Like a House on Fire

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF CATE KENNEDY

Kennedy was born in Lincolnshire, England, but moved to Australia during her childhood. As a teenager she won a short story prize in *The Canberra Times*, and she went on to study creative writing at university. She took a hiatus from writing after graduation, but began entering short story competitions again when she was in her thirties. Since then, she has published many fictional works—including her highly acclaimed short story collection *Dark Roots* (2006)—and been awarded numerous literary prizes. In 2010, for example, her novel *The World Beneath* won the People's Choice Award at the NSW Premier's Literary Awards, and she has won The Age Short Story competition twice. Kennedy's memoir, *Sing, and Don't Cry* (2005), charts her experiences traveling and working in rural Mexico. She has also published several poetry collections: *Signs of Other Fires* (2001), *Joyflight* (2004), and *The Taste of River Water* (2011). More recently, her short story anthology *Like a House on Fire* was shortlisted for the Stella Prize (2013) and won the Steele Rudd Award in the same year.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Kennedy is interested in universal human experiences and emotions, and takes her inspiration from everyday events in the world around her. Throughout the anthology *Like a House on Fire* she explores the relationship between parents and their children. Kennedy may have drawn on her own experiences as a mother in order to portray the ordinary tensions of family life, or perhaps she was influenced by the lives of those she observed in Victoria, Australia, where much of her writing is set. In "*Like a House on Fire*"—the story that gives the collection its name—the narrator grapples with the challenge of remaining relevant to his three young children. Preoccupied with television and mass-produced plastic toys, they are growing up in an increasingly globalized and capitalistic society, which the narrator seems unsure whether to embrace or confront. The story is littered with references to Western capitalism and modernity, themes that Kennedy approaches with both humor and critical cynicism. Her writing often addresses unequal power dynamics and is critical of traditional gender roles. However, she portrays her characters—who are often conflicted by modern challenges or identity politics—without judgment. It is with this realistic portrayal of contemporary life that she is able to share a diversity of Australian voices.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

In interviews, Kennedy often explains how Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* hugely influenced both her life and writing, encouraging her to write with conviction. Kennedy also cites Peter Carey's subversive short stories as a source of inspiration, along with Lewis Hyde's *The Gift*, which—as with Kennedy's work—explores capitalism and modernity. Like Kennedy, in *Mateship with Birds*, Carrie Tiffany explores country life in Australia, paying particular attention to the isolation and family tensions experienced by ordinary people. Similarly, Jon McGregor's *So Many Ways to Begin* interrogates themes of identity, memory and masculinity, paying close attention to human relationships and people's internal emotional lives.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Like a House on Fire
- **When Written:** 2012
- **Where Written:** Victoria, Australia
- **When Published:** 2012
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary, Realism
- **Genre:** Literary fiction, short story
- **Setting:** Probably Victoria, Australia
- **Climax:** The narrator and his wife have an argument about his overbearing need for control, and he realizes the extent to which his back injury is destroying his marriage.
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

Teaching. Kennedy has taught many writing courses and workshops, including the Masters in Creative Writing program at Pacific University, Oregon.

Book worm. During her thirties, Kennedy was a librarian in Daylesford—a small town in rural Victoria. It was here that she happened across the entry form for the Scarlet Stiletto short story prize, which kickstarted her writing career.

PLOT SUMMARY

In "Like a House on Fire," Cate Kennedy tells the story of an ordinary man whose whole life is turned upside down when he has an accident at work. Suffering daily from the excruciating pain of his back injury, the unnamed narrator is unable to work and can barely move. After nearly sixteen weeks confined at home, he spends his days watching his family from the living room floor where he lies to rest his back.

The story begins with a description of the humiliation the

narrator experiences as he watches his wife and children drag their newly purchased Christmas tree to the car. The narrator is unable to help but be embarrassed by his own uselessness. When they return home, his wife Claire rushes off to the hospital—where she works as nurse—while the narrator is left to care for his three children, Ben, Sam, and Evie. Again, he is reminded and ashamed of his ineptitude when acknowledging that Claire has had to take extra shifts at her job because he is unable to provide for the family financially.

Unable to dissuade his three children from watching television, the narrator climbs the stairs to the attic to find the Christmas tree decorations. His doctor has warned him against any physical exertion, and as the narrator pulls **the nativity scene** towards him, pain soars through his body, causing him to drop and break the contents of the box.

Determined to salvage what is left of their family Christmas traditions—but miserable from pain and humiliation—the narrator orders his children to turn the television off and help him decorate the tree. When his youngest child, Evie, notices how much pain he's in, she hands the narrator a cushion and tells him to lie down.

Once Claire is home, the narrator shares a brief moment of laughter with his wife about the nativity set, but it is obvious that she is tired and frustrated. When the narrator complains to her about the mess in the house, she snaps, telling him to get over his obsessive need for control, and reminding him that he should have recovered by now. The narrator bemoans the distance and tension growing between him and his wife, as he remembers how happy they were before his injury. He reflects on how their marriage is "like **a house on fire**"—in danger of going up in flames at any minute.

On the night of Christmas Eve, while Claire is working at the hospital, the narrator looks up his symptoms on her laptop and notices that her previous Internet searches include "*back pain psychosomatic.*" Over dinner with the children, the narrator laments how quickly they are growing up, and likens this painful fatherly experience to the physical agony he is experiencing with his back. Later, while carefully climbing the stairs to deliver the Christmas stockings to his children's bedrooms, he considers whether his injury could be somewhat psychological. Once upstairs, he shares a tender interaction with his son, Ben, who sees him bringing in the presents. The narrator feels an excruciating soreness in his back, but ignores the pain so as not to spoil the moment.

When Claire arrives home from work, the narrator asks her to stand on his back to relieve some of the tension. Although reluctant at first, she cracks a joke and obliges. Laughing together and in close physical proximity, Claire and the narrator share a rare and intimate moment of affection. The story closes when Claire laughs gently at her husband and in return, he lovingly removes her hair clips.

CHARACTERS

The narrator – The unnamed narrator is a husband, the father of three children, and the story's protagonist. After an accident at work almost sixteen weeks ago, he is still recovering from a serious back injury. He is running out of sick pay and as a result, his wife Claire has been working extra shifts at the hospital, where she is a nurse. In Claire's absence, the narrator has assumed the childcare responsibilities at home. His inability to provide financial stability for his family and his perception that he's failing to adequately care for his children Ben, Sam, and Evie, cause him to feel insecure and ashamed. Accustomed to maintaining careful order in every element of his life—managing his team at work and dutifully completing domestic tasks at home—the injury has thrown the narrator into an unfamiliar state of chaos. As he struggles to accept his new role in family life—or adapt to his messy household surroundings—the narrator charts the growing tension between him and his wife.

