

Play It As It Lays



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JOAN DIDION

Joan Didion was born on December 5, 1934, in Sacramento, California. In her senior year at the University of California, Berkeley, she won an essay contest sponsored by *Vogue* and was awarded a job at the magazine's New York office. Didion worked at *Vogue* from 1956 to 1964, eventually becoming a contributing writer and assistant features editor. She met her future husband, John Gregory Dunne, also a writer, while living in New York; in fact, Dunne edited her first novel, *Run, River* (1963). The couple married in 1964, relocated to Southern California, and adopted their daughter, Quintana, in 1966. The couple wrote magazine pieces during this period, and Didion published her first nonfiction book, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (1968), which is considered to be one of the most important books of the 1960s. She published her second novel, *Play It as It Lays*, in 1970. In the 1970s, Didion and Dunne collaborated on a number of screenplays, including *The Panic in Needle Park* (1971) and a film adaptation of *Play It as It Lays* (1972). Didion published her third novel, *A Book of Common Prayer*, in 1977, and the couple returned to New York in the 1990s. Didion's life took a tragic turn in 2003, when Quintana became critically ill, and Dunne suffered a fatal heart attack in December. Didion recounts her experiences of mourning Dunne's death while caring for Quintana in her 2005 memoir *The Year of Magical Thinking*, which received the 2005 National Book Award for Nonfiction. Despite a promising year of recovery, Quintana suffered a series of additional health crises and died in 2005, at age 39. Didion wrote a subsequent memoir, *Blue Nights* (2011) about Quintana. Didion was awarded the National Medal of Arts in 2013 by President Barack Obama, and in 2017, she was the subject of a documentary directed by her nephew, Griffin Dunne, called *Joan Didion: The Center Will Not Hold*. Didion died in Manhattan on December 23, 2021, at age 87.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The disillusionment Didion explores in *Play It as It Lays* is better understood within the context of 1960s America, where the optimism of the early 1960s surrendered to the civil unrest, war, and disillusionment that characterized the latter half of the decade. In the famous acceptance speech he delivered to the 1960 Democratic National Convention, President John F. Kennedy placed the United States "on the edge of a New Frontier" and called on its citizens to become "pioneers" who would explore the "uncharted areas of science and space, unsolved problems of peace and war, unconquered pockets of ignorance and prejudice, unanswered questions of poverty and

surplus." While Kennedy's words packed a rhetorical punch, his utopian vision of a new world failed to manifest. Despite the milestones of social progress and innovation the U.S. witnessed over the course of the 1960s, the violence and division that took hold of the country irreparably marred Kennedy's earlier vision of an idyllic New Frontier. 1968, in particular, was a year of unprecedented violence. In March, American soldiers tortured and slaughtered most of the village of My Lai in a massacre that would become one of the most egregious attacks on unarmed citizens to be committed during the Vietnam War. Martin Luther King Junior's assassination in April 1968 resulted in heightened racial tensions and riots, effectively ending the Civil Rights Era. And in August, police brutalized anti-war protestors at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. The United States as it existed in the late 1960s was a country that had tried and failed to manifest Kennedy's imagined New Frontier, signifying a broader failure of the country's institutions to enact real change, unify its people, and make order from disorder. This broader atmosphere of chaos, pessimism, and senseless violence plays out on a more personal scale in *Play it as it Lays*, as Maria (the protagonist) struggles to find purpose in a world that seems meaningless and full of random suffering.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Joan Didion has published four novels in addition to *Play It as It Lays*. Like *Play It as It Lays*, Didion's first novel, *Run, River* (1963) is set in midcentury California and explores the loneliness and betrayal that develop over the course of a marriage. Although not a work of fiction, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (1968), Didion's first published essay collection, examines the themes of disillusionment, disorder, and meaninglessness that are central to *Play It as It Lays*. The essays in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* depict a California that has come undone in its efforts to wrestle with the momentous social and political changes that developed over the 1960s. It reassesses the optimistic promise of a better, more unified world that characterized the earlier part of the decade, in light of increased political polarization and the brutality of the Vietnam War. The nihilism that Didion presents in *Play It as It Lays* is very much in conversation with the despair and disillusionment that took hold of the United States in the 1960s. Finally, Nathanael West's satirical novel *The Day of the Locust* (1939) offers another literary take on Hollywood's disillusioning and corruptive nature.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Play It as It Lays

- **When Written:** 1970
- **Where Written:** Malibu, California
- **When Published:** 1970
- **Literary Period:** Postmodernism
- **Genre:** Novel
- **Setting:** Los Angeles, Southern California, Nevada
- **Climax:** Maria chooses not to interfere in BZ's suicide, he dies, and Maria is committed to a psychiatric facility.
- **Antagonist:** Carter Lang
- **Point of View:** First Person, Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Replay It as It Lays. *Play It as It Lays* was made into a film in 1972. Joan Didion and her husband, John Gregory Dunne, wrote the screenplay. The film starred Tuesday Weld as Maria Wyeth and Anthony Perkins as BZ.



PLOT SUMMARY

In 1960s Los Angeles, Maria Wyeth, a 31-year-old unemployed actress, recounts the events that led to her commitment to a psychiatric facility. In an internal monologue, Maria introduces herself as an uncurious woman determined not to dwell on the past. Still, because her doctors want to figure out why she had a nervous breakdown, she establishes some basic facts about herself, ruminating on her childhood growing up in the small **desert** town of Silver Wells, Nevada; her gambling and entrepreneurial father Harry Wyeth; her depressive mother, Francine; and Benny Austin, Harry's business partner and her godfather. Both of Maria's parents are now dead. Maria has a four-year-old daughter, Kate, who was born with serious disabilities. Kate lives in a medical facility and is the only reason Maria keeps on living.

Next, Maria recalls leaving Nevada for New York to pursue an acting career, and her failed, tumultuous love affair with Ivan Costello. Maria eventually married Carter Lang, a director who gave her roles in two of his films, though the marriage ultimately fell apart. In two subsequent internal monologues, Helene and Carter offer their perspectives on Maria's current situation. Helene is angry with Maria, who has just refused to see her at the hospital, and whose "carelessness," she believes, caused Helene's husband, BZ's, death. Carter recalls memories of Maria that paint her as an unstable woman. From this point forward, the narrative covers the year that preceded Maria's institutionalization.

It's the fall after Maria and Carter's separation, and Maria spends her days taking long drives along the highways of southern California to avoid having anxiety dreams about Les Goodwin, or about Carter, BZ, Helene, and her herself in the desert. One day, she visits her agent Freddy Chaikin's office to

inquire about work, but she worries about appearing desperate and leaves without seeing him. When she returns home, she considers calling Les Goodwin but thinks better of it.

One evening in October, Maria chats with BZ, who is careful not to mention Carter, though BZ is a producer on one of Carter's films. BZ asks Maria if she's going to Larry Kulick's party, but Maria says no and accuses Kulick of being "gangster," prompting BZ to tell Maria she has no sense of humor. Later on, Freddy Chaikin follows up with Maria to say that he's gotten her some television roles. He mentions Carter, which upsets Maria. On another night in October, Maria takes a long drive and realizes she's near Carter's filming location. She imagines him having a drink with BZ and Helene and considers stopping by, but she decides she doesn't want to see him.

One afternoon, BZ calls Maria and convinces her to attend a party with him. Maria goes but feels alienated and doesn't have any fun. Larry Kulick sees her there and invites her over to use his sauna. BZ goes home with a French director, and Maria returns to her empty Beverly Hills home. When Les Goodwin calls Maria the next morning, she starts to weep. Sometime later, Carter drops by at Maria's home, and they decide to give their relationship another try, though Maria is reluctant to do so. Carter advises Maria that her unscheduled visits with Kate are starting to annoy hospital staff.

Sometime later, Maria lies on the beach outside Helene and BZ's house with Helene, BZ, Carter, and some of Helene and BZ's friends when she suddenly feels nauseous and runs to the bathroom. She pulls off her bathing suit and sees that she's not bleeding. In the car heading home, Maria tells Carter that she's pregnant. Carter states that while *he* knows who the father is, Felicia Goodwin might not. Carter drops Maria off and doesn't come home that night. The next morning, he calls from his filming location in the desert to tell Maria that if she doesn't have an abortion, he'll take away Kate.

Maria arranges to have the abortion but starts to unravel: she starts crying for her mother, which she hasn't done since her "bad season" in New York, in the immediate aftermath of her mother's death in a car wreck. In those days, she couldn't eat, since her food had begun to resemble coiled **rattlesnakes**. Maria ignores Les Goodwin's numerous attempts to reach her but agrees to meet him Monday night, the evening after she's scheduled to have the abortion, though she hides this detail from Les.

On Monday, Maria has the abortion. A mysterious man dressed in white escorts her to the house of a nameless doctor, who performs the procedure in newspaper-lined bedroom, carelessly placing the fetus in a pail. At dinner with Les that night, Maria refuses to tell him what's wrong with her. A few weeks later, Maria starts to bleed heavily and wishes she could talk to her mother. She starts having bad dreams about the man dressed in white, the abortionist, and clogged plumbing. When the sink backs up in her Beverly Hills home, Maria moves into

an apartment.

In December, Maria brings Kate home for Christmas. They go to Les and Felicia Goodwins' house for dinner, though the visit ends early when Kate has an outburst. By January, Maria has become increasingly terrified of hearing about danger harming children—of new stories involving rattlesnakes being found in playpens, children stuck in refrigerators—so she no longer speaks to others, reads the paper, or leaves her apartment. When the shower drain becomes clogged in her apartment, she moves back into her home. Maria and Carter realize things aren't working out and finalize their divorce, and Maria continues to unravel and grieve her aborted child. She obsesses over Les Goodwin and imagines Les, Kate, and herself living peacefully together in a seaside home.

That spring, Maria attends parties to distract herself from her unraveling psyche. She starts drinking and taking pills to ward off bad dreams. Helene reveals that Carter is dating Susannah Wood, the lead actress in a film he's shooting in the desert. Sometime later, Maria arranges to meet Les Goodwin at a motel after the screening of Les's film. They drive up the coast, rent a seaside room, and spend the evening together, though Les has to leave to return to Felicia the next day. Maria and Les lament the hopelessness of their situation. Sometime later, Carter travels to Paris to promote his latest film, which has been entered at Cannes. Helene calls Maria to gossip about Carter and Susannah, but Maria refuses to engage with Helene's attempts to rile her.

Sometime later, Maria meets with an agent to discuss her role in an upcoming television show and is humiliated to discover that she hasn't been cast as the lead. Ivan Costello calls her from New York and ridicules her unraveling life and ruined career. Maria hangs up and arranges to go to a casino with Larry Kulick, where she runs into Benny Austin. Benny is overjoyed to see Maria for the first time in many years, but Maria abandons Benny without saying goodbye after he starts talking about their past in Nevada.

Time passes. In May, Maria leaves a party with an actor named Johnny Waters. Waters takes her to his place and aggressively coerces her into sex. Afterward, Maria leaves without saying goodbye and steals Waters's car. She speeds into the desert but is pulled over and arrested when the police officer realizes the car has been reported as being stolen.

Sometime later, Carter invites Maria to accompany him, BZ, and Helene to film in the desert. Maria accuses Carter of only inviting her because he thinks she can't take care of herself, and he admits that this is true. Maria initially resists. Later that night, she finds Ivan Costello sitting in her living room. They have sex, but Maria kicks him out the next morning. She calls Les Goodwin crying. Les tries to cheer up Maria but is annoyed when she refuses to laugh. Out of options, Maria drives to the desert to be with Carter. Things don't go well: Carter and Maria fight and end up sleeping in separate rooms. One night, Maria is

hanging out with everyone in Susannah's motel room. When Maria asks Susannah to turn down the music, Susannah mocks Maria. Fed up, Maria tells everyone she hates them and that they make her sick. Helene tells Maria to stop saying things that aren't "funny."

After their third week in the desert, Susannah is beat up in a Las Vegas hotel room. Maria fears that Carter is responsible, but BZ tells her this can't be true since Carter was with Helene when it happened. Maria is bothered by the implication of BZ's words, and he tells her to get out of the game if she can't deal with Carter's infidelities. With just over a week left in the desert shoot, Carter invites Maria to watch the shoot. Maria opts to borrow a gun from the stunt man and shoot road signs instead. Carter confronts Maria about her increasingly unhinged behavior, and Maria starts to withdraw from everyone even more.

In an internal monologue that occurs in the aftermath of the novel's events, during Maria's institutionalization, she ruminates on her simple plans for the future: to be released, to live alone with Kate, and to "do some canning."

Back in the present, a forlorn BZ enters Maria's motel room with some pills and a bottle of vodka. BZ admits that he's no longer interested in "playing" and warns Maria that one day, she'll tire of playing too, since the two of them know things the others do not. Maria drifts off to sleep but awakens in time to see BZ ingesting the bottle of pills. He offers some to Maria, but she refuses. Maria holds BZ in her arms and falls asleep. When she awakens, the lights are on, Carter is shaking her, and Helene is screaming.

In an internal monologue, as Maria recovers at the psychiatric facility, she reveals that although she knows that life is meaningless, she "keep[s] on playing." She imagines BZ asking her "why," to which she responds, "why not."



