angry because Isobel put her name in the paper. Mrs. Adams asks Isobel whatever would have made her think that, and then, realizing that the answer is her mother, Mrs. Adams states that Mrs. Callaghan was "a strange woman." Mrs. Adams tells Isobel sadly that she doesn't have the book anymore—she gave it to her niece.

There were people in the world who wanted to be kind to Isobel, and the realization that her parents willfully held her back from any sense of affection or understanding hurts her deeply. Mrs. Adams was only trying to support and admire Isobel, but Isobel's parents created a web of terror, paranoia, and self-doubt that prevented Isobel from seeing Mrs. Adams' good intentions.

Isobel finishes her tea and thanks Mrs. Adams—she knows she has to leave soon, as she feels she is "coming to pieces in great slabs." As Mrs. Adams ushers Isobel into the street, she feels "artesian tears rising from the center of the earth." She hurries down the street, cursing her parents in her mind and out loud as "spiteful tormenting bastards." She realizes that her father was in many ways just as bad as her mother, as he helped to instill the myth about Mrs. Adams in her. Isobel sobs as she makes her way down the road, and her tears drown out all thoughts except for one: "I am a writer."

Isobel is shattered by the realization that her parents inflicted so much more pain upon her than she'd even realized. Isobel was always meant to be a writer, but her recording the goings-on of her household would have forced her parents to see—and threatened the idea that others would see—the extent of their abuse and manipulation.

Isobel worries that it is too late for her to pursue her dream, but as the crying lets up, she realizes that she can choose to be a writer if she wants to be—she can choose anything in the world. She decides to give into the word factory at last, and wonders if it has, all along, been the poor **baby** trying to get out of the baking dish. Isobel, feeling much better, continues heading through the street, towards a shop where she can buy an notebook. In the shop, she catches a glimpse of herself in the mirror—she is "wild-haired, blubbered, [and] red-eyed." Isobel thinks that this moment is the happiest of her life.

Isobel has to remind herself continually that her life is her own—her past trauma does not have to dictate her present life. She realizes that there is still time to save herself. Instead of searching for an escape, she must seek deliverance from her past through stories, words, and books of her own invention.

After purchasing the book, Isobel heads home. Back in her room, she opens up the notebook and begins writing a story called "The Book is Gone"—it is from Michael's perspective, as he talks with a friend about the girl who stole his book early in the morning after a one-night stand. As she writes, she realizes she must send the book back to Michael—she can live without it, and has her own words now to carry as a talisman instead.

Isobel no longer needs to rely solely on other people's works or words to sustain her. Now in control of the word factory in her mind and able to produce stories of her own, it seems that Isobel has finally accepted that she was always meant to be a writer.

The next morning at work, Isobel's friends ask her how her weekend was. Unable to tell them all she has been through in just a few days, she simply says it was "very nice," and smiles so happily that Rita wonders aloud if Isobel has met someone. Isobel uncovers her typewriter and smiles at it. "Oh, yes," she thinks to herself, "I met someone."

Isobel's joy at finally succeeding in her journey of self-discovery is so great that even her coworkers can sense the unbridled joy and sense of peace and calm radiating from her.

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