Claire – Claire is a foil to the narrator, her husband. While he requires neatness, order, and control, Claire prefers to embrace the messy and unpredictable side of life. Claire is exhausted from working extra shifts at the hospital to make ends meet, on top of tending to her husband once she's home. Increasingly frustrated with her husband's slow recovery, she resents his complaints about the household mess and clutter. The narrator observes a new side to Claire throughout the course of his injury; when she is caring for him, she assumes a strict, professional persona, which he feels creates further distance between them.

Ben – At eight-years-old, Ben is the narrator's eldest son. He has reached the age where he is skeptical of almost everything, is disinterested in family activities, and no longer believes in Santa or flying reindeer. His younger brother, Sam, looks up to Ben as a gauge of how to behave, and his sister, Evie, is frequently perplexed by Ben's "changeable" behavior, which she is too young to understand. The narrator describes Ben's attitude as a "grating delinquent surliness" and is saddened by how quickly he is growing up. Just last year Ben was writing innocent notes to Santa, and now he doesn't even want to decorate the Christmas tree with his siblings.

Sam – Sam is the narrator's middle child. He is interested in watching the television and impressing his older brother, Ben, who he looks to for affirmation. The narrator remembers nostalgically how, the Christmas before, Sam had been "worried about wetting the bed on Christmas Eve in case Santa saw." This year—taking the lead from his brother—Sam seems indifferent to the festivities or the excitement of Christmas.

Evie – Four-year-old Evie is the narrator's youngest child and only daughter. She is still enchanted by the magic of the Christmas season and can't wait to decorate the tree, prepare

the nativity scene, or toast marshmallows with her brothers. When the narrator drops and breaks the box of decorations, Evie improvises by creating a nativity scene with all her plastic toys—"Christmas designed by Disney and Mattel."

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.

HUMILIATION AND MASCULINITY

"Like a House on Fire" is the story of an unnamed man suffering from severe back pain after an accident at work. After nearly sixteen weeks recovering at home, the narrator feels humiliated by his inability to work or provide for his family. Author Cate Kennedy reveals how the protagonist's humiliation is inherently linked to a sense of inadequate masculinity. Although his physical frailness, his inability to play with his children, and his failure to support his wife, Claire, all cause the narrator pain, it is ultimately his narrow definition of masculinity that makes his situation truly humiliating, rather than merely unfortunate. Through the example of the narrator, Kennedy suggests that conventional expectations of manhood can cause more harm than good in situations like these.

The narrator perceives his own physical weakness as unmanly. To the narrator, being a man requires physical strength, and that perception makes him feel useless within his family. As the narrator's wife and son drag their new Christmas tree towards the car, the man selling them the tree looks towards the narrator with the disdain and judgment "he reserves for […] those destroying the social fabric by refusing to pull their weight." In other words, the narrator interprets his own inability to carry the Christmas tree as a sign that he is essentially worthless. In contrast, the narrator's wife, Claire, is physically strong. She drags and "lugs" the Christmas tree in a way that suggests to the narrator that she is taking over the conventionally masculine role in the family, leaving the narrator without purpose. When the narrator does try to help physically by carrying boxes of Christmas decorations, his efforts backfire: his back flares up and he drops **the nativity scene**, shattering it. The accident shows how clinging to an idea of what masculinity *should* be can end in destruction; the family and the narrator himself would probably have been better off if the narrator had simply accepted his own physical limitations.

The narrator also feels worthless and emasculated by the change in his financial situation. He feels that he should provide for the family, and when he can't, he suspects that he's not a real man. The narrator's injury prevents him from working, so Claire takes on more shifts at the hospital where she works. Just as she took on the physical burden of moving the Christmas tree, Claire also shoulders the financial burden that should fall to a man, according to traditional gender roles. As he watches Claire prepare for her night shift on Christmas Eve, the narrator feels "the humiliation of helplessness, the hands-down winner of all humiliations." Even though the family is still provided for, the narrator's narrow definition of what his role as a man should be makes him interpret the situation as shameful. As the narrator cannot contribute physically or financially to buying presents, Claire asks him to wrap them. Completing the task gives the narrator a sense of purpose and pride such as he has not felt in weeks: "It's like I've been in the army for years, drilling myself on just this thing." The allusion to the army evokes ideas of traditional masculinity, revealing how the narrator can restore his self-worth only by framing a satisfying domestic task as a conventionally masculine pursuit.

The narrator's relationship with his children is perhaps the story's most piercing examination of how expectations of manhood can spoil otherwise positive parts of life. Unable to provide for his family financially, the narrator is given the task of looking after the children at home. The narrator thinks little of his own parenting skills, noting, for example, how "the three kids are all glued to the TV, something that's been happening a lot since I've been the chief childcare provider." Spending time with the children also reminds the narrator of the perceived humiliations of his physical condition. He and the children are supposed to spend the afternoon decorating the Christmas tree, but the task turns out to be very physically painful for the narrator and he quickly ends up yelling at his children. It seems that this gesture toward controlling the children is an anxious attempt to maintain some degree of masculine authority, but all it does is make everyone unhappy.

The narrator knows that if his wife were home, she would lift their daughter Evie up to place the angel on top of the tree, but he is incapable of picking her up. When Evie hands him a cushion and orders him to lie down, he feels defeated and ashamed, "like a beaten dog." The narrator self-deprecatingly grumbles "Oh, Merry Christmas, father of the year" to himself, revealing how inadequate and incompetent he feels. Evie's gesture is an affectionate one, but because it challenges his ideas of what fatherhood should be, the narrator feels only misery in response.

However, Kennedy also illustrates how the narrator's bond with his children has the potential to bring him joy and purpose. For instance, he shares a tender moment with his son, Ben, despite his intense pain. Afterwards, the narrator makes his way painfully upstairs "just to get another look at each of them asleep, sprawled in their beds without a worry in the world." Kennedy demonstrates, then, that beneath the narrator's fixation on his masculine failings, his family is actually strong

and loving. It's only the narrator's narrow idea of what his manly role should be that makes the situation seem negative.

Throughout, Kennedy indicates that the narrator's feelings of shame and humiliation are rooted in his narrow perceptions of masculinity. His situation is a painful one, but it is only the narrator's own ideas about conventional masculinity that make it humiliating.

CHAOS VS. ORDER

In "Like a House on Fire," a perfectionistic man's life is thrown into chaos when he sustains a serious back injury at work and is forced to take extensive sick leave. The story's two central characters—the unnamed narrator and his wife, Claire—embody order and chaos, respectively, and the conflict between the two illustrates how insisting on complete order can actually lead to increased chaos. Some chaos, Kennedy suggests, is inevitable, and denying that fact only makes it truer.