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Maria Wyeth – Maria Wyeth is a 31-year-old actress who is at a psychiatric facility to recover from a nervous breakdown. The novel chronicles what led up to her hospitalization, namely the events surrounding her separation from her movie director husband, Carter Lang. Maria is nihilistic, in part because of her traumatic past: her parents, Francine and Harry, both died relatively young; the small **desert** hometown she loved has been demolished; and she had an abusive relationship with Ivan Costello as a young woman. As a result, she avoids confronting the past, insisting that it "leads nowhere." She's also the mother to a young daughter, Kate, who's seriously ill and can't reciprocate Maria's love in the way she wants. After Maria and Carter separate, her behavior grows increasingly erratic, as she takes aimless drives into the desert and self-medicates with

drugs, alcohol, and casual sex. She passively lets things happen to her, believing that life as a “game” in which people unconsciously uphold constructed beliefs and social norms while remaining ignorant to the reality that their lives are meaningless. Although Carter claims he wants to reconcile during their separation period, he emotionally abuses her and continues to pursue other women, including Maria’s friend Helene. He also coerces Maria into having an abortion when he learns she’s pregnant (likely by her former lover Les Goodwin), an experience that utterly traumatizes Maria and gives her chronic nightmares. Around this time, Maria also grows increasingly disillusioned with Hollywood and its superficiality, a sentiment that her friend BZ shares. Maria’s most egregious moment of passivity occurs when she fails to intervene in BZ’s suicidal overdose. She also refuses to kill herself alongside him, and while her decision to live might seem like a new lease on life, it more likely illustrates her cynical realization that death is just as meaningless as life. By the time she is hospitalized, though, Maria seems to be ready to reclaim her past and accept the possibility that life *could* offer meaning. She wants to live with Kate in a house by the sea and “do some canning,” which suggests a longing to return the simpler life she experienced growing up in Nevada.

BZ – BZ is a producer for Carter’s films and Maria’s only genuine friend. He is gay but trapped in a loveless marriage with Helene because his mother, Carlotta, pays the couple to stay together to keep up appearances. Despite being married, BZ has frequent affairs with men. At the core of BZ and Maria’s friendship is their shared disillusionment with Hollywood and their friends, and with life more broadly. BZ and Maria ultimately arrive at the same conclusion that life is meaningless, and they lose the desire to pretend otherwise. BZ initially plays along with what he considers to be the “game” of life: he presents to the world a superficial appearance of success, maintains an active social life, and encourages others to do the same. BZ repeatedly scolds Maria—though not unselfconsciously—for not having a sense of humor about her problems. For example, when Maria wallows in self-pity over her failed marriage, BZ encourages her to go to parties and lose herself in meaningless social and romantic encounters. Still, there is a self-awareness to BZ’s cynical embrace of superficiality. Though BZ initially participates in that “game,” perhaps because he sees no alternative, he eventually grows tired of the vapidness of his relationships, the emptiness of wealth, and the pointlessness of success. His disillusionment overpowers him, and he chooses to exit the “game” altogether, ending his life by overdosing on pills while visiting Maria in her motel room. BZ’s suicide is his way of taking a stand against superficiality and affirms his conviction in life’s meaninglessness; his death is a statement that positions death as preferable to living disingenuously and without meaning. Since Maria doesn’t actively intervene to stop his suicide, Helene blames BZ’s death on Maria’s “carelessness” and

“selfishness.”

Carter Lang – Carter Lang is Maria’s estranged film director husband. In the early days of their relationship, Maria starred in two of Carter’s films, *Angel Beach* and *Maria*. Various infidelities and Maria’s erratic behavior lead the couple separate the summer before the events of the novel occur. Although Carter claims that he wants to reconcile with Maria, he continues to pursue affairs with various women, including Susannah Wood, the lead actress on his latest film, and Maria’s friend Helene. Carter and Maria maintain a dysfunctional, off-and-on relationship, even after they finalize their divorce, and they only sever ties after Maria is committed to a psychiatric facility and refuses to see him or Helene. Like most characters in the novel, Carter is self-absorbed, obsessed with superficial displays of success, and dismissive of Maria’s attempts to communicate honestly. He resents her refusal to adhere to their social circle’s norms, characterizing her as erratic and unhinged. Carter is physically and emotionally abusive toward Maria and the other women with whom he is romantically involved. When Maria tells Carter that she is pregnant and insinuates that the baby’s father is her former lover, Les Goodwin, Carter responds by weaponizing Maria’s unconditional love of their four-year-old daughter, Kate. He coerces her into having an abortion by threatening to take away Kate if Maria does not undergo the procedure—an experience that traumatizes Maria and contributes to her mental breakdown.

Helene – Helene is BZ’s wife. She is part of Maria’s social circle because BZ is a producer on Carter’s films. Helene is attractive, vain, and twice divorced. Her marriage to BZ is a loveless relationship of convenience: it’s revealed that BZ’s wealthy mother, Carlotta, pays the couple to remain married, seemingly to keep up appearances and downplay BZ’s homosexuality. Although Helene is Maria’s friend, their relationship remains entirely superficial, as Helene is only concerned with gossip and resents Maria’s efforts to broach serious or uncomfortable subjects. Helene doesn’t show much regard for Maria’s emotional well-being: in one instance, she tries to get a rise out of Maria by openly discussing Carter’s flourishing career and frequent womanizing. Helene’s careless treatment of Maria culminates in her having an affair with Carter. When Maria is institutionalized, she refuses to see Helene. This offends Helene, who believes that Maria owes her an apology for the role she played in BZ’s suicide. Helene claims that Maria’s “carelessness” and “selfishness” caused BZ’s death, which is somewhat ironic, since Helene is one of the most self-absorbed, careless characters in the novel. In fact, when Helene condemns Maria for her supposed self-absorption, it’s because she sees herself—rather than her dead husband—as a victim of Maria’s selfishness.

Kate Lang – Kate is Maria and Carter’s four-year-old daughter. She was born with an unspecified illness that predisposes her to emotional outbursts and other ailments, and this leads

Carter to have her institutionalized. Carter uses Kate to coerce Maria into having an abortion, threatening to take Kate away if Maria refuses to undergo the procedure. Maria regards Kate as her only reason for living and has dreams about leaving the hospital and living alone with Kate in a house by the sea.

Benny Austin – Benny Austin is Harry Wyeth’s former business partner and Maria’s godfather. Maria associates Benny with “as it was,” with her childhood years spent in the small **desert** town of Silver Wells, Nevada. She dislikes being around him for this reason. In the year preceding her institutionalization, Maria runs into Benny at a casino but abandons him once he starts ruminating on the past. Although Benny cares deeply for Maria, he is unreliable. For example, he gives Maria an address and phone number to call to retrieve her father’s old legal and financial documents, but the information turns out to be false, and she isn’t able to reach him to get these documents.

Les Goodwin – Les Goodwin is a screenwriter. He is Maria’s former lover and likely the father of her aborted baby. In an attempt to distract herself from her aimless life and deteriorating mental health, Maria rekindles her romance with Les, though the affair is complicated by the fact that Les is married to Felicia Goodwin. Even though Les is a persistent presence in Maria’s daydreams, she knows that Les won’t leave Felicia and that they cannot have a future together. Maria chooses not to tell Les about the abortion, but he detects that something is wrong with her and might suspect the pregnancy.

Ivan Costello – Ivan Costello is one of Maria’s former lovers. They had a relationship before she met Carter, when she was working as an actress and model in New York. Maria and Costello’s relationship was essentially loveless, with Costello mostly interested in Maria for her body and her wealth. Even after Maria moves on from Costello, he continues to reinsert himself into her life, preying on her when she is at her most vulnerable. Costello is boorish, sadistic, and manipulative, and he taunts Maria for her emotional fragility and erratic behavior.

Francine Wyeth – Francine Wyeth was Maria’s mother who died in a car accident when Maria was only 19 years old. Francine suffered from depression, though this wasn’t obvious to Maria at the time. As an adult, Maria sometimes wonders whether her mother’s death was an accident or whether she drove the car off the road off purpose. Francine’s marriage to Harry Wyeth, Maria’s father, wasn’t particularly happy: the novel portrays Harry as dismissive of his wife. Maria realizes, in retrospect, that he was likely having an affair with Paulette, the cashier at their restaurant. Francine is the source of much regret for Maria, who wishes she had been a more attentive daughter when her mother was alive. After her abortion, Maria cries for her mother for the first time in years and longs for her comforting presence. Maria’s unresolved grief for her mother contributes to her own nervous breakdown. As an adult, Maria wonders whether her parents, too, had recognized the

meaninglessness of life and had only pretended not to understand.

Harry Wyeth – Harry Wyeth is Maria’s father who died shortly after his wife, Francine Wyeth. Harry was entrepreneurial and optimistic, though none of his business ventures in Silver Wells, Nevada saw much success, because a highway failed to be built near the town. He was also a gambler: it’s possible that the Wyeth family moved to Silver Wells in the first place because Harry gambled away their house in Reno. Throughout Maria’s childhood, Harry taught her about cards, games, and probability, and he used these lessons to explain life, as well. For instance, after Maria’s mother’s death, Harry encouraged Maria not to let the “bad hand” life had dealt her make her forget that she was “holding all the aces.” As Maria transitioned into adulthood, she found it harder to emulate her father’s optimism. Harry was dismissive of his wife when she was alive and likely carried on an affair with Paulette, who worked at the family restaurant. As an adult, Maria wonders whether her parents, too, had discovered the truth about life’s meaninglessness and had simply pretended not to understand.

Freddy Chaikin – Freddy Chaikin is Maria’s agent. He is surprised when she inquires about work, since her last job ended abruptly when an argument caused her to walk off set. Freddy eventually promises Maria some television work and arranges for her to meet with a director about a secondary role in a motorcycle film. Although Freddy also works with Maria’s estranged husband, Carter, he promises Maria that he’s happy to represent both of them. Freddy seems to pity Maria for her declining mental health, failed marriage, and failing career, and he does what he can to help her; for example, he smooths things over with Johnny Waters after Maria is arrested for stealing Waters’s Ferrari.

The Man in White – The man in white is the man with whom Maria corresponds over the phone to make arrangements for her illegal abortion. He meets Maria in a parking lot, and they drive together in Maria’s car to the house where she will undergo the procedure. The man wears a white sport shirt, white duck pants, and has “a moon face.” He makes trivial small talk with Maria as they drive to the doctor’s house, and she is grateful for this, since it allows her to suppress the reality of her situation and the unwanted procedure she is about to undergo. The man’s white clothing and casual demeanor seem to reflect his innocence and easy existence relative to Maria: unlike Maria, this man hasn’t been beaten down by a sexist, objectifying world. The man’s innocence also suggests a discrepancy between the minimal impact his complicity in arranging illegal abortions has on his emotions versus the life-altering effect the abortion has on Maria’s life. The man’s white clothing reflects his untarnished, unaffected psyche. He will later appear in the nightmares Maria has following her abortion.

The Doctor – The doctor is the man who performs Maria’s

illegal abortion. He is cold, impatient, and insensitive toward Maria, seemingly more concerned about the neighbors hearing her screams and catching wind of his illicit business than with Maria's physical or emotional well-being. The doctor later appears in Maria's nightmares about her abortion.

Susannah Wood – Susannah Wood is the lead actress in Carter's latest film. Carter has an affair with Susannah after he and Maria finalize their divorce, even though he and Maria maintain sporadic contact, and even though Carter claims he doesn't particularly enjoy his intimate relations with Susannah. When Maria stays with Carter while he is filming in the **desert**, Susannah claims that Maria's presence on set makes her uncomfortable. At the same time, she seems unconcerned with making Maria feel uncomfortable: one day, while a group of people are gathered in Susannah's motel room, Susannah taunts Maria about being arrested for stealing Johnny Waters's Ferrari. Susannah is assaulted by Harrison Porter, the film's lead actor, in a motel room in Las Vegas.

Johnny Waters/The Actor – Johnny Waters is a pompous actor Maria has sex with after a party. She refers to him only as "the actor" during their interactions, since she doesn't know his name. Waters, in turn, mishears Maria's name and refers to her as "Myra." Maria has sex with Waters to disassociate from her life, so she is grateful for the added anonymity that Waters not knowing her name adds to their tryst. The sex itself is aggressive and unsatisfying for Maria. She leaves without saying goodbye, steals Waters' Ferrari, and drives to Tonopah, Nevada, where she is pulled over for speeding and arrested for driving a stolen vehicle.

Harrison Porter – Harrison Porter is the lead actor in Carter's latest film. He assaults the film's lead actress, Susannah Wood, in a Las Vegas motel room. Maria initially thinks it was Carter who assaulted Susannah, but BZ informs her that this can't be true, since Carter was having sex with Helene when the assault occurred. It's in this offhand, insensitive manner that Maria learns of Helene and Carter's affair.

The Masseur – The masseur is a gay male friend of BZ's. He complains dramatically about the artificial lemon juice in BZ's refrigerator while Maria is sunbathing outside BZ's house one afternoon. Maria realizes that she first met the masseur at a party three years ago, though he appears not to recognize her. Maria is troubled by the fact that the masseur looks exactly the same as he did three years ago, while she, in contrast, has aged considerably.