The narrator embodies order throughout, and Kennedy depicts his need for control as overbearing and unhealthy. The story's narrator and central character is a perfectionist. He owes much of his professional success to his careful precision, but it is also to blame for the back injury that now prevents him from working at all. Describing his work overseeing the maintenance of some trees, he says: "I saw [...] an errant bit of cypress bough just at head height, offending my perfectionist streak." It is while trying to cut down that bit of tree that the narrator is injured.

The narrator now spends his days confined at home in agony, "driven mad" by the "toys and mess [he] can't pick up." For the narrator, the domestic setting represents disorder and chaos. Unlike in his job, at home he has little control over any mess that offends his "perfectionist streak," and his general inability to manage his environment is only intensified by his specific physical disability. Claire resents the fact that her husband's presence at home brings his "control freakery" into daily family life. Claire demands to know why he has chosen to lie down in the busiest room of the house, saying: "Why *there*? Just where you can keep your eye on everything, like Central Control?" Arguably, the narrator has chosen to position himself "in the middle of a busy family room" because he wants to continue participating in family life, despite his illness. Claire highlights, however, that when the narrator complains about the household mess "it morphs pretty quickly into orders." The narrator inadvertently creates more chaos at home—through the tension between him and Claire—when she perceives his need for order as bossy and overbearing.

In contrast to the narrator, Claire's preference for chaos facilitates her more relaxed approach to life and its challenges. While the narrator represents order and control, his wife Claire has always been "the slapdash one." The narrator remembers how Claire "was as messy as the kids," and how she would implore him to be more relaxed with the children, saying: "Don't inflict your perfectionism on them, for God's sake. Leave it for your job." However, Claire is a nurse and has spent the past weeks caring for her husband as if he were one of her patients. The narrator describes how he has witnessed a new "side to her [...] for the first time." Tending to him with a "professional, acquired distance," Claire touches him with "hands that were anything except neutral and businesslike." Kennedy demonstrates how Claire is able to strike a balance between order and disorder, an approach that Kennedy suggests is much more healthy than the narrator's fixation on total order.

The narrator's refusal to embrace a little chaos ultimately causes him more pain, both physical and emotional. Kennedy demonstrates how the narrator literally impedes his own recovery through his pursuit of order: "I get down on my hands and knees in dogged slow motion, like an old-age pensioner who's dropped something." Here, the narrator strains his back to retrieve a forgotten shoe from under the couch, desperate to create order around him even when pursuing it makes his injuries worse. In addition, the narrator's inability to relinquish his need for control causes him more internal misery and stress. "I just can't stand all this...chaos I can't do anything about." Kennedy implies that his new environment exacerbates the narrator's need for order, making him feel powerless and helpless when he is unable to exert the control he is accustomed to.

Furthermore, the narrator frequently likens emotional pain to the physical pain he is suffering due to his injury. The narrator worries, for example, about his second son, Sam, maturing too fast. He remembers "with a sudden aching spasm, of the year before, when Claire and I had read his note to Santa." The narrator's grief surrounding his son is inherently tied to the lack of control he has over Sam's growing up. Thus the narrator's refusal to accept what he cannot control causes him intense emotional pain that mirrors his physical pain. Kennedy even goes so far as to suggest that the narrator's back pain is so entwined with his emotional suffering that he is unable to recover from his injury at all. After sixteen weeks of unsuccessful rehabilitation, he considers whether his pain might originate "in the mind or the emotions rather than through a physical cause." Kennedy draws attention to the psychosomatic aspect of the narrator's illness, not to dismiss the very real pain that he is suffering, but to draw attention to how the narrator's recovery is thwarted by deep emotional stress, which seems closely linked to his inability to accept chaos in his life.

By outlining the ways in which the narrator's fixation on order has only led to increased pain for himself and his family (by depicting the more chaotic Claire as a healthier contrast) Kennedy seems to argue that a sustainable worldview has to allow for a certain degree of chaos—especially since denying it

will only make its effects more powerful.

INTIMACY, COMMUNICATION, AND HUMOR

"Like a House on Fire" is the story of a couple navigating the challenges of love, pain, and family. When the unnamed narrator's workplace injury puts a serious strain on his marriage, Kennedy portrays how he and his wife, Claire, rely on humor to keep their relationship alive, and to communicate with one another about things that would otherwise go unsaid.

Through the example of the narrator and Claire, Kennedy candidly depicts the nature of close relationships and suggests that stress and tension are sometimes inevitable. The narrator admits, for example, that he and Claire share "very little eye contact these days." The stress in their daily lives—caused by the narrator's ill health and their precarious financial situation—is evident in the way they now communicate with one another: "It gets so you can almost hear a head shaking in pained disbelief, or distant teeth grinding in the silence." Indeed, lamenting the growing friction in their marriage, the narrator remembers how they "used to get on like **a house on fire**." This is a significant symbol throughout the story, and the narrator initially uses the simile to evoke ideas of love and passion. Now, however, he acknowledges that the expression is misleading, and that it actually connotes danger and destruction rather than affection and intimacy. He concedes that "a house on fire is a perfect description for what seems to be happening now" because he feels that his marriage is at risk of being ruined. Presumably this isn't the first time that the narrator and his wife have experienced stress together—they have three children, after all—but Kennedy suggests that the reason their marriage is particularly vulnerable at the moment is because they seem unable to communicate with one another effectively, and this impairs their ability to face challenges as a united team.

However, the interactions between the narrator and Claire also demonstrate how humor can stand in as a powerful language to overcome stress and lack of communication in intimate relationships. In the absence of effective communication, jokes and humor act as a barometer with which the narrator can evaluate the health of his marriage. He recalls how he and Claire had laughed about his diagnosis at the beginning, approaching the calamity with positivity and unity. Now, he accepts that it's been a while since the two of them joked together, indicating the distance between him and his wife. But despite this diminished sense of fun in their relationship, Claire and the narrator still use humor as a coping mechanism. Among the unspoken resentments, they share fleeting happy moments when they are able to laugh together. When the narrator breaks the entire box of Claire's **childhood nativity figurines**, she laughs, saying: "That's OK. It was made in the Philippines. Funny how everything except the Jesus broke." Here, Kennedy provides a nuanced and realistic portrayal of married life, revealing how the couple uses laughter as a language of its own, expressing the feelings that might otherwise go unsaid. In the place of apologies or forgiveness, the couple is able to communicate their love for one another through humor, utilizing it as a form of relief from the daily stresses they are experiencing.

Through the narrator and his wife—who ultimately manage to rekindle their connection—Kennedy suggests that humor is essential for the long-term survival of close relationships. When Claire returns from her Christmas Eve shift, the narrator asks her to stand on his back to try and relieve some of the pain. Claire reluctantly agrees, saying "Well, maybe this isn't doing you much good, but it's working for me." Her faux cruelty brings the narrator joy: "I smile into the floor, in spite of myself, feeling my sternum take the pressure." The narrator is literally vulnerable in this moment—lying on the floor in pain, with his wife standing precariously on his injured back—as well as emotionally vulnerable—admitting that he is struggling and requires her help. Through humor, however, for the first time in the story the narrator is able to accept his weakness and embrace a moment of vulnerable intimacy with his wife. At the story's close, Kennedy returns to the fire imagery in order to reveal how their shared humor has allowed them to reclaim the love that still exists in their marriage: "I look at her, feeling that small heat build between us [...] This is how you do it, I think, stick by careful stick over the ashes, oxygen and fuel, a controlled burn."

In "Like a House on Fire," Kennedy explores the power of humor to bridge gaps and bring people together in the face of adversity. Ultimately, the narrator and his wife are able to reclaim their relationship's intimacy through humor, and through their example Kennedy suggests that real-life intimate relationships might benefit from the same approach.

SYMBOLS

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

A HOUSE ON FIRE

The story's title, "Like a House on Fire," is not only the name for Cate Kennedy's wider short story collection, but the image—of a house on fire—is also a central symbol throughout this particular story. It is first introduced when the narrator describes the strain that his injury has had on his marriage with Claire. He contrasts the current state of their relationship—filled with "frustration and fury," "grimaces," and "excruciating discussion[s]"—to how things were before the accident: "Listening to the two of us, you'd never believe that we used to get on like a house on fire." Here, the narrator uses

the simile to describe how close him and Claire were in the past, and how strong and happy their marriage was. The expression "like a house on fire" connotes friendship, passion, and love. Shortly after making this comparison, however, the narrator changes his mind. He decides that the expression actually better describes danger, disaster, and destruction, and acknowledges that this is a more accurate portrayal of his current relationship with Claire: "but now that I think of it, a house on fire is a perfect description for what seems to be happening now: these flickering small resentments [...] this faint, acrid smell of smoke." The symbol of a house on fire therefore comes to represent the strength—or fragility—of his marriage, and how worried the narrator is about losing control over yet another aspect of his life. At the story's close, Kennedy portrays how a gentle exchange between the narrator and his wife allows them to rekindle their fraught relationship, creating a "controlled burn" in place of a roaring fire. Through this final allusion to the house on fire, Kennedy suggests that with patience, communication, and understanding, the couple will be able to save their marriage, even in the face of adversity.

THE CHRISTMAS NATIVITY SCENE

Feeling useless and humiliated, the narrator attempts to make himself useful by retrieving the Christmas decorations from the attic. However, he falters on the ladder, dropping the box that contains Claire's childhood nativity set. Inspecting the damage, he realizes that all the nativity figurines have shattered, with the exception of the "baby Jesus." On the one hand, the act of breaking his wife's decorations symbolizes how fragile their relationship is at the moment. On the other hand, the fact that the figurine of Jesus—the Savior—survived suggests that there might be hope for them to salvage their marriage. When the narrator later apologizes to his wife for the breakage, she just laughs, saying "That's OK. It was made in the Philippines. Funny how everything except the Jesus broke." Claire's reference to cheap goods made in the Philippines suggests that her nativity set is somehow not worthy of evoking nostalgia, simply because it was mass-produced. Kennedy highlights the wasteful nature of Western capitalism when depicting how, despite having the set since she was a child, Claire does not attach value to it because she sees it as disposable and easily replaceable. Kennedy complicates her portrayal of modern capitalism, however, when Evie saves the day by creating a new nativity scene using her plastic dolls and toys. Here, the image of the plastic nativity scene demonstrates how mass-produced goods *can* have sentimental value, and it thus provides a realistic portrayal of modernity and contemporary family values.

QUOTES

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

Like A House on Fire Quotes

The Rotary guy [...] gives me a look he reserves for shirkers, layabouts, vandals and those destroying the social fabric by refusing to pull their weight.

Related Characters: The narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 72

Explanation and Analysis

Kennedy introduces the narrator's strong sense of shame and humiliation from the beginning of the story, when he feels judged by the man who sells his family their Christmas tree. Powerless to lift the tree himself—because of his back injury—the narrator stands beside the "Rotary guy" watching his wife and oldest son drag the tree towards the car. The narrator is quite literally unable to pull his weight—he can't lift a thing—and he senses the man's scorn directed towards him, accusing him of "destroying the social fabric by refusing to pull [his] weight."

The tree seller is probably a member of Rotary International, a global organization of professionals who do humanitarian work. The "Rotary guy" therefore symbolizes success, goodwill, professionalism, and traditional manhood, while the narrator—in contrast—feels inept, useless, and emasculated. The narrator feels embarrassed, not only for being too weak to help his family with a physical task—which he perceives as a man's duty—but also for being likened to a portion of society who fail to contribute to "the social fabric." The comparison is a source of shame for the narrator because he perceives himself to be superior to the "shirkers, layabouts, vandals," but he is unable to demonstrate his worth in this context. It's worth noting that the "Rotary guy"—who is probably selling the Christmas tree to raise money for charity—might not actually be judging the narrator at all, but because the narrator is so embarrassed, and his self-loathing so strong, he feels certain of the scorn being directed towards him.

"Every sheep and cow, every adoring shepherd, broken. Only the baby Jesus in his crib, one leg raised in that classic nappy-changing pose, remains miraculously unscathed."

Related Characters: The narrator (speaker), Claire

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 73-4

Explanation and Analysis

Here, despite hurting his back and destroying his wife's childhood nativity set, the narrator's description of the baby Jesus, with his "one leg raised in that classic nappy-changing pose" is comic and lighthearted. The narrator uses humor as a coping mechanism; without it he would surely descend into a state of despair upon making yet another mistake that harms his family. The Jesus figurine's miraculous survival is another example of Kennedy's use of humor; Jesus—the "savior," in terms of Christianity—is the only piece to survive the narrator's accident. The broken ceramic nativity scene also serves as a symbol of the fragile state of the narrator's marriage, and reflects the fact that every time he tries to be useful around the house and gain a degree of control over his circumstances, he actually makes things worse and invites further chaos into his family's life.

That motion, swinging and lifting my arm to full stretch, feels like someone has taken a big ceramic shard out of the box—a remnant bit of shepherd, maybe, or a shattered piece of camel—and is stabbing it into the base of my spine.