Ceci Delano – Ceci Delano is a model Maria worked with on a shoot in Ocho Rios many years ago. Ceci had told Maria a humorous story about a New York District Attorney arranging for her to have an abortion, "quid pro quo," in exchange for her testimony in a trial against a party-girl operation. Maria recalls this exchange with Ceci to try to absolve herself of the grief and guilt she feels about her own abortion. But she ultimately can't

compare the two, since her abortion is very real to her, whereas Ceci's abortion "was just a New York story."

Larry Kulik – Larry Kulik is a wealthy, well-connected lawyer "for gangsters," according to Maria. He's a womanizer who is superficially attracted to—but does not appear to respect—Maria. Larry repeatedly tries to pursue Maria, who eventually agrees to go out with him one evening to distract herself from her ongoing mental collapse. Maria is with Larry at the Flamingo when she runs into Benny Austin.

Jeanelle – Jeanelle is a young, vapid woman who ends up hanging around BZ and Helene's house one day. She babbles nonsensically, and everyone wishes they could get rid of her. People like Jeanelle, interested in a good time and the cache of hanging around Hollywood industry people like BZ, always seem to wander in and out of BZ and Helene's house.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Carlotta – Carlotta is BZ's wealthy, loathsome mother who pays for Helene to stay married to BZ to conceal his homosexuality. She has a victim complex and is perpetually engaged in legal battles with her estranged husband.

The Hypnotist – Maria visits a hypnotist who contacts her through the studio that produced *Angel Beach*. Over the course of several sessions, the hypnotist tries to get Maria to delve into her past, but Maria resists and ultimately stops seeing him.

Leonard – Leonard is Helene's hairdresser. Helene breaks down crying when she tells Maria that Leonard is going to be out of town in New York for 10 days, which makes her "frightened."

Tommy Loew – Tommy Loew is a man who works in the film industry and is based in New York. He accompanies BZ to a party, which makes Maria wonder whether he and BZ are intimately involved.

Felicia Goodwin – Felicia Goodwin is Les Goodwin's wife. Felicia appears not to know about—or chooses to ignore—Les's affair with Maria, and Les has no intentions of leaving her for Maria.

The Young Agent – The young agent is sent from Freddy Chaikin's office to accompany Maria to speak to a director about a potential job. The agent shocks Maria when he tells her that it's the director's girlfriend—not Maria—who is being considered for the lead role.

Paulette – Paulette ran the Wyeths' restaurant in Silver Wells, though the establishment never had any customers. As an adult, Maria realizes that Paulette was having an affair with Harry Wyeth, Maria's father.

Allene Walsh – Allene Walsh is a woman Helene knows. When Maria and Helene see Allene eating with Sharon Carroll at the Bistro, Helene insinuates that Allene and Sharon are having a lesbian affair.

Sharon Carroll – Sharon Carroll is an actress Maria worked with years ago. Maria and Helene spot Sharon eating with Allene Walsh at the Bistro, and Helene giddily insinuates that the women are having a lesbian affair.

Cuban Woman – Maria runs into a Cuban woman in the ladies' room at the Flamingo. They cross paths again later that night at a party in Larry Kulik's hotel suite, though the woman shows no sign of recognizing Maria.

Anita Garson – Anita Garson is a woman whose house party Maria reluctantly attends with BZ.



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.



MEANINGLESSNESS

Play It as It Lays follows Maria Wyeth, a 31-year-old failed actress and model, as she reflects on the events that preceded her nervous breakdown and

institutionalization at a psychiatric facility. While the doctors who treat Maria want her to reflect on her life to discover the cause of her insanity—to find out what it means—Maria's reflections on the past only reaffirm her conviction that life is meaningless. Maria's life has been plagued by hardship, like the death of her mother Francine, her volatile relationship with her husband Carter, and her daughter Kate's debilitating medical condition. Moreover, just before her institutionalization, Maria endures two crises that send her over the edge: first, Carter coerces her to have an unwanted abortion after she becomes pregnant, likely by her former lover, Les Goodwin. Second, BZ, a producer for Carter's films and Maria's only genuine friend, commits suicide. While Maria's doctors believe that processing these events to identify the "reason" for Maria's breakdown is essential to her recovery, Maria rejects the notion on the basis that there *are* no reasons: that the universe is indifferent to humanity's suffering, and that life is ultimately meaningless.

Indeed, Maria's internal struggle isn't about whether or not life has meaning. Rather, it's about whether there is value in continuing to live *despite* life's fundamental meaninglessness, and whether a person's actions matter, even when the summation of their life does not. For much of the novel, Maria behaves passively and carelessly, believing that life's meaninglessness makes her actions unimportant. She stays with Carter despite his abuse, for instance, and she has sex with whomever will have her, regardless of her attraction to them. Maria's passivity proves most destructive when she knowingly fails to prevent BZ's suicide while they are in a motel room

together and he ingests a fatal dose of Seconal. But when BZ offers to share his pills so that she can kill herself alongside him, Maria rejects the invitation.

The final lines of the novel suggest that Maria's decision to reject BZ's pills doesn't signify an affirmation of life so much as a newfound awareness in the meaninglessness of life *and* death. The novel ends with Maria entertaining a hypothetical conversation between BZ and herself, in which BZ questions why a person should continue to live if nothing matters. To BZ's "why," Maria responds, "why not." Even Maria's rebuttal to BZ's "why" is a rather passive statement that conveys her unwillingness to assign meaning even to death. Unlike BZ, who believes so strongly in the meaninglessness of life that he thinks death will present him a preferable alternative, Maria seems to view death as just as meaningless as life. Her decision to "stay in the action" rather than kill herself thus reads not as an enthusiastic assent to life, but a recognition that death isn't a solution to nihilism.



GENDER INEQUALITY AND IDENTITY

As an actress in 1960s Hollywood, Maria Wyeth struggles to navigate a world structured around sexist social norms, patriarchal oppression, and gender inequality. People repeatedly objectify, devalue, and dehumanize her to the point that she loses all sense of her identity and self-worth. For example, even though she and Carter are divorced, nurses who care for Maria when she's hospitalized at a psychiatric facility refer to her by her married name, Mrs. Lang. Similarly, when an actor she meets in the elevator ogles her, Maria knows that his sexual gaze is "meant not for Maria herself but for Carter Lang's wife," a calculated effort on the actor's part to exert dominance over another man in his industry by mentally defiling his property.

Indeed, society denies Maria the right to her own identity and defines her exclusively in terms of who (or what) she is in relation to others: she is her parents' daughter, Kate's, mother, Carter's wife, and an object of desire to those who watch her films. Ultimately, none of these roles give Maria a stable, dependable identity or purpose in life: Maria's parents die, Kate's illness complicates her ability to reciprocate Maria's maternal love, and Maria's marriage to Carter dissolves. Moreover, Maria's status as an alluring sex symbol will last only so long as Maria remains young, fresh, and beautiful. With her identity and value so fully dependent on other people's ever-changing treatment of her, Maria succumbs to depression and existential dread. In this way, the novel frames Maria's mental collapse as the natural consequence of gender inequality and objectification of women. Maria doesn't break from reality—reality breaks *her*.



LOSS AND RECOVERY

"I have trouble with *as it was*," Maria states in an internal monologue at the beginning of the novel.

The phrase becomes a common refrain for Maria, who maintains that dwelling on the past "leads nowhere." Maria's desire to live in the present makes sense given the abundant pain, loss, and grief she incurs throughout her life. Having lost her mother in a tragic accident (or, as Maria believes, a suicide), her small **desert** hometown in Nevada, and her marriage to Carter, Maria tries to numb her pain through short-lived (and ultimately unsatisfying) sexual encounters. Maria's breaking point occurs when she discovers she is pregnant, likely by her former lover, Les Goodwin, and Carter coerces her into having an abortion. When her grief over the loss of her unborn baby gives her nightmares, Maria uses drugs and alcohol to stop dreaming altogether. From here, Maria's life spirals out of control until she suffers a nervous breakdown that necessitates her stay in a psychiatric facility.

The novel seems to suggest that Maria's nervous breakdown is the delayed but inevitable consequence of years of disassociating from the past: her "trouble with *as it was*" creates a stockpile of unexamined, unresolved traumas, the collective pain of which becomes too much to bear after her traumatic abortion sends her over the edge. Although Maria initially insists that ruminating on the past "leads nowhere," she comes to understand that the opposite might be true: that internalizing and making peace with the past is actually the only way to forge a path forward. As she recovers in the hospital, Maria states that her only "plans" for the future are to live alone with her daughter Kate and to "do some canning." Maria's unambitious, straightforward plans reflect a desire to return to the smaller, simpler life she experienced growing up in small-town Nevada, as well as the conviction that reconnecting with the past is what will restore some semblance of coherence and peace to her present life.



SUPERFICIALITY

In the Hollywood depicted in *Play It as It Lays*, style and appearance are everything, and nobody has any tolerance for sincerity, vulnerability, or

meaningful communication. Shortly before she's institutionalized for having a mental breakdown, Hollywood actress Maria is in a motel room with her husband Carter; her friends Helene and BZ; and Susannah Wood, the lead actress in Carter's latest film and Carter's mistress. When Susannah mocks Maria for asking to turn down the music, Maria states bluntly and honestly, "I don't like any of you. [...] You are all making me sick." The room responds poorly to Maria's candid expression of disgust. "If it's not funny don't say it," Helene advises Maria. Helene's advice reflects the general attitude adopted by everyone in their social circle: keep things light and entertaining, and, above all, don't be too honest.

As such, superficiality pervades every aspect of Maria's life: her friendships are phony and unfulfilling, and her conversations are inane and impersonal. When Maria asks Helene to be her witness in her divorce hearing, Helene's main concern is whether they'll eat lunch before or after the hearing—not Maria's feelings about the dissolution of her marriage. Similarly, while the two women are out to lunch, Helene chastises Maria for "looking like hell," insisting that a divorce "isn't any excuse for [her] to fall apart." Helene's remark illustrates what little patience she has for her friend's personal problems, as well as the value she places on outward appearances: to Helene, Maria's biggest sin is "looking like hell," regardless of how hellish Maria might feel on the inside. Superficiality presents itself in other ways, as well: for instance, BZ and Helene remain in a loveless marriage to conceal BZ's scandalous homosexuality. And when Maria finds out she's pregnant (most likely with another man's baby), Carter coerces her to have an illicit abortion to protect his reputation.

Maria and BZ, the only two characters who explicitly acknowledge their disillusionment with their lives' phoniness, see themselves as players in a game. Right before BZ commits suicide, he warns Maria that "some day [she'll] wake up and [she] just won't feel like playing anymore." BZ's choice to commit suicide—to stop "playing" the game of life—suggests that superficiality isn't a Hollywood-specific problem, but an inherent part of the human experience. The novel isn't a scathing critique of the shallow meaninglessness that lurks beneath Hollywood's charmed exterior. Rather, it's a broader look into how society's accepted "rules" encourage superficiality and perpetuate the loneliness and alienation that socializing should, in theory, alleviate. People's inherent strangeness—the fact that all one can ever know of others is what they display (consciously or unconsciously) on the surface—makes superficiality the default state.



SYMBOLS

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



SNAKES

Snakes symbolize meaningless suffering. The novel opens with Maria remarking on how arbitrary it is that the coral snake is highly poisonous, while the king snake (which is unnervingly similar in appearance) is harmless. Maria's comparison of the two snakes underscores the almost comical cruelty of the fact that a discrepancy as *minor* as the order of colored bands on a snake's skin can bring about a discrepancy as *major* as living or dying. In other words, it's completely illogical that an error as simple as mistaking one type of snake for another can have such a serious consequence. Snakes thus

represent the cruel asymmetry between action and consequence. This idea extends to life more broadly in the novel, in that people who do not deserve to suffer often experience suffering anyway. The book rejects the notion of deserving altogether, offering in its place the cynical alternative that there is no such thing as deserving or undeserving, because the world doesn't operate according to a logical, just set of rules. In the absence of order and logic, there is only disorder and meaninglessness. Whenever a snake appears, then, the novel is gesturing toward the senseless, unpredictable, and often unfair manner in which suffering and misfortune affect people's lives.

In a poignant example of this idea, Maria expands her snake analogy to explain her daughter, Kate's, congenital illness: "In the place where Kate is they put electrodes on her head and needles in her spine and try to figure what went wrong. It is one more version of why does a coral snake have two glands of neurotoxic poison. Kate has soft down on her spine and an aberrant chemical in her brain." Here, Maria positions Kate as a stand-in for the coral snake, likening her medical condition to the precisely ordered bands that reveal the snake's poisonousness. Maria's comparison draws on the cruel randomness of Kate's illness, just as a slight rearrangement of colored bands makes the difference between a poisonous coral snake and a harmless king snake.



THE DESERT

The desert symbolizes Maria's fraught relationship with her past. In the most obvious sense, the desert represents the past to Maria because it reminds her of Silver Wells, Nevada, the small desert town in which she was raised. Maria repeatedly insists that dwelling on the past "leads nowhere" and avoids ruminating on her deceased parents and demolished hometown. However, the memories she *does* allow herself to muse over are inextricably tied to the desert landscape: she recalls long road trips to Las Vegas, speeding down empty stretches of highway in a pickup truck with her parents. The desert is connected to less joyful memories, as well: it was along a barren stretch of desert highway outside of Tonopah that Maria's mother, Francine Wyeth, was in a fatal car wreck.

On a deeper level, the desert's austere geography embodies Maria's complicated, counterproductive relationship to her past. Just as the desert's desolation and harsh conditions make it difficult for life to thrive there, so too do the painful elements of Maria's past, such as the trauma of her mother's death, hinder her ability to thrive in the present. To that end, Maria has learned to disassociate from her past in order to function more effectively in her present life. Yet Maria also seems inextricably drawn to the desert and thus, by extension, to her past. In the aftermath of her separation from Carter, Maria

develops a daily routine of going for long, aimless drives in the desert, toward destinations that have clear ties to her past. For instance, one day she drives for longer than she intended until she arrives in Baker, which is within 60 miles of the filming location for Carter's latest film. In her efforts to drive aimlessly to distract herself from her failed marriage, she has steered herself right back into the midst of it. In this way, Maria's excursions into the desert show that she is misguided in her belief that the past "leads nowhere," and that she can willfully divorce her present self from the experiences—traumatic or otherwise—that have transported her to this current place in time and shaped her into the person she has become.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the FSG edition of *Play It As It Lays* published in 2005.

Maria Quotes

☝ What makes Iago evil? some people ask. I never ask.

Related Characters: Maria Wyeth (speaker), Kate Lang, Francine Wyeth, BZ

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

These are the first lines of the novel, conveyed by Maria in an internal monologue as she recovers in a psychiatric facility in the aftermath of her friend BZ's death. Maria's opening question introduces the audience to her firm conviction in life's meaninglessness.

Iago refers to the antagonist of the Shakespearean tragedy *Othello*. In the play, Iago ruthlessly manipulates the play's tragic hero, Othello, into believing his wife, Desdemona, is being unfaithful to him. This ultimately leads Othello to murder Desdemona in a moment of retributive, blind rage. One of the most strikingly "evil" and fascinating aspects of Iago's decision to manipulate Othello is that he seems to have no underlying reason to act the way he does.

Maria's admission that she, unlike other people, never contemplates "what makes Iago evil," introduces her as a cynical, disillusioned character who has accepted the bleak fact that "evil" and misfortune can exist in the world for no reason at all. Maria "never ask[s]" what makes Iago evil because she doesn't believe there needs to be a cause for evil to exist. The hardships Maria has encountered over the

course of her life, such as her mother's death or her daughter's severe illness, contribute to her nihilistic philosophy. She believes that tragedies and injustices can befall people for no reason at all, and that to search for a reason or cause for those misfortunes is a useless, futile task.

These opening lines create a foundation for Maria's thesis about the meaninglessness of life by disassociating cause from effect, and action from consequence. Maria doesn't concern herself with Iago's evildeed because she knows that there is no cause for Iago's evilness, just as she assumes there is no deeper meaning to anything that happens in life.

☝ I might as well lay it on the line, I have trouble with *as it was*. I mean it leads nowhere.

Related Characters: Maria Wyeth (speaker), Kate Lang, Benny Austin, Harry Wyeth, Francine Wyeth

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

As Maria recovers in a psychiatric facility, she offers a condensed history of her life, beginning in childhood and interjecting these earlier memories with more recent episodes. In one such episode, Maria shamefully recalls running into her godfather, Benny Austin, at a casino. She abandoned him the minute he started talking about the good times they had many years ago in Silver Wells, Nevada, the small town in which Maria was raised.

"I might as well lay it on the line, I have trouble with *as it was*," Maria states. Though Maria has fond, nostalgic memories from childhood, Silver Wells is inexorably tied to Maria's most painful sources of grief, guilt, and regret. Silver Wells is where her parents died and were buried. Maria's mother's sudden death in a car wreck is a particularly painful memory for her. After Maria left home to pursue an acting career in New York, her mother began to suffer from depression. Looking back, Maria often wonders whether her mother's fatal car accident was actually a suicide. In this way, Silver Wells is also tied to regret: Maria regrets having abandoned her parents and the life they had there. In the moments Maria allows herself to meditate on "*as it was*," she wonders whether her life would've turned out better had she not let go of the only people whose love for her was not transactional, conditional, or feigned.

What is perhaps most painful about "*as it was*" is the

impossibility of it: the literal location where Silver Wells once stood is now a missile range, and Maria's parents are dead. At the end of the novel, Maria makes plans to retrieve her daughter, Kate, move to a small house, and live a simple life like the one she experienced with her parents in Silver Wells. But Maria's dreams for the future are rendered futile by the fact that they are tied to an idea of "*as it was*," which can never be recaptured. This is why Maria abandoned Benny at the casino years ago: because she knows that reminiscing about an impossible past "*leads nowhere*," only serving to reopen old wounds and remind her of all she has lost.

Chapter 4 Quotes

☝ "He said, 'What I like about your wife, Carter, is she's not a cunt.'"

Maria said nothing.

"That's very funny, Maria, Kulik saying that to Carter, you lost your sense of humor?"

"I've already heard it."

Related Characters: BZ, Maria Wyeth (speaker), Carter Lang, Larry Kulik

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

Maria and BZ are at her house having drinks and exchanging gossip and small talk. At one point, BZ recalls what was supposed to be a funny compliment Larry Kulik made to Carter about Maria. According to BZ, "[Kulik] said, 'What I like about your wife, Carter, is she's not a cunt.'" Although Kulik didn't mean this as an insult, it nevertheless contains a misogynistic slur to describe other women. Maria responds to BZ's retelling of the joke with silence, so he criticizes her for having "lost [her] sense of humor."



This passage is important because it establishes the idea of Maria's having—or having lost—a "sense of humor," which is a criticism numerous characters use throughout the novel. People in Maria's social circle condemn her for her failure to uphold her end of their unspoken agreement to follow the script, laugh at the jokes, and not burden anybody with the discomfort of sincerity. When Maria responds to BZ's accusation of humorlessness with the explanation that she's "already heard it," she's specifically referring to Larry Kulik's off-color remark. But her response also speaks to her growing disillusionment with the superficial culture of


Hollywood that reduces the depth of people's experiences to derogatory punch lines and cocktail hour fodder. Maria is repeatedly degraded and forced to make light of her own degradation, so it's no wonder that her gradual disillusionment with Hollywood evolves into full-blown nihilism.

Chapter 6 Quotes

☞ On the way back into the city the traffic was heavy and the hot wind blew sand through the windows and the radio got on her nerves and after that Maria did not go back to the freeway except as a way of getting somewhere.

Related Characters: Maria Wyeth (speaker), Carter Lang

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 32-33

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs during one of Maria's aimless highway excursions, a habit she began after her separation from Carter earlier that summer to clear her head. One such drive becomes not so aimless, though, and Maria realizes—too late—that she has driven through the desert nearly all the way to Las Vegas, which is where Carter is currently shooting his latest film. Though Maria stands in a phonebooth and contemplates calling Carter to ask if she can join him, she realizes that their relationship inevitably degrades into violence, anger, and (on her part) self-pity and thinks better of it, driving back the way she came.

Maria's flustered demeanor as she drives home shows how violated she feels by her unconscious mind allowing her past to slip uninvited into her present. Her accidental road trip toward Las Vegas shows her that she misses her violent, cruel, and very much estranged director husband, Carter—though perhaps only subconsciously. This makes her irritated and uncomfortable: the “radio [gets] on her nerves,” and she becomes especially sensitive to the “hot wind” that “bl[ows] sand through the windows.” Her promise not to “go back to the freeway except as a way of getting somewhere” shows how determined Maria is not to repeat today's experience, as it has finally become clear to her that the destination she almost reached today had been her destination all along.

Chapter 8 Quotes

☞ “You haven't asked me how it went after we left Anita's,” BZ said.

“How did it go,” Maria said without interest.

“Everybody got what he came for.”

“Don't you ever get tired of doing favors for people?”

There was a long silence. “You don't know how tired,” BZ said.

Related Characters: Maria Wyeth, BZ (speaker), Anita Garson, Larry Kulik

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

BZ urges Maria to ask him how things went after she left a party at Anita Garson's house. Maria relents, and BZ tells her that “everybody got what he came for,” insinuating that BZ and the people he invited back to his place got to have sex with the people in whom they were interested. When Maria asks BZ if he “ever get[s] tired of doing favors for people,” she insinuates that BZ strategically chose to invite certain people back to his place to assuage certain other people's needs. For example, Larry Kulik had his eyes on a certain young girl all night, so BZ invited them both back to his place.

This passage is important because it identifies BZ's adherence to their social circle's superficial norms. On the one hand, BZ is a willing and active participant in perpetuating these norms, as evidenced by his eagerness for Maria to ask him “how it went after [they] left Anita's.” Maria hasn't asked and clearly doesn't care, but BZ goads her into asking anyway. He insinuates that he wants to share the titillating story of the afterparty and conveys that he has followed through with his social obligation of meeting everyone's needs.

At the same time, BZ's willingness to participate in social norms is clearly waning, since when Maria asks him if he “get[s] tired of doing favors for people,” he expresses that he does: “you don't know how tired,” he admits. BZ becomes so “tired” of “doing people favors” and adhering to the status quo of their vapid social life in Hollywood that he ultimately commits suicide. This exchange between he and Maria foreshadows his tragic fate, showing that he is aware of the pointlessness of his life, which is already taking a toll on him.

Chapter 10 Quotes

☝☝ The way he looked was the problem. He looked exactly the same. He looked untouched, and she did not.

Related Characters: Maria Wyeth, The Masseur, BZ, Helene

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 44-45

Explanation and Analysis

Maria is sunbathing with a group of people at BZ and Helene's house. She recognizes one man, the masseur, from a Santa Barbara party a few years back and is troubled by how little the man's appearance has changed, especially in comparison to how drastically she believes hers has.

Maria refers to the man's unchanged appearance as a "problem," illustrating how deeply the discrepancy bothers her. When Maria describes the masseur as appearing "untouched," on the surface, she refers to the man being "untouched" by time: he looks just as young and fresh as he did three or so years back. On a deeper level, Maria refers to the masseur being untouched by disillusionment, as well: she insinuates that the masseur is just as content playing the game of life, keeping up appearances, and following superficial social norms as he was before.

By extension, when Maria states that "she [does] not" appear unchanged, she refers to how her own relationship to her friends, her job, and her world has changed. Over the past few years, her attitude toward life has grown more cynical and detached. The years haven't left Maria "untouched," and she can no longer keep up the external or internal charade that the masseur (and the rest of the people Maria hangs around with) is willing to uphold.

Chapter 14 Quotes

☝☝ "The doctor will want to know how many weeks."

"How many weeks what?"

There was a silence. "How advanced is the *problem*, Maria," the voice said finally.

Related Characters: Maria Wyeth, The Man in White (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 56

Explanation and Analysis

Maria speaks on the phone with an unknown man to schedule her illicit abortion. This passage illustrates the superficiality and sexism inherent in Maria's Hollywood world, which is highly superficial. It's all about maintaining an external appearance of excitement, success, and beauty—but never acknowledging that this external appearance is only skin-deep. People eliminate inconvenient "problems" (like unwanted pregnancies) that complicate this attractive external image, but they don't talk about them, because to do that would be to admit that the image is contrived.

Maria's conversation with the mystery man exhibits this duplicity: the man and Maria have a discussion to arrange for Maria's abortion, yet neither addresses the actual procedure Maria is slated to undergo outright. The man refers to Maria's pregnancy as "the problem," and he grows irritated with Maria when she presses him to expand on what he means. Maria's confusion is likely genuine, as the man's phrasing is vague and unclear. On a deeper level, though, Maria's question of "how many weeks what?" reveals her unconscious unwillingness to maintain the superficial charade that she, the man, and everyone else in their world are participating in. She doesn't want the "problem" of her pregnancy to remain unspoken and vague; it's a very real, ugly "problem" for her, one that she feels deserves to be addressed outright.

Of course, the man's discretion—and his irritation when Maria refuses to be discreet—makes sense, given the fact that abortion was illegal in California in the 1960s (when the novel is set). Even so, the way the man handles the delicate situation versus the way Maria handles it is telling of the significantly different implications the illegal abortion has for them. The man's discretion reflects his desire not to be implicated in an illegal activity. Maria's pregnancy is a mere "problem" to him because it implicates him in an illegal activity that could have real, problematic consequences. For Maria, though, the pregnancy is more than a problem, and the abortion poses challenges that far surpass the legal realm: it poses moral and personal issues for her, as well. Indeed, the emotional consequences that Maria suffers after the abortion are perhaps just as long-lasting and painful as anything the man would be met with if he were caught.

Chapter 19 Quotes

☝☝ She could remember it all but none of it seemed to come to anything. She had a sense the dream had ended and she had slept on.