Related Characters: The narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 75

Explanation and Analysis

When the narrator stretches to place the television remote control out of reach of his children, he suffers an agonizing pain in his back. By invoking a simile that compares the pain to broken pieces of the nativity figurines "stabbing [...] into the base" of his back, Kennedy portrays the excruciating discomfort the narrator experiences when completing simple tasks or movements. In addition, she reveals the deep self-loathing he feels. Indeed, it is possible that the narrator imagines somebody hurting him with the broken ceramic pieces because deep down he believes that this would be just retribution or punishment to get him back for dropping the nativity scene. Perhaps by being punished—by the imaginary person "stabbing" him—he can come to terms his feelings of guilt and shame.

Further, Kennedy draws parallels between this scene and the day that the narrator sustained his injury in the first place. Irritated by a stray branch at work, he grabbed a heavy tool, swinging it over his shoulders in a jerky motion, putting his back out in the process. Similarly, here the narrator hurts his back because he is fraught and tense when swinging around to hide the remote control. It is clear that the narrator hasn't really learned his lesson yet; to his detriment, he is still a perfectionist who makes rash decisions when angry about small imperfections.

Some days it feels like that's my entire identity focused there in one single space between two injured segments of a bone puzzle, shrunk down to one locus of existence, and seized there.

Related Characters: The narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 77

Explanation and Analysis

Kennedy draws attention to the all-consuming nature of illness when the narrator laments how his "entire identity" has been reduced to his injury. Indeed, the narrator believes that his various identities or characteristics—as a manager, as a breadwinner, as a productive member of society, as a good husband, as a capable father, as a man—have all been undermined by his illness. Stripped of his sense of self, the narrator feels like a burden and a nobody. Through the narrator, Kennedy honestly portrays the emotional strain felt by those suffering from physical injuries, and the isolation that they often experience when they are unable to communicate how they really feel. This moment also hints at the connection between the narrator's emotional state and his physical health, which becomes more prominent later in the story.

Footsteps, muttering, the sound of fingers stirring through ceramic debris. A tightly constrained hiss of frustration and fury. You get good at listening to sounds in a household when you're prone; it gets so you can almost hear a head shaking in pained disbelief, or distant teeth grinding in the silence.

Related Characters: The narrator (speaker), Claire

Related Themes:

Page Number: 77

Explanation and Analysis

Through her use of onomatopoeia and sensuous language—"muttering," "hiss," and "grinding"—Kennedy captures the degree to which the narrator's senses have become heightened since he's been "prone." Trapped inside the house, and confined to his bed on the floor in the living room, the narrator has little stimulation or excitement in his day. In this context, he has become very good at tuning into "sounds" around the house, as a way of monitoring what his family are up to. The intensity of his focus here makes it clear just how far the narrator's perfectionism extends; even tiny disturbances in the sounds of the house are agonizingly obvious to him.

Furthermore, in place of effective or loving communication, the narrator relies on reading his wife's body language, or listening to the sounds she makes under her breath, to understand what she is thinking or feeling. This passage therefore reveals the fraught tension in their marriage, which is simmering with "frustration and fury," as a result of the narrator's injury and his inability to communicate effectively about his emotions.

A long while has passed since we'd made jokes [...] I can't remember the last time my wife touched me with hands that were anything except neutral and businesslike [...] It was a side to her I was seeing for the first time, this professional, acquired distance. At our house, in our script, Claire was the slapdash one.

Related Characters: The narrator (speaker), Claire

Related Themes:

Page Number: 79

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator's description highlights the extent to which Claire and the narrator have diametrically opposed approaches to life. While the narrator is a perfectionist who values control and order, Claire is more relaxed and willing to embrace life's chaos. Before the injury, they were able to strike a healthy balance between their binary positions, but the narrator's injury has inverted their family "script" and thrown their relationship into a state of disorder. By inviting Claire's professional persona into the domestic setting—when she cares for her husband like one of her patients—the divide between their personal and professional lives is collapsed, throwing them off-balance.

Kennedy suggests, however, that Claire's ability to adapt to different circumstances is a much healthier approach to life, and the narrator's strict need for control and order, and inability to be flexible, causes him and his wife greater unhappiness. Kennedy also reveals a correlation between the health of the couple's marriage and their ability to make jokes with one another. When things get difficult, and the couple is unable to say what they really feel to one another, they rely on humor as an alternative form of communication. Here we see that the couple has not made jokes with one another for weeks, indicating how tense and strained their relationship has become.

"Look,' she says, 'either tell Sam to get it out, or forget about it. Just give the martyrdom and control freakery a rest."

Related Characters: Claire (speaker), Sam , The narrator

Related Themes:

Page Number: 83

Explanation and Analysis

This argument—between the narrator and his wife—serves as the story's climax. The tensions in their marriage come to a head when Claire snaps at her injured husband after watching him strain his back in an attempt to retrieve Sam's forgotten shoe from under the couch. Claire cannot bear to see her husband risking his recovery for something she perceives to be so unimportant, and she accuses him of "martyrdom and control freakery." Her use of the word "martyrdom" indicates that she perceives his need for order and neatness as a complaint or criticism of her and the rest of the family. She is tired from a long week of extra shifts and misinterprets her husband's need to reach the shoe as selfish and ungrateful, rather than as a cry for help. Through this argument, Kennedy again reveals how ineffective the

couple's communication has become due to the stress of their current situation; neither one of them understands the other, and their inability to share how they really feel results in an exchange of harsh words.

> Listening to the two of us, you'd never believe that we used to get on like a house on fire, that even after we had the kids, occasionally we'd stay up late, just talking. But now that I think of it, a house on fire is a perfect description for what seems to be happening now: these flickering small resentments licking their way up into the wall cavities; this faint, acrid smell of smoke. And suddenly, before you know it, everything threatening to go roaring out of control [...] And what am I? The guy who can't get the firetruck started? The one turning and turning the creaking tap, knowing the tank is draining empty, the one with the taste of ash in his mouth and all this black and brittle aftermath?

Related Characters: The narrator (speaker), Claire

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 87

Explanation and Analysis

Kennedy uses sensuous and descriptive language to draw attention to the story's central symbol: a house on fire. The use of literary devices, such as onomatopoeia and personification, create vivid imagery for the reader as the narrator imagines his house alight: "flickering," "licking," "faint, acrid smell," "roaring." The house is a simile for his marriage, and he compares the "small resentments" between him and Claire to the flames of the fire that will inevitably destroy them. The narrator fears that his marriage is on the brink of catastrophe, and he blames himself for the destruction that his back injury has caused in his family's life.

Further, when the narrator imagines himself as the "guy who can't get the firetruck started," Kennedy reveals how powerless he feels to stop the destruction altogether. It's notable that a firefighter is another traditionally masculine figure, and the narrator feels that he can't live up to that ideal, just as he can't live up to his own ideas of being the perfect husband and father. He feels useless; failing to put out the fire, but trying again and again anyway, despite "knowing the tank is draining empty." Ultimately, Kennedy suggests that if the narrator and his wife continue to misunderstand one another, they will also continue to fight a losing battle, each trying to douse the flames without success. To stand a chance of saving their marriage, and overcoming the fire, the couple will need to communicate effectively and work together.

> I look at her, feeling that small heat build between us. Our breaths fuelling it, close to the ground. This is how you do it, I think, stick by careful stick over the ashes, oxygen and fuel, a controlled burn.

Related Characters: The narrator (speaker), Claire

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 91

Explanation and Analysis

Returning to the fire imagery, Kennedy portrays how the couple manages to regain a state of equilibrium in their marriage by the story's close. Despite the frustration and tension in their marriage, they find peace and intimacy in the early hours of the morning after Claire has helped relieve some of the pain in her husband's back. Tentatively, the narrator allows himself to feel the "heat build between" him and Claire as she brings her face close to his. The proximity between their bodies, and the closeness of their breath, reminds the narrator that he doesn't want to put the fire out altogether after all. Rather, he wants to keep love and passion burning between them, but gently. That is, he wants to find a way to balance his wife's healthy embrace of chaos—here, the flames—with his own tendency to want to keep things under control. This conclusion implies that finding such a balance is possible; even the narrator's perfectionism and need for control can be an asset when effectively balanced against an acceptance of life's inherent disorder. Through this small, affectionate moment, Kennedy implies that the couple *will* find a way through the chaos, together.

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.

LIKE A HOUSE ON FIRE

The narrator feels ashamed as he watches his wife and his son, Sam, "lugging" their newly purchased Christmas tree towards the car. Feeling judged by the "Rotary guy" who sold them the tree, the narrator explains that he cannot help because he has a back injury.

Through the story's opening, Kennedy highlights how the narrator's sense of worth is strongly tied to his narrow definition of masculinity. The narrator feels embarrassed precisely because he lacks physical strength, a traditional benchmark of manliness. His feelings of humiliation are only heightened when another man—the "Rotary guy"—shames him, thus reinforcing the narrator's belief that his back injury has made him somehow inadequate.

The narrator notices some graffiti outside the subway that says "only eight shoplifting days till Christmas," but decides not to point it out to his wife, Claire, like he normally would. Claire "exaggeratedly" checks her watch as she secures the Christmas tree to the car, signaling that she's in a rush for work.

Kennedy subtly indicates that there is some tension in the narrator's marriage when he feels unable to laugh with Claire about the graffiti. The reader learns later that humor is very important for the couple, and this moment foreshadows that importance. Further, through the references to the subway and the graffiti, Kennedy draws attention to the modern urban setting of the story.

Once at home—and as Claire hurries off to work—the narrator admits that Claire makes "very little eye contact" with him at the moment. He blames the fact that he hasn't been able to work due to his back injury. He's been off work for four months now, and he continues to "fail each week to bring home any sort of pay cheque." Meanwhile, Claire is both working as a nurse at the hospital and caring for her injured husband at home.

The narrator perceives himself as a failure because he cannot financially support his family—another example of how his limited definition of masculinity causes him to feel insecure and ashamed. When he notes that Claire doesn't make eye contact with him, he chooses not to tell her how that makes him feel, preferring stoic silence instead. Through the tension described here, Kennedy suggests that effective communication is essential for successful and loving relationships.


In the afternoon, the narrator disobeys his physio's instructions and climbs up the ladder to the attic in search of Christmas decorations. As he pulls boxes of ornaments towards him, he panics on the ladder and drops the boxes onto the floor. The narrator feels an excruciating "jolt" of pain in his back as he hears the decorations "crunch" and break below him.

In a desperate attempt to be useful—and perhaps to regain a degree of self-respect—the narrator climbs the ladder, even though he knows that it will be risky for his back. It is intended as a selfless act, motivated by his desire to do something nice for his family. Ironically, however, his efforts just cause trouble, as he ends up breaking the decorations. Additionally, his family actually needs him to prioritize his own recovery and take his physio's instructions seriously. His stubborn efforts to live up to his idea of what a husband and father should be only make things harder for the family.

As he inspects the damage—numerous shattered ceramic ornaments—the narrator notices that from the broken **nativity scene**, "only the baby Jesus [...] remains miraculously unscathed." His three children—Ben, Sam, and Evie—pay little attention to him as he walks past with the box of broken decorations. The narrator resigns himself to the fact that his children have frequently been "glued to the TV" since he has been their primary childcare provider at home.

The broken nativity scene—which the reader later learns Claire has had since she was little—symbolizes how fragile the narrator's marriage is. In trying to help, and make things better between him and his wife, the narrator actually ends up causing further destruction. On top of feeling incompetent, the narrator also believes he is failing to raise and care for his children adequately, which is another source of humiliation and shame.

The narrator tells the children to turn off the TV so that they can all decorate the Christmas tree, but his oldest son, Ben, tells him that only Evie is interested. When the narrator checks with Sam (who would ordinarily be excited to decorate the tree), asking if he really doesn't want to decorate the tree, Sam confirms, looking towards Ben for approval.

The narrator feels that he has been losing control over many aspects of his life since his accident. Here, he feels his parental authority slipping away, as well as the destabilizing feeling that he doesn't understand Sam anymore.

The narrator notices how disappointed Evie looks, so he once more instructs the boys to turn the TV off and help him. When Ben refuses, replying with "delinquent surliness," the narrator resorts to shouting, commanding the brothers to help. As the narrator places the television remote far out of reach, he feels an agonizing "stabbing" in his back.

Unable to positively encourage Sam and Ben to engage in the family activity, and feeling his control quickly slipping away, he snaps at his children. Immediately afterwards—almost like a punishment for shouting—he feels a sharp pain in his back as he swings around to confiscate the remote. Later, the narrator will describe how he sustained his injury in the first place: angry and desperate to exert control at his job as a tree-feller, he had swung his arms around to remove a stray branch. The parallel between that moment and this one makes it seem like the narrator has not learned from his mistakes and continues to behave in a reactionary way when things are beyond his control.

Throughout the tree decorating process, the narrator hops from "foot to foot" in pain, conscious that he's probably ruining the occasion for his three children. Evie notices that he is uncomfortable and, instead of asking him to lift her up so she can place the fairy on top of the tree, she hands him a cushion and tells him to lie down and rest. The narrator feels defeated, comparing himself to "a beaten dog."