Related Characters: Maria Wyeth, Carter Lang, Les Goodwin, Ivan Costello, BZ

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 69

Explanation and Analysis

After Maria takes out \$1,000 in cash to pay for her illicit abortion, she reflects back on her past lovers: Carter Lang, Les Goodwin, and Ivan Costello. She finds that she can remember all the details of her romantic past in vivid detail, she but comes to a cynical conclusion nonetheless: “she could remember it all but none of it seemed to come to anything. She had a sense the dream had ended and she had slept on.” Maria’s observation expands on her broader dismissive, disassociate relationship to the past. She regards her former lovers as she regards her childhood: thinking about the past is useless since it’s unchangeable, and dwelling on it gives her no clarity in her present life. This is what she means when she describes her reflections on past love affairs as failing “to come to anything.”

Further, she expresses a disillusionment with love and interpersonal relationships. One would think that a lifetime of intimate connections would mean something in the long run, and yet Maria is just a sad woman who has had the misfortune of becoming pregnant by an illicit affair. There’s no sanctity in whatever love she might have felt for Les Goodwin: it was simply a series of actions that have resulted in a consequence (the pregnancy) that she must deal with.

The last line of this passage illustrates Maria’s conviction in the meaninglessness of life. In likening life to sleep, Maria undermines the agency she has in controlling her own destiny: she sees herself as a sleepwalker, fumbling unconsciously through life and unable to control what problems come her way. When she states that “the dream had ended,” she is describing the moment she realized the extent of her powerlessness. It’s not that Maria has suddenly become less capable of controlling her life—it’s been this way the entire time, and she was only dreaming when she thought she could author her own life.

Maria’s observation is cynical. She’s essentially saying that a person can’t ever wake up or take control of their own lives, since powerlessness and meaninglessness are the default states of human existence. Maria thinks that people lack the capability to control or make meaningful their own lives, and that those who think otherwise are only dreaming—they are deluding themselves into believing in the illusion of control. This puts enlightened people like herself and BZ in a difficult position, because there’s nothing a person can do with this knowledge. They can’t wake, since sleeping is the default;

they can only choose to believe in the false dream of control.

Chapter 24 Quotes

●● Maria turned off the ignition and looked at the man in the white duck pants with an intense and grateful interest. In the past few minutes he had significantly altered her perception of reality: she saw now that she was not a woman on her way to have an abortion. She was a woman parking a Corvette outside a tract house while a man in white pants talked about buying a Camaro. There was no more to it than that.

Related Characters: Maria Wyeth (speaker), The Man in White

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 79

Explanation and Analysis

Maria meets “the man in the white duck pants” in a Thriftmart parking lot. They hop in her car (she drives), and he directs her to the house where she’ll receive an illicit abortion in a bedroom lined with newspaper. Up until now, Maria has only spoken with the men who have helped her arrange her illegal abortion over the phone, and their conversations have always been stilted and brief, spoken in a sterile, coded language.

Maria’s experience with this man is vastly different. From the moment he hops in her car, he speaks of light and airy nonsense: the mileage of her Corvette, the considerably worse mileage of his Camaro, and his plans for “buying a Camaro” anyway. Maria had become so accustomed to speaking in code with the scheduling men over the phone that she initially believes the man in white’s small talk must contain a secret, more nefarious message, which is why she is elated to find that “there was no more to it than that.”

Maria is surprised to find herself receiving this man’s company and mindless chatter “with an intense and grateful interest.” This situation—where small talk and surfaces is actually restorative, freeing, and “of grateful interest” to Maria—is a reversal of the norm. Usually, the superficiality that abounds her Hollywood social world makes her feel isolated and desperately sad. She’s constantly surrounded by people who make light of her suffering and trauma, when all she wants is to meaningfully connect.

But on this occasion, the man’s chatter is takes on an almost transcendental quality for Maria: “in the past few minutes he had significantly altered her perception of reality,” she

explains. Now, she's no longer "a woman on her way to have an abortion," but instead, "a woman parking a Corvette outside a tract house while a man in white pants talked about buying a Camaro." Unlike the backhanded and subtly cruel small talk Maria is often subjected to, this simple interaction provides her with a brief moment of solace for her to simply exist. "There [is] no more to it than that," however fleeting that moment might be.

Chapter 26 Quotes

☞ "I am just very very very tired of listening to you all."

Related Characters: Maria Wyeth (speaker), Les Goodwin, Susannah Wood, Helene, BZ, Carter Lang

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 85

Explanation and Analysis

Maria has dinner with Les Goodwin the evening after she aborts the baby he likely fathered. When Les discerns Maria's dismal mood and asks what is wrong with her, she doesn't tell him about the pregnancy and abortion, offering only that she is "just very very very tired of listening to you all." Maria's comment to Les foreshadows the remark she will make later on in Susannah Wood's motel room, when she tells the group of people gathered there—including Helene, Carter, and BZ—that listening to them all makes her feel ill.

Despite the fact that Maria is only speaking to Les, she addresses him using the second-person plural pronoun, "you all." In this way, she treats Les as a stand-in for all the disingenuous people in Hollywood who Maria has grown "tired of listening to." In this moment, she sees Les as just as superficial, uncaring, and unperceptive as everyone else she engages with in the industry.

Interestingly, Maria's comment is somewhat ironic within the larger context of this scene, since she's done considerably more of the talking than Les. Perhaps her indictment of "you all" is a reaction to what she has *not* had to listen to Les say—to the fact that he has not suspected the pregnancy or confronted Maria about it. Maria is "tired of listening" to Les and the rest of his crowd because of the jarring absence of sincerity and vulnerability in their words.

This scene also articulates an asymmetry in the burden Maria versus Les bears for the pregnancy that they're equally responsible for. While Maria is coerced into having a traumatic abortion that causes her to suffer from chronic

grief and emotional distresses, Les doesn't have to undergo any invasive procedure and remains blissfully ignorant of the child he likely fathered.

Chapter 27 Quotes

☞ That night as the plane taxied out onto the runway at McCarran Maria had kept her face pressed against the window for as long as she could see them, her mother and father and Benny Austin, waving at the wrong window.

Related Characters: Maria Wyeth (speaker), Harry Wyeth, Francine Wyeth, Benny Austin

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 88

Explanation and Analysis

Maria remembers the last time she saw her mother, Francine, alive. She had flown out to Silver Wells and shared a rather uncomfortable meal with her parents and Benny Austin, which had involved Benny telling Maria about Francine's depression, Maria expressing her homesickness, and Harry Wyeth lashing out at his apparently depressed wife. Finally, Maria recounts her final image of her mother, when from behind the window of an airplane she watched her parents and Benny Austin "waving at the wrong window."

This scene conveys the meaninglessness of life by illustrating a disconnect between Maria's parents' and Benny Austin's intentions versus the actual effect of their actions. Maria's parents and Benny had wanted to wave to Maria as her plane departed for New York, and they believe that they are doing so. Yet, as Maria confirms, they are in fact "waving at the wrong window," and so only fulfilling the intended effect of their actions symbolically. They are performing the gesture of a goodbye—and feeling the consequence of performing that sentimental gesture—and yet, their gesture doesn't fulfill its intended consequence for Maria.

Seeing her parents and Benny waving at the wrong window creates a distance between Maria and her parents rather than a closeness. It symbolically illustrates the pointlessness of connecting with others, suggesting that while a person can try to bridge the distance between themselves and others, that very distance—here, represented by the fact that the plane is too far away for Maria's parents to see which window she's behind—makes it more likely than not that those efforts will be ineffective and inadequate. People

want to think that symbolic actions have meaning: Maria wants to see some deeper symbolism in her parents and Benny waving her off, in remembering the final time she saw her mother alive. But the fact that they're waving at the wrong window empties their symbolic gesture of meaning.

Maria regards herself as someone who denies the existence of cause-and-effect relationships: she doesn't believe people can perform actions that result in predictable consequences. Here, she sees her parents' attempts to connect with her as a failure, only widening their disconnection from each other when they fail in their intention to say goodbye to her and wave at the wrong window.

Chapter 30 Quotes

☝☝ “Maria, I empathize. What you and Carter are going through, it tears my heart out. Believe me, I've been through it. Which is why I know that *work is the best medicine for things wrong in the private-life department*. And I don't want to sound like an agent, but ten percent of nothing doesn't pay the bar bill.” He laughed, and then looked at her. “A joke, Maria. Just a joke.”

Related Characters: Freddy Chaikin (speaker), Maria Wyeth, Carter Lang

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 91

Explanation and Analysis

Maria is out for drinks with her agent, Freddy Chaikin, who informs her of a role he's secured her on a television series. When Maria is indifferent, Freddy implores her to seize this opportunity to work. He argues that “*work is the best medicine for things wrong in the private-life department*,” implying that Maria should deal with her personal problems by not dealing with them: by becoming so distracted by work and professional success that she no longer has time to wallow over her unraveling marriage.

The values implicit in Freddy's advice reflect the Hollywood culture that has caused Maria to become disillusioned with life in the first place. Freddy sees the superficial appearance of fulfillment as an adequate substitute—a remedy even—for personal unfulfillment. His inability to remain candid and sympathetic to Maria reinforces his superficial priorities. Freddy begins by sympathizing with Maria, talking to her as though they are friends: “Maria, I empathize,” he assures her. “What you and Carter are going through, it tears my

heart out. Believe me, I've been through it.” However, Freddy undercuts his initial sympathy with his swift transition to business matters, as he reminds her that “ten percent of nothing doesn't pay the bar bill,” verifying to Maria that whatever advice he dispensed is coming not from a close friend but from a business associate, who is only spending time with her because he expects to be paid by her later.


Finally, Freddy's laughter and assurance that his words were “just a joke” underscore a common trait of nearly everyone Maria interacts with in Hollywood: a refusal to be serious, and an almost pathological need to treat everything as fodder for entertainment. Maria can't even mourn her failing marriage without someone trying to make a joke out of it.

Chapter 34 Quotes

☝☝ In the whole world there was not so much sedation as there was instantaneous peril.

Related Characters: Maria Wyeth, Carter Lang, Helene, BZ, Kate Lang

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 100

Explanation and Analysis

Maria spirals out of control in the aftermath of her abortion and an unhappy holiday visit with Kate, to the point that she stops reading newspapers. She can't bear to hear stories about children being injured and killed in horrific ways, having fallen into such perilous situations in the first place because their mothers were too “sedat[ed]” to look after them.

Maria meditates on these horrific new stories and thinks to herself, “in the whole world there was not so much sedation as there was instantaneous peril.” This passage resonates within Maria's broader views about life's meaninglessness and the arbitrary nature of tragedy. Maria's views oppose those espoused in the newspaper stories, which comment on the mothers' “sedation” as though to suggest that their inattentiveness or carelessness somehow caused peril to befall their children. In contrast, Maria sees perilous situations—a rattlesnake getting into a child's playpen, for instance—as arbitrary and largely unavoidable, moments of “instantaneous peril” that occur with too little warning for

any mother (sedated or otherwise) to reasonably prevent or sidestep.

This passage foreshadows the role Maria will later play in BZ's death, when she lies half-asleep next to him as he intentionally overdoses on pills, goes back to sleep, and wakes up to a room full of people reacting, in horror, to BZ's death. Furthermore, the news stories' insinuation that the mothers' "sedation" caused their children's deaths foreshadows the blame Helene and Carter will later cast on Maria when they frame her negligence as a contributing factor to BZ's death.

When Maria claims that the world is full of not "sedation" but "instantaneous peril" she is preemptively refuting Carter and Helene's claims, arguing instead that tragedies like BZ's death occur abundantly and unpredictably, irrespective of other people's attentiveness or inattentiveness. To Maria, matters of life and death are arbitrary, meaningless, and neither deserved nor undeserved.

Chapter 36 Quotes

☪☪ But the next morning when the shower seemed slow to drain she threw up in the toilet, and after she had stopped trembling packed the few things she had brought to Fountain Avenue and, in the driving rain, drove back to the house in Beverly Hills. There would be plumbing anywhere she went.

Related Characters: Maria Wyeth

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 104

Explanation and Analysis

Ever since having an abortion, Maria has had nightmares of backed-up plumbing, and her neuroses become so bad that she moves into an apartment after the pipes actually back up in her Beverly Hills home. Now, when "the shower seem[s] slow to drain" and it seems as if the same plumbing issues have followed her to her new apartment, she realizes what wishful thinking it was to imagine she could run away from her problems and returns home. Maria recognizes that "there would be plumbing anywhere she went."

The pipes Maria dreams about symbolize her reproductive system and are directly tied to the guilt and grief she feels after going through with an unwanted abortion. The reason she leaves her Beverly Hills home after the pipes become blocked is because she can't bear to confront these painful feelings and believes that avoiding anything that reminds

her of them will grant her temporary relief. This follows Maria's typical method of managing her hardships: avoidance and psychological suppression.

When she leaves her new apartment after suspecting that the pipes there are backed up as well, it's not an act of continued avoidance but an indicator that Maria has realized that avoiding her problems won't make them go away: her conclusion that "there would be plumbing anywhere she went" suggests that her problems will follow her wherever she goes, regardless of her efforts to suppress them.

Chapter 37 Quotes

☪☪ "You look like hell, Maria this isn't any excuse for you to fall apart, I mean a *divorce*. I've done it twice."