Despite the narrator's aggressive reaction to the boys' disinterest, Evie responds kindly and lovingly when offering him a cushion. However, the narrator is too preoccupied with his own insecurities to cherish this sweet moment with his daughter. Feeling self-pity, he describes himself as "a beaten dog," again letting his pride and ideas about how he should *be cloud his interpretation of what's going on around him.*


Just as the narrator begins to lie down, Sam reminds him about the remote control, but it's too late—the narrator has already begun his slow and painful descent towards the floor. He instructs Ben to climb the bookshelf to retrieve the remote control, chastising himself sardonically for being the best "father of the year." He laments how his "entire identity" is bound up in his injury.

Putting Ben in potential danger by asking him to climb the bookshelf, the narrator realizes that his parenting skills are lacking. He feels useless and inept, embarrassed by his inability to entertain or protect his children as he feels that a father should. Kennedy draws attention to the all-consuming nature of illness or disability, which often causes people to feel that their personhood has been reduced to their ill health.

When Claire returns home, Ben tells her about the broken **nativity scene** and the narrator can sense her unspoken despair and frustration. In a brief and "excruciating" exchange, she tells him that she's been offered triple pay for working over Christmas Eve. He recalls how they had laughed about his diagnosis at the beginning, how positive Claire had been about his recovery, and reflects on how much has changed between them since he sustained his injury nearly sixteen weeks ago.

The narrator describes his and his wife's communication as "excruciating." Here he feels his emotional stress in physical terms, likening it to his back pain. The narrator feels upset when he is unable maintain control or order over his life, and the Christmas Eve shift at the hospital represents one more obstacle standing between him and a "normal" family Christmas. Additionally, Kennedy suggests here that humor is an important aspect of the couple's marriage. Indeed, the narrator uses humor as a barometer with which to measure the success of their relationship. The fact that he and Claire are no longer laughing about his diagnosis suggests that their relationship is under strain.

The narrator describes how he has recently witnessed a new, professional side to Claire "for the first time" since she's been caring for him. Typically, Claire had been the "slapdash one" in the relationship, while the narrator is a perfectionist. He recounts how he injured his back during his job managing a team of tree-fellers: he saw "an errant bit of cypress bough" that a new employee missed and angrily went to cut it down, and the combination of stress and effort caused the injury. Now, the narrator bemoans how soon his sick pay will run out.

Kennedy reveals how the couple normally preserve a public-private divide in their relationship, where neither one of them bring their professional personas into the domestic realm. This divide is inverted, however, when the narrator observes Claire's strict, organized professionalism. The collapse of the boundaries between work and home represents how the couple's relationship has been thrown into chaos since the narrator's injury. What's more, the narrator's description of the moment of his injury shows how anger and perfectionism essentially caused the agony that's now disrupting the family.

The narrator describes at length how he has been "driven mad" by the untidy state of the house, and the fact that he is in too much pain to clear up the accumulating mess and "fluff" surrounding him. When he shares this concern with Claire, she replies "brusquely," refusing to remove the cobweb that's been bothering him. Then she tells him that she's finished all the Christmas shopping, but that she's going to leave him in charge of wrapping the presents.

The narrator's desire to master and overcome the household mess represents his need to maintain steady control over his life. Of course, the narrator has almost no control over his situation, and therefore his attempts to gain control become increasingly fraught.

The narrator apologizes to Claire about her **nativity set**, which he knows she's had since she was a child. She replies, laughing, "funny how everything except the Jesus broke." Meanwhile Evie has been making her own nativity set with her numerous plastic dolls and toys—"Christmas designed by Disney and Mattel."

With the survival of the baby Jesus figurine, Kennedy suggests a symbolic opportunity for the couple to salvage their relationship. Jesus Christ—the "savior" of the Christian religious tradition—figuratively saves the narrator and his wife from another argument and instead allows them to laugh together. Humor is an important form of communication for the couple, and here they are able to laugh together for the first time in weeks.

After seeing how Evie saved the **nativity display**, the narrator tells his wife not to "do the Christmas Eve shift" at the hospital, but Claire says she has to. The narrator internally compares this Christmas with the year before, when the couple had happily splurged his overtime pay on gifts for the children and a family holiday.

Evie's efforts to recreate the nativity scene help improve the narrator's mood, prompting him to communicate with his wife—verbally—in a way he was unable to earlier that same day. Realizing how much he values family, he asks her not to work on Christmas Eve. However, it's too late; Claire has already made up her mind to work the late shift.

As the narrator lowers himself to the ground like "an old-age pensioner who's dropped something"—in order to retrieve a pair of Sam's shoes from under the couch—Claire accuses her husband of "Control freakery" and implores him to go for a walk or do some exercise. She demands to know why he has positioned himself right "in the middle of a busy family room" and likens him to "Central Control."

This argument demonstrates how diametrically opposed the narrator and his wife are; while she is relaxed and embraces chaos, he requires order and control. Usually, they strike a healthy balance between the two, but the stress and financial strain of the narrator's injury have disrupted their normal balance. Claire suggests that the narrator's obsessive need for control is selfish and damaging for their family; far from making things perfect, his perfectionistic tendency only makes a difficult situation worse.

Shocked by Claire's accusation, the narrator responds by explaining that he "can't stand all this…chaos" in the house. He reminds Claire that he isn't exaggerating the seriousness of his injury, even though it's not clear why it hasn't improved yet. She replies: "I'm not saying you're faking it, for crying out loud. Why would you put us all through this?"

The narrator struggles to articulate how he is feeling to Claire, as indicated by the ellipsis in his assertion that he "can't stand all this…chaos." Kennedy suggests that the narrator's fixation on the household mess is his way of dealing with the fact that his entire life is in "chaos;" micromanaging the household is his small way of trying to gain control. Therefore, his complaints about the house are not really just about the house after all, but rather a manifestation of much deeper insecurities, which he is unable to express.

The narrator wishes to tell Claire that his situation—the constant agony, the shame, the fact that his family step over him as if he's not there—is far worse than what she is going through. Instead of articulating this, however, he retrieves "one of Evie's Polly Pocket dolls" from the floor.

Again, the narrator chooses to focus on external messes—like cleaning up Evie's toys—rather than communicating his insecurities to his wife directly.

When Claire is in bed, the narrator opens her laptop to check whether "gentle exercise is a good thing" for his condition. He can see all of Claire's previous searches, and notices that she recently typed "back pain psychosomatic" into the search engine. "Hey, thanks, Claire," he thinks to himself.