Related Characters: Helene (speaker), Maria Wyeth, Carter Lang, BZ

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 107

Explanation and Analysis

Maria and Helene eat lunch at the Bistro before heading to Maria and Carter's divorce hearing, at which Helene will be a witness. Helene, who has been distracted by gossip, suddenly notices Maria's haggard appearance. Rather than comfort Maria, who struggles to accept the reality of her failed marriage to Carter, Helene minimizes Maria's emotions in two ways. She first recasts the problem of Maria's internal grief as a problem of appearances. By commenting that Maria "look[s] like hell," Helene foregrounds Maria's looks over her emotional wellness. To Helene, it is a bigger tragedy for Maria's looks "to fall apart" than for her state of mind to deteriorate.

Helene's words also diminish the meaningfulness of human relationships. She insists that Maria's divorce is insignificant, citing her own history of having "done it twice" as proof that Maria is overreacting by reacting at all to the dissolution of her marriage. To Helene, a marriage—or any relationship—isn't a meaningful bond so much as a superficial accessory one can discard and replace to suit one's changing tastes. Helene's callous remarks to Maria underscore the superficiality of their social world, and they characterize her as selfish and uncaring. Her actions here are particularly significant in light of the comments she will make about Maria later on, in the aftermath of BZ's death. Helene casts Maria as a selfish, cruel woman whose self-

absorption enabled BZ's suicide, when in reality, Helene is one of the most self-absorbed, uncaring characters in the novel.

Chapter 46 Quotes

☝☝ She had watched them in supermarkets and she knew the signs. At seven o'clock on a Saturday evening they would be standing in the checkout line reading the horoscope in *Harper's Bazaar* and in their carts would be a single lamb chop and maybe two cans of cat food and the Sunday morning paper, the early edition with the comics wrapped outside. They would be very pretty some of the time, their skirts the right length and their sunglasses the right tint and maybe only a little vulnerable tightness around the mouth, but there they were, one lamb chop and some cat food and the morning paper. To avoid giving off the signs, Maria shopped always for a household, gallons of grapefruit juice, quarts of green chile salsa, dried lentils and alphabet noodles, rigatoni and canned yams, twenty-pound boxes of laundry detergent. She knew all the indices to the idle lonely, never bought a small tube of toothpaste, never dropped a magazine in her shopping cart. The house in Beverly Hills overflowed with sugar, corn-muffin mix, frozen roasts and Spanish onions. Maria ate cottage cheese.

Related Characters: Maria Wyeth

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 122-123

Explanation and Analysis

Maria's mental health sharply declines in the aftermath of her abortion, and she isolates herself from others, rarely leaving her house. In this passage, she describes the "idle lonely" she sees at the supermarket: women who live alone and are, she presumes, as "vulnerable" and miserable as she is. Maria goes into great detail in this passage, describing both the "indices" of these women and the vast measures she takes to avoid looking like one of them.

In her description of the "idle lonely," Maria paints a derogative and stereotypical picture of the life of an eternally sad and single aging woman: she reads magazines to replace having an active social life, cooks meals for one, and has only a cat to keep her company. The fact that these women "would be very pretty some of the time, their skirts the right length and their sunglasses the right tint and maybe only a little vulnerable tightness around the mouth" suggests that they are ashamed of their loneliness and put considerable effort into disguising the sad reality of their lives.

This shame is evidence of the considerable weight Maria's society places on lightheartedness, extroversion, and intimate relationships. These women know that society views their single status and social isolation as defects, so they try to conceal these things in themselves to avoid being pitied and ostracized. The "vulnerable tightness around the mouth" that Maria observes suggests that they, in turn, have internalized society's pitying gaze and have grown to see themselves as pitiful and defective.

Maria's own efforts for society not to see her as one of the "idle lonely" show her own internalized shame. She surpasses these other women's efforts to conceal her loneliness, "shop[ping] always for a household" in order to project image of social and familial fulfillment—when in reality, she lives alone, sees nobody, and eats only cottage cheese. For all of Maria's disillusionment with social norms and the contrived nature of Hollywood, she, too, is compelled to project a superficially happy external image to conceal her suffering.

Chapter 56 Quotes

☝☝ "Some people resist," he said. "Some people don't want to know."

Related Characters: The Hypnotist (speaker), Maria Wyeth, Carter Lang, Helene

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 143

Explanation and Analysis

Maria attends her final session with a hypnotist. The hypnotist has just suggested that Maria is not to blame for her failed career, which Maria ignores. As Maria leaves the hypnotist's office, he makes this final observation: "Some people resist," he said. "Some people don't want to know."

Taken literally, the hypnotist's observation refers to Maria's refusal to accept the deep, uncomfortable truths that the hypnotist has tried to make her realize about herself. He blames Maria's decision to end their sessions together (sessions for which Maria likely pays him a hefty fee) on her stubborn closedmindedness—her "resist[ance]" to see reality as it is. His observation foreshadows the conclusion Maria will reach by the end of the novel, which is that "some people don't want to know" the truth about the arbitrary meaninglessness of life. By this point, Maria has suffered through an unwanted abortion, a divorce, and a failed acting career, all of which have contributed to her disillusionment

with life. It's clear that she's losing interest in pretending that things are going well when they are really falling apart. Despite this—and as the hypnotist suggests in this passage—Maria remains unwilling to acknowledge her disillusionment consciously. In other words, she “resist[s]” acknowledging what she already believes to be true about life, which is that it is meaningless.

By the end of the novel, Maria will no longer “resist” her conviction in life's meaninglessness. In fact, she will later accuse Carter and Helene of being the type of people the hypnotist accuses her of being now: people who remain willfully, stubbornly ignorant to the bleak reality that they have no control over their own destinies, and that life itself is ultimately devoid of meaning.

Chapter 67 Quotes

☝ “Something bad is going to happen to me,” she said.

“Something bad is going to happen to all of us.”

She could hear a typewriter in the background. “I mean it. Take me somewhere.”

“You got a map of Peru?”

She said nothing.

“That's funny, Maria. That's a line from *Dark Passage*.”

“I know it.”

“I had a fight with Felicia at lunch, I've got to have a rewrite by tomorrow morning, I tell you something funny and you don't laugh.”

“When I want to hear something funny I'll call you up again.”

Related Characters: Les Goodwin, Maria Wyeth (speaker), Felicia Goodwin, Ivan Costello, Carter Lang

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 182

Explanation and Analysis

Maria calls Les Goodwin for help after fighting with Carter and then with Ivan Costello. But her strategy backfires when she argues with Les, too. Les scolds Maria for not being in a good mood: “I tell you something funny and you don't laugh,” he complains, when she is unreceptive to his reference to *Dark Passage* (a 1947 thriller about a woman who helps her romantic interest flee the country after he is accused of a crime).

Maria's conversation with Les illustrates the limitations of their love and their inability to connect meaningfully with

each other. Les refuses to take Maria's distress seriously, despite her repeated cries for help. “Something bad is going to happen to me” ought to be treated seriously on its own, but Maria expands on this foreboding message with an urgent plea for Les to “take [her] somewhere,” the subtext of which could easily be interpreted as Maria begging to be admitted to a hospital for fear that she will hurt herself. Despite Maria's repeated attempts to get through to Les, he refuses to take her seriously, the sound of “a typewriter in the background” implying that Maria's distress is less important than his work. Les's decision to respond to Maria's concerns with a joke further minimize her suffering.

Maria's response to Les, that she'll reach out “when [she] want[s] to hear something funny,” conveys her realization that comic relief and romantic distraction—methods she has relied on to temporarily relieve her suffering—are no longer effective. Her mental state has deteriorated to the extent that she can no longer bring herself to feign amusement at jokes she finds unfunny, or to seek solace in people in places that have nothing to offer her. When Maria tells Les that she'll call him the next time she “want[s] to hear something funny,” she is implicitly ending their relationship, since any love she had for her him was based on his ability to uplift and distract her from her unfulfilling life.

Chapter 71 Quotes

☝ “I don't like any of you,” she said. “You are all making me sick.”

Susannah Wood laughed.

“That's not funny, Maria,” Helene said.

“I mean sick. Physically sick.”

Helene picked up a jar from the clutter on Susannah Wood's dressing table and began smoothing cream onto Maria's shoulders. “If it's not funny don't say it, Maria.”

Related Characters: Maria Wyeth, Helene (speaker), Susannah Wood, Carter Lang, Johnny Waters/The Actor

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 190-191

Explanation and Analysis

Maria spends time with a group of people in Susannah Wood's motel room on set for filming Carter's latest film. Susannah makes a joke at Maria's expense, commenting on Maria's recent arrest for stealing Johnny Waters's car, but Maria responds to laugh along with Susannah, instead rising

to her feet and bluntly expressing her distaste for everyone in the room. “You are all making me sick,” she states. Maria’s blunt remarks, and Helene’s and Susannah Wood’s responses to them, highlight the superficiality inherent in Maria’s society, and people’s incapacity to register or cope with any words that aren’t spoken primarily for entertainment value. Thus far, Maria has been discrete about her growing disillusionment with Hollywood and lingering distaste for the shallow people in her social circle, so it’s understandable for Susannah to respond with laughter. It’s absurd for Maria to utter such a grave remark, particularly in light of the fact that the room’s atmosphere has been light and playful up until this point.

But when Maria doubles down on her remark, clarifying that everyone in the room makes her “physically sick,” the mood shifts as it becomes clear that Maria is deathly serious—and that this seriousness threatens to shatter the superficial illusion of lightness and ease on which this social circle is dependent. Without saying so, the whole room seems to realize that Maria has broken the unspoken social agreement at the center of their world: to keep the party going, smile through anything, and maintain the illusion of success and fulfillment. This is why Helene responds the way she does, essentially scolding Maria like a child who has acted out: “if it’s not funny don’t say it, Maria,” she says, reminding Maria of the conditions she must follow if she wants to remain part of their exclusive world.

and BZ laughs off her response as an attempt to appear hurt or bothered by the affair. Maria explains to BZ that her response is sincere, stating calmly, “it does make a difference to me.” But BZ refuses to believe Maria—or, at least, tries to convince her of what she hasn’t yet realized about herself. “You know it doesn’t,” BZ insists. “If you thought things like that mattered you’d be gone already. You’re not going anywhere.” Maria neither confirms nor denies BZ’s accusation, only ending her long silence to ask him to fix her a drink. Using alcohol and pills is one way Maria suppresses hardships that are too difficult for her to confront, so her request for BZ to bring her a drink implies that she has not come to grips with the emotional distress hearing about Carter and Helene’s affair has caused her.

Maria’s inner turmoil could be for one of two reasons. On the one hand, she could be upset by Carter and Helene’s affair, as she initially insisted to BZ that she was, and is now choosing to drink her pain away in silence. Maria has grown increasingly disillusioned with the superficiality and callousness of Hollywood and her social circle, so it would make sense that it “make[s] a difference to [her]” that her friend and estranged husband are having an affair. On the other hand, Maria could be upset by the fact that BZ’s criticisms ring true, forcing her to reckon with the fact that she is as unsentimental and fake as the very people whose callousness and superficiality she criticizes. After all, BZ makes a fair point in arguing that Maria would “be gone already” if she did care about anything.

This cynical exchange between BZ and Maria foreshadows the decisions they will soon be forced to make. Both characters are self-aware and critical of the heartless core of their world. If they want to criticize that world without perpetuating the very moral shortcomings they claim to resent, they will have to make the decision to compromise their morals and stay, or uphold their values and leave.

Chapter 72 Quotes

☝☝ “It does make a difference to me.”

“No,” BZ said. “It doesn’t.”

Maria stared out the window into the dry wash behind the motel.

“You know it doesn’t. If you thought things like that mattered you’d be gone already. You’re not going anywhere.”

“Why don’t you get me a drink,” Maria said finally.

Related Characters: Maria Wyeth, BZ (speaker), Carter Lang, Helene

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 195

Explanation and Analysis

BZ and Maria are in Maria’s motel room on set for Carter’s latest film when BZ informs Maria of Carter’s ongoing affair with Helene. Maria is shocked into silence by this revelation,

Chapter 74 Quotes

☝☝ *Always when I play back. My father’s voice it is with a professional rasp, it goes as it lays, don’t do it the hard way. My father advised me that life itself was a crap game.*

Related Characters: Maria Wyeth (speaker), Harry Wyeth, BZ

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 200

Explanation and Analysis

Maria recovers at a psychiatric facility in the aftermath of BZ's death. In an internal monologue, she recalls the advice that her father gave her when he taught her to assess a craps layout when she was 10 years old. Maria states, "*it goes at it lays, don't do it the hard way. My father advised me that life itself was a crap game.*" Maria's father, Harry Wyeth, was an optimist and a gambler, and he infused the lessons he taught Maria with the language of games.

This passage is important because it's related to the novel's title, *Play It as It Lays*. "*It goes as it lays,*" or play it as it lays, refers to playing the hand (or roll) that one is dealt. The advice Maria's father gives her is that she should accept things as they are rather than overcomplicate them in her quest for deeper meaning. Interpreted through a more optimistic lens, the expression means she should accept the life she has and make the most of it. Even though Maria eventually adopts a more cynical outlook on life, her father's advice forms the foundation of her personal brand of nihilism, and this foundation is what allows her to live in the aftermath of BZ's suicide. Whereas BZ ultimately commits suicide because he believes that life's meaninglessness makes the game not worth playing, Maria evokes her father's philosophy and continues to play then hand she was dealt despite life's meaninglessness.

Chapter 76 Quotes

☛☛ *If Carter and Helene want to think it happened because I was insane, I say let them. They have to lay it off on someone. Carter and Helene still believe in cause-effect. Carter and Helene also believe that people are either sane or insane.*

Related Characters: Maria Wyeth (speaker), Carter Lang, Helene, BZ

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 203

Explanation and Analysis

Chapter 76 consists of an internal monologue told from Maria's perspective while she recovers in a psychiatric facility in the aftermath of BZ's death. Here, Maria explains Carter and Helene's decision to blame Maria for the role her inaction played in BZ's death within the context of their misguided belief in "cause-effect." Helene and Carter believe that Maria is "insane" because this is the only explanation they can provide to account for her failure to intervene in BZ's suicide, which occurred as BZ lay beside Maria in her motel room, and which Maria may have been

able to prevent. Believing Maria to be "insane" also absolves them of any responsibility that they—and the toxic, superficial culture of Hollywood more broadly—have for contributing to BZ's unhappiness. Besides this, "lay[ing] it off on" Maria allows Carter and Helene to assign a "cause" to the unexplainably tragic event of BZ's death.

To Maria, Helene and Carter's attempts to explain anything stem from a broader misguided belief in "cause-effect," or in believing that all consequences can be traced to direct, logical causes. Maria sees Carter and Helene as the kind of people who believe that everything happens for a reason, and this logic leads them to repeatedly justify their own mistakes and relegate blame onto others. In contrast to Helene and Carter, Maria has a more dismal, nuanced vision of the world, in which not all effects have direct causes, and in which people don't have to be "either sane or insane." Maria doesn't believe that tragedies necessarily have to have reasons. She sees pain and suffering as detached from cause: in other words, a person doesn't have to deserve the cards that life deals them. Often, bad things happen regardless of whether one deserved what one got.

In claiming that people don't have to be "either sane or insane," Maria suggests that she arrived at her seemingly "insane" decision not to interfere in BZ's death by "sane" logic. BZ wanted to die for reasons that were justifiable to him, at the very least, and so Maria let him die. Maria's notion that people don't have to be "either sane or insane" also suggests that actions and behaviors that people regard as "insane" are very often perfectly "sane" responses to living in an "insane" world.

People frequently judge Maria for her erratic behavior, and yet, her actions often make sense. She is emotional because her life has been filled with senseless tragedy and disappointment, and she behaves erratically out of frustration with the people around her refusing to treat her with sympathy and compassion. Repeatedly, she looks to the people in her life for emotional connection and solidarity, and without fail, these people are too concerned with keeping up appearances to offer Maria any emotional support. In short, any sane person in Maria's shoes would probably lash out with frustration, and yet Maria is the one regarded as insane for doing so.

Chapter 82 Quotes

☞☞ *Carter and Helene still ask questions. I used to ask questions, and I got the answer: nothing. The answer is “nothing.” Now that I have the answer, my plans for the future are these: (1) get Kate, (2) live with Kate alone, (3) do some canning. Damson plums, apricot preserves. Sweet India relish and pickled peaches. Apple chutney. Summer squash succotash. There might even be a ready market for such canning: you will note that after everything I remain Harry and Francine Wyeth’s daughter and Benny Austin’s godchild. For all I know they knew the answer too, and pretended they didn’t. You call it as you see it, and stay in the action. BZ thought otherwise. If Carter and Helene aren’t careful they’ll get the answer too.*

Related Characters: Maria Wyeth (speaker), Helene, BZ, Francine Wyeth, Harry Wyeth, Benny Austin, Carter Lang

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 210

Explanation and Analysis

This is part of Maria’s internal monologue as she recovers in a psychiatric facility after the main events of the novel take place. Here, Maria responds to Helene and Carter’s repeated attempts to uncover why she failed to intervene in BZ’s death and relates her plans for the future. This section brings the novel full circle: “I used to ask questions” mirrors the opening lines of the book, in which Maria describes herself as a person who stopped asking questions after she learned that there are no answers. In other words, she stopped trying to find meaning and logic in tragedy once she realized that life is inherently meaningless. Maria reaffirms this earlier sentiment here when she states that “the answer is ‘nothing.’” The novel begins where it ends: with Maria supposedly recovering at the hospital, all the while holding firm to her cynical conviction in life’s meaninglessness.

When Maria states that “*Carter and Helene still ask questions*,” she sets them apart from herself, relegating them to the ignorant, unenlightened masses who still believe that there is logic or reason behind why suffering exists in the world. Not only do they believe that asking questions will provide them with answers, but also that those answers will comfort them. Maria knows that no answer exists that can sufficiently justify suffering or hardship to the extent that a person can make peace with tragedy.

Maria’s plans for the future are the only glimmer of hope that exists in a novel that is otherwise relentlessly bleak. She states that she will “*get Kate*,” live alone with her, and “*do some canning*.” The simplicity of Maria’s plans suggests a deeper desire to return to the simpler, slower way of life she

experienced in childhood. She embellishes on this idea when she comments on her entrepreneurial aspirations for canning, observing, “*after everything I remain Harry and Francine Wyeth’s daughter and Benny Austin’s godchild*.” In other words, despite her repeated efforts to disassociate from her past, the past remains inexorably within her. Rather than denying this connection—as she has done repeatedly over the course of the novel—she now chooses to embrace it.

Maria’s newfound openness to her past presents a possible avenue for recovery. In the very least, it offers her a less self-destructive way to live out the rest of her days, however meaningless she might deem them to be. After all, she entertains the possibility that her parents, too, saw the meaninglessness of life “*and pretended they didn’t*.”

In the end, Maria takes a practical stance toward life, arguing that a person really only has two options: to “*call it as you see it, and stay in the action*,” or else exit life altogether, as BZ chose to do when he committed suicide. The frank manner in which Maria offers these two possibilities shows that she honors no choice above the other, which reinforces the idea that her decision to live isn’t a hopeful affirmation of life, so much as it is a decision she makes at random. It upholds her conviction in life’s meaninglessness: life is so pointless, and her own existence itself so insignificant, that the choice of life versus death is as meaningless as flipping a coin.

Chapter 83 Quotes

☞☞ She took his hand and held it. “Why are you here.”
“Because you and I, we know something. Because we’ve been out there where nothing is. Because I wanted—you know why.”

Related Characters: Maria Wyeth, BZ (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 212

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, BZ implicitly informs Maria of his intent to commit suicide. BZ establishes himself and Maria as kindred spirits, acknowledging that they both “*know something*,” having both “*been out there where nothing is*,” and having both arrived at the bleak realization that life is meaningless. The vague, fragmented quality of BZ’s words only deepens their impact: he and Maria are so intellectually

synchronized that BZ need not finish his sentences for Maria to intuit what he's trying to say.

This moment is also important because it implicates Maria in BZ's death. At the very least, it shows that BZ, however vaguely, tries to inform Maria of his plans, which Maria ultimately chooses not to thwart when she does not call for help after BZ overdoses on pills. "Because I wanted—you know why" is BZ's statement of purpose to Maria. Over the course of the novel, the two characters have confided in each other about their shared disillusionment with life. They're both tired of maintaining the illusion of happiness that so directly contradicts their inner feelings of dissatisfaction and existential woe.

Having confided in each other as they have over the course of the novel, it's reasonable for BZ to assume that Maria "know[s] why" he has come to her room tonight, and what his intentions are when he washes down a bottle of pills with a bottle of vodka. This moment, and Maria's subsequent decision to fall back asleep after she sees BZ take the pills, provide ample evidence that she was privy to and could have stopped BZ's suicide—but that she willfully chose to let him go through with his plans.

This, in turn, conveys the extent of Maria's passivity, which is one of her defining characteristics and the primary way she responds to life's meaninglessness. Because she believes that nothing matters, she believes that nothing she does (or doesn't do) matters. Therefore, she never takes control of her life or acts with any degree of intention. Letting her friend die is just the latest in a long stretch of inaction.

Chapter 84 Quotes

●● I know what "nothing" means, and I keep on playing.

Why, BZ would say.

Why not, I say.

Related Characters: Maria Wyeth, BZ (speaker), Harry Wyeth

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 214

Explanation and Analysis

These are the last lines of the novel. Maria, confined to a psychiatric facility in the aftermath of BZ's death, meditates on the contradictory nature of her decision to continue living despite being fully aware of life's meaninglessness. Maria and BZ are the only two characters to acknowledge life's inherent meaninglessness, which is what Maria refers to when she claims to "know what 'nothing' means." However, while BZ's realization ultimately motivates him to commit suicide, Maria chooses to "keep on playing," which references her father's advice to her about playing it as it lays, or accepting things as they are.

To explain her decision, Maria imagines a hypothetical conversation between herself and BZ. In response to BZ's question of "why" she chooses life, Maria responds "why not." Maria's words are not a positive affirmation of life. Rather, they reflect her complete indifference to it: she finds so little meaning in everything that she cannot extend the effort to care about her own life enough to end it. Maria's decision not to commit suicide isn't a renewed lease on life so much as yet another instance of the unceasing passivity she has demonstrated over the course of the novel. And yet, she "keep[s] on playing." BZ's death hasn't instilled in Maria the value of life; rather, it has shown her that death is just as pointless as life. Maria's decision to "keep on playing" is neither an affirmation of life nor a condemnation of death; rather, it is an amoral gesture simply to accept what lays before her.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

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

MARIA

Some people might ask the question “What makes Iago evil?” but the narrator isn’t one of them. She doesn’t ask questions about **snakes**, either, though she presently wonders to herself why a coral snake is toxic when a king snake, which looks so similar, is not. She recalls a news story she read about two honeymooners found dead in their camper in Boca Raton, a coral snake still curled up in their blankets.

The narrator no longer asks many questions about life, deciding that “to look for ‘reasons’ is beside the point.” Even so, “the pursuit of reasons” is the whole point of her stay “here.” The narrator, who now refers to herself as Maria, recalls a series of questions the people here have asked her, which involve her love life, “bad sexual conduct,” and seeing a phallus in an inkblot. Maria wrote “NOTHING APPLIES” in response to these questions, but this only presented her with additional questions to answer. Still, in an effort “to be an agreeable player of the game,” Maria tries to cooperate with her questioners, offering explanations for her actions. For instance, Kate is the only reason Maria “bother[s]” anymore.

Maria’s questioners told her that if she wants to find the “reasons” why, she must first establish the basic facts, and she now presents some of these facts to the audience: her name is Mara Wyeth, though some people here call her “Mrs. Lang.” She is 31, divorced, and has a four-year-old daughter named Kate who is institutionalized due to a bad chemical in her brain and something “soft” in her spine.

*Iago is the antagonist of Shakespeare’s [Othello](#), a tragedy in which Iago slowly manipulates Othello, the play’s protagonist, into murdering his wife in a fit of jealous rage. What makes Iago such a compelling villain is his lack of discernable motivation for antagonizing Othello. When the narrator of *Play It as It Lays* claims not to ask “what makes Iago evil,” she suggests that it’s not important to her why people act the way they do—or that they don’t need a reason to explain their actions in the first place. Her observation about poisonous coral snakes versus the harmless king snakes supports this latter hypothesis: given how similar the snakes appear, it’s almost random that one snake is deadly and the other is not.*



Maria’s observation that “to look for ‘reasons’ is beside the point” reaffirms that she finds most actions and consequences to be arbitrary and impossible to justify. The fact that she’s in a place where people ask her questions about inkblots (which likely refers to a Rorschach test, now considered an outdated psychotherapeutic assessment) and her sexuality implies that she’s in some kind of psychiatric facility. It’s not clear why she is there, but her indifferent answers to questions might suggest that she has become depressed or at least disillusioned with life. Indeed, she views life (or at least being institutionalized) as a “game” she’s playing. It’s not clear who Kate is, either, though if Kate is the only reason Maria “bother[s]” anymore, she must be important to her.



People’s instinct to refer to Maria as Mrs. Lang, likely her married name, shows how entrenched her identity is in being a wife. Being married irreparably changes how people see her, to the extent that she continues to be seen as an extension of her husband, even after they are divorced. Maria reveals that Kate is her daughter, and that she has serious birth defects or disabilities.



Maria continues to recount her personal history. She got her good looks and tendency to get migraines from her mother, and her optimism from her father, though recently she hasn't been all that optimistic. After Maria's father gambled away their house in Reno, the family move to a Nevada small town called Silver Wells (population 28), which her father owned, though he couldn't remember how the town fell into his hands.

Many things "came and went" in Maria's life, such as her family's cattle ranch, a ski resort, and a motel. In Silver Wells, Maria's family would eventually have 300 acres of mesquite, houses, a gas station, a zinc mine. Eventually, after her father and his partner, Benny Austin, vowed to make Silver Wells a tourist hotspot, there was a mini golf course, reptile museum, and restaurant with a few slot machines and games.

Paulette ran the restaurant (though it never had any customers) and had an affair with Maria's father (something Maria only now realizes). Things went downhill when a highway that was supposed to pass through Silver Wells was never built, Maria's father's money ran out, her mother got sick, and Benny Austin returned to Las Vegas. Today, Silver Wells no longer exists and is part of a missile range.