Through the reference to psychosomatic symptoms, Kennedy indicates there is a correlation between the narrator's emotional distress and physical ill health. The more stressed, upset, and out of control he feels—by the mess, by his own uselessness, by his slow recovery, and even by the simple fact that life is inherently chaotic—the more discomfort he experiences in his back.

The narrator takes some painkillers and wraps all the Christmas presents, ensuring they are "neat and perfect and pintucked." He imagines himself as a soldier in the army who has been training for years to prepare for this important task.

The narrator feels useful, important, and in control for the first time in weeks when wrapping the Christmas presents. By comparing this menial task to the work of a well-trained soldier, the narrator conjures up a fantasy of himself in the army. By granting himself the characteristics of militarized masculinity—strength, honor and power—the narrator reveals the extent to which his self-worth is bound up in traditional notions of masculinity.

As the narrator watches Claire prepare herself for the Christmas Eve shift at the hospital—tying her hair up and putting on her "squeaky" hospital shoes—he feels humiliated, even after the triumph of wrapping the presents. He tells her everything that he wishes he could do that day—taking the kids to hear carols, making Claire breakfast in bed—to which Claire simply replies: "Well, it can't be helped." The narrator reflects that he hears "the sound of everything she's really talking about" underneath her literal words.

The narrator is pained to see Claire head off to work because he believes that, as the man, he should be the one to provide for the family financially. Again, it is the narrator's own narrow definitions of masculinity that cause him to feel small and ashamed. His sense that Claire's words hide some larger truth also indicates that, though he knows that he and Claire are having trouble communicating, he doesn't know how to solve the problem.

The narrator reflects on the tension and distance growing between him and Claire. He remembers how they used to "get on like **a house on fire**," meaning that they loved spending time together, but realizes now that this is actually an accurate representation of their current relationship—"these flickering resentments […] everything threatening to go roaring out of control." He imagines him and Claire watching their house go up in flames, picturing her with "the hose," while "he can't get the firetruck started."

The simile of the "house on fire" is a central symbol throughout the story. The size and power of the fire correlates to the strength, or weakness, of the narrator's relationship with his wife. Since the injury, the figurative fire has been growing increasingly "out of control." Given that the narrator is a perfectionist and needs order in his life, the roaring fire indicates the chaos and catastrophe he sees ahead for his marriage. Kennedy again portrays the extent of his self-loathing when he imagines that he is unable to "get the firetruck started." This reveals that he fears he is unable to protect his wife or save his marriage—a reality made all the worse by the fact that he feels a real man should *be able to do these things.*

As the narrator makes dinner for his children, he is saddened by the realization that Ben is growing up fast. He remembers "with a sudden aching spasm" how the year before Ben had written "a note to Santa." While they toast marshmallows over a Christmas candle, the narrator thinks about the "definition of psychosomatic" and wonders about the possible mental or emotional causes of physical pain.

Again, the narrator feels his emotions as physical pain, describing his sadness using the same language he would to describe his back injury: "sudden aching spasm." Kennedy implies that the narrator does not have the language to communicate his feelings and emotions, so he explains them in bodily terms instead, perhaps because he fears undermining his stereotypically masculine stoicism. Further, Kennedy reinforces the idea that mental and physical health are intertwined, because the narrator's repressed emotional life manifests itself physically through his relentless back pain.

The narrator takes a photo of Evie's **nativity scene**, says some encouraging words to Sam, and shares a joke with Ben, thinking that "laughing feels like remembering what it's like to be fit." Early in the morning, he heads upstairs to place the Christmas sacks by the children's beds. The journey is agonizing, and despite stopping for a break, he feels the "hot pain building anyway."

Making an effort with Evie, Sam, and Ben, the narrator abandons his need to be traditionally masculine in favor of sharing a nice evening with his children. It's particularly notable that laughing with Ben seems to be the narrator's greatest moment of healing, even though the back pain returns as soon as the narrator confronts the tasks—like climbing the stairs—that have become so difficult for him.

Once upstairs, the narrator sees that Ben is awake. They share an affectionate moment despite the pain that the narrator is experiencing; he has to hold onto the door for support, but continues joking with his son anyway. Later, the narrator acknowledges that he is "insane" for climbing back up the stairs once more "just to get another look at each of them asleep."

Kennedy realistically captures the essence of parenthood when presenting the fraught moments of family life alongside the precious, memorable ones. Despite his flaws, it is obvious that the narrator cares for his children very much, especially when he manages to protect Ben from seeing how much agony he is in. Tellingly, the narrator proves here that he's more than capable of being a good father, even though he still feels emasculated by his injury; it seems that all of his fears about not being good enough are somewhat unfounded.

The narrator is contemplating the whole "mind/body somatic" element of his illness when Claire returns home from work. From where he's lying in the living room, he can see that she's bought the children's favorite foods and snacks. He admits that Claire was right about how he "can see everything" from his spot on the floor.

Suffering immensely, the narrator feels defeated and vulnerable. In this state he is able to understand Claire's point of view for the first time, and perhaps even accept that his actions have been selfish and overbearing.

The narrator asks Claire to do him a favor and stand on his back, to help relieve some of the pain. When Claire is hesitant, the narrator cracks a joke—"don't tell me you wouldn't love to walk all over me"—to which she gives a weary grin and replies, "that part would be my pleasure."

Finally ready to embrace his own vulnerability, the narrator is able to ask for help. This vulnerability facilitates a closeness between him and Claire that hadn't been possible before; until now he has been too preoccupied with his own need to be manly to accept his weaknesses. Using humor as a language of its own, the couple don't need to explain themselves—instead they let their laughter soften the tension that had been present between them.

After she stands on his back and they both hear "something crack," Claire crouches down beside her husband and says: "Temporary respite […] Happy Christmas,." The narrator feels a "small heat build between" them, the start of **"a controlled burn**." Here, in the early hours of the morning, they share a loving and intimate moment.

Returning to the story's central motif—the house on fire—the narrator realizes that there is still hope for their relationship; he can feel a small spark of passion and love between them after all. Kennedy thus reveals how necessary humor is for the couple—without it they are unable to communicate at all, to the detriment of their marriage.

The narrator points out some glitter that's been ground into the carpet, to which Claire replies: "Don't they look great in this light." In response, the narrator reaches to remove the "elastic band and grips" from her hair.

The narrator risks ruining this loving moment with Claire when he puts his need for perfectionism ahead of their reconciliation. When she responds kindly, however, making a joke and remaining positive, he manages to stay positive as well. Here he literally allows her to let her hair down, thus liberating her from her work persona, and embracing the relaxed, "slapdash" side of his wife's character. This small exchange between husband and wife portrays the reality of love and marriage: two people—with their competing needs and wants—finding compromise and equilibrium when least expected.

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