Years later, Maria ran into Benny at the Flamingo, and he told her that her father's only mistake was being ahead of his time. He ordered them Cuba Libres to drink, and Maria gave him money to play the slots for her and leaves. Later, she imagines that she left because she didn't want Benny to see the man she was with—someone who played "baccarat with hundred-dollar bills." But in reality, she left because she "ha[d] trouble with *as it was*."

Maria laments how dwelling on the past "leads nowhere." She remembers her mother sitting with Benny in the empty restaurant on a sweltering day, thumbing through magazines to find contests they could enter to win a vacation. Maria observes that her mother's pipe dreams "suffused our life like nerve gas." She remembers driving down long stretches of empty highway with her parents, her father storing a bottle of Jim Beam on the ground and talking about all his plans. Maria, in contrast, has never had any plans.

Despite inheriting certain traits from her parents, Maria seems to have a shaky and unreliable relationship to her past—for example, she has lost her father's optimism.



The way things "came and went" throughout Maria's childhood may have deprived her of the consistency and stability, which is perhaps why she isn't optimistic in adulthood. Maria's father and Benny Austin seem to have had big dreams of Silver Wells that never quite materialized, which might also have instilled in Maria a cynical disillusionment with life.



Maria's comment about only now realizing that her father was having an affair with Paulette suggests a disparity between the superficially happy exterior of her parents' marriage and the more subtle problems that are only apparent to Maria as a more experienced and discerning adult. That Silver Wells has been demolished and replaced by a missile range places a metaphorical barrier between Maria's past and present. In a sense, the destruction of her town represents the destruction of her past and, by extension, her ability to connect meaningfully with it.



Maria appears to use the phrase "as it was" to refer to her past in Silver Wells, and her "trouble" with again suggests that she's unable to connect with it. Indeed, she abandons Benny in the casino because he reminds her of her childhood in Silver Wells.



Maria's insistence that dwelling on the past "leads nowhere" characterizes her as practical, unsentimental, and uninterested in fixating on people and places that no longer exist. Maria also seems to have an issue with the future: unlike her parents, both of whom she remembers for their lofty dreams, she has no plans and dreams of nothing. This establishes her as a meandering, rather purposeless person. At some point in her life, she became a lost soul, with neither the traditions of her past nor plans for the future to anchor her to reality.



Maria changes the subject now to recall New York, where she moved when she was 18 to take acting lessons. Her parents supported the idea, hoping things would work out and they could “be regular airline passengers between Las Vegas and New York City.” One of the last times Maria ever saw her mother was at the airport the day she first left for New York. Dwelling on the past reinvigorates Maria’s desire not to think “about how everything goes.”

The way Maria’s parents envision her acting career is just as lofty and idealized as all their plans for Silver Wells. They imagine a charmed world in which they can “be regular airline passengers between Las Vegas and New York City,” almost magically transporting themselves from their small town to a more cosmopolitan life. Maria’s comment about the day she left for New York being one of the last times she saw her mother implies that her mother died many years ago. Maria’s insistence about not thinking “about how everything goes” also suggests that she has tragic or painful associations with her past, perhaps because of her mother’s death.



In New York, it was decided that Maria was acceptably beautiful. Someone took her photo, and shortly thereafter, she was making \$100 an hour from agencies and \$50 an hour from magazines, and she entered into the bustling social scene of the rich and famous. She was with a “rich boy” at a bar, the old Morocco, when her mother ran her car off the road. Coyotes scavenged her body before anyone could find her. Maria thinks back to Benny’s happy recollections of the “good thing [they had] going in Silver Wells” and wonders if this is true, if she should never have left. But she decides it’s useless to think this way, since, as she told Benny, “*there is no Silver Wells.*”

Almost overnight, Maria is transported from the sleepy town of Silver Wells to a world populated by beautiful, rich, and famous people. In so doing, she metaphorically severs ties with her past. Maria’s mother’s death destroys this illusion, however, and forces her to reckon with place and people she has abandoned to live this new life in New York. This is, perhaps, why she feels so detached from her past, and why she insists to Benny that “there is no Silver Wells”—because to acknowledge the past would be to acknowledge her guilt.



Maria remembers a letter her father wrote to her, which she can only read when she’s drunk—which she never is, because it’s prohibited where she is now. In the letter, he says that although God dealt them a bad hand, Maria shouldn’t let that set her back, since she’s “holding all the aces.” After this, Maria’s life took a downward turn, and she was ordered to go to Montego Bay to recover. But she had trouble sleeping alone, things weren’t going well with Ivan Costello, “and everything showed in the camera.” She didn’t go back to Nevada that year. Instead, she left Ivan and married Carter, who put her in a couple movies, though only one was distributed.

The gambling metaphors Maria’s father employs in his advice to Maria introduces the idea that life is a game, and that one must strategize accordingly. This hearkens back to Maria’s statement at the beginning of the novel that she’s trying to be an “agreeable player of the game.” His advice for Maria not to forget that she’s “holding all the aces” exemplifies his optimism. He’s telling Maria that despite the bad hand she’s been dealt by having to suffer through her mother’s death, she’s fortunate enough to have a successful career as an actress and should make the most of it. Maria doesn’t heed her father’s advice, though: her admission that “everything showed in the camera” reveals that her grief inhibited her ability to act, which put her career on hold. Grief further derails her life: she breaks up with one lover (Ivan), marries another (Carter), and appears not to have had very much success as an actress since. Clearly, Maria’s mother’s death was one of the pivotal moments of her life.



Maria doesn't remember what happened after that year but does recall going to Nevada on many occasions. By that point, though, her father was already dead, and her marriage was over. Presently, Maria lies in the sun and plays solitaire. There's a sea down the cliff, though she's not allowed to swim unsupervised. She tries not to think about her past. She thinks about what her father wrote, about how she's "holding all the aces," but she wonders what game she's supposed to be playing.

Maria's many trips to Nevada in the aftermath of her mother's death suggest a serious attempt to reconcile with the unresolved guilt she has about abandoning Silver Wells for New York. However, since her father's death, there's nothing in Nevada for her to return to, which complicates this healing process. Maria's observation about not knowing which game she's playing when she supposedly "hold[s] all the aces" suggests that she lost something integral to her sense of self when she left home.



HELENE

Helene tried to see Maria today, for Carter's sake, loading up a car full of books and some of Maria's other personal effects, including a letter from Ivan Costello and a *New York Times* article about Carter (though Maria has always resented Carter's success, Helene muses.)

Helene seems determined to rub Maria's failures in her face by bringing her items that will remind her of her former lovers and their failed relationships. At the very least, Helene doesn't seem to be a particularly sensitive, thoughtful person.



In the end, Maria wouldn't see Helene, though Helene could spot Maria sunbathing in a bikini—the same one she wore “the summer she killed BZ.” Helene scornfully observes how Maria, like all selfish women, never gains any weight. Though Helene insists that she doesn't blame Maria for anything that happened to her, she thinks that it's *she* who should be resting, because it was she who lost BZ “through [Maria's] carelessness.”

Helene's spiteful comments about Maria suggest that something has created tension between them. Helene mentions that Maria “killed BZ.” If Maria did murder someone, she would probably be in a prison rather than a psychiatric facility, so there has to be more to the story than Helene is letting on. Helene's version of events seems skewed toward painting herself in a favorable light. That Helene equates Maria's trim physique with selfishness paints Helene as a superficial person who is overly concerned with appearances. Lastly, Helene seems to see herself as a victim, blaming Maria and “[Maria's] carelessness” for killing BZ.



CARTER

Carter thinks about memories that are seared into his mind. In one, he and Maria were at a dinner party with their friends—though Maria, who “has never understood friendship,” would counter that they weren't really *her* friends. In Carter's memory, he tells someone that he “always goes out for breakfast,” which prompts Maria to mutter this isn't even slightly true—that he hasn't been out to breakfast since April. This makes the other dinner guests (with the exception of BZ) feel uncomfortable and turn away.

Carter's comment that Maria “never understood friendship” depicts Maria as alienated or misunderstood. His anecdote about Maria publicly correcting his white lie about suggests that she has little patience for pretense. That Maria's odd social behavior doesn't faze BZ suggests a closeness between the two of them—perhaps BZ appreciates Maria's oddness and sincerity in ways the others do not.



In another memory, Maria and the baby play with a hose in the yard. Carter had warned Maria not to let the baby “get chilled,” which prompted Maria to walk away from the baby, telling child calmly, “your father wants to talk to you.” Carter would replay these scenes in his mind after BZ’s death but could never find a “pattern.”

The baby Carter refers to is likely Kate, though Carter doesn’t refer to her by name, which could suggest that he’s not particularly invested in fatherhood. This entire scene between Kate, Maria, and Carter is stilted and uncomfortable. Carter offers this vignette as evidence of Maria’s standoffishness, yet he betrays his own detachment from his family by not referring to Kate by name. Carter wants to find a “pattern” in Maria’s behavior, to justify or explain whatever role she played in BZ’s death.



CHAPTER 1

The fall after she and Carter broke up, Maria would dress each morning and drive south on the highway, from Beverly Hills down to the Harbor. She slept beside the pool in those days, beneath beach towels. In order to avoid slipping “toward something unnameable,” toward an existence of “slovenliness past the point of return,” she told herself that she’d only sleep outside until it was too cold to sleep only with beach towels. Sleeping outside was only a “temporary [...] arrangement.”

Maria sees her new habit of sleeping outside as evidence that she is losing touch with reality; it’s clear that she’s not handling her separation from Carter very well. Maria’s anxieties about “slovenliness” reflect the importance her society places on appearances. Maria insists that sleeping outside is a “temporary [...] arrangement” to show that she is aware of her crumbling mental state and determined not to let things get out of hand.



Maria would bring a hard-boiled egg with her on her highway journeys, placing it on the passenger seat of the Corvette, cracking and peeling its shell as she drove. She’d drink Coca-Cola at gas stations, placing the empty bottles back on the rack, intentionally trying to make the attendants notice her doing so, and then she’d ask them questions about car maintenance “to hear her own voice” before resuming her drive. The first month that fall, she put 7,000 miles on the car.

This passage is another example of Maria wanting to project a certain image to others: she makes sure the gas station attendants see her place her empty bottle back on the rack to appear conscientious and put-together. That Maria speaks to the attendants just to hear herself suggests that she fears she is losing touch with reality and wants to “hear her own voice” to will herself back to sanity. Maria’s intense driving habit implies an inner desire to run—or in this case, drive—away from her troubles.



Some nights, Maria would have panicked dreams about Les Goodwin in New York, or Carter and BZ and Helene in the **desert** together, but she’d never have such thoughts while she was driving.

It’s not yet clear who Les Goodwin is, but given that Maria is dreaming about him, he seems to have been an important figure in her life at some point. Maria’s passing comment about having panicked dreams about Carter, BZ, and Helene in the desert establishes a connection between the desert and Maria’s unresolved conflicts.



CHAPTER 2

The second film Maria made with Carter was *Angel Beach*. She played a girl who was raped by a motorcycle gang. Maria saw the film twice, though she never recognized herself as the girl. Carter's original ending featured a shot of the motorcycle gang "as if they represented some reality not fully appreciated by the girl," but the studio ended the film with a long shot of Maria walking across a campus, which was the ending Maria preferred. Maria liked the film, because the girl seemed able to "control[] her own destiny."

The other film of Carter's that Maria worked on was *Maria*, which involved Carter filming Maria as she went about her day in New York—talking on the phone, doing a photo shoot, sleeping on a couch at a party. The film ended in negative film, with Maria appearing dead. It won a festival award and was popular with UCLA and USC students, who talked among themselves of "using" Maria the way commercial directors talked about using A-list actresses. When students would approach Carter while her and Maria were out, they would talk to Carter and only glance at Maria, who had nothing to say to them.

One night, when Maria and Carter went to BZ and Helene's, BZ started playing the film on a projector. Maria immediately became ill and sat outside smoking cigarettes while the rest of the group watched the film. Later, Maria asked Carter why BZ played the film so often, and Carter said that BZ wanted Helene to see it. When Maria insisted that Helene didn't even like the film, Carter frustratedly told Maria that she "[didn't] understand anything" before going to bed without another word. Maria decides that she doesn't "want to understand" anything about BZ's motivations.

CHAPTER 3

Maria repeats her name to Freddy Chaikin's receptionist. She feels suddenly insecure about coming here without an appointment, since it's something that "only people in trouble" do, and she doesn't want Freddy to start avoiding her. When the receptionist tells Maria that Freddy is in the projection room, Maria says she'll talk to him tomorrow and leaves.

Maria can't relate to her self-assured character in Angel Beach because she can't "control[] her own destiny." Carter's preferred ending for the film, in which "reality [is] not fully appreciated by the girl" dehumanizes the character. In fact, Carter's dehumanizing treatment of Maria's character could suggest that he's not particularly fond of women in general.



Carter dehumanizes Maria in Maria, as well, essentially following her around until she appears dead on screen—almost as though he's stalking and hunting his prey. The vastly different reactions Maria and Carter receive from the film's fans implies a sexist attitude inherent in the culture. The college students speak of Carter "using" Maria, language that objectifies her and deprives her of bodily and artistic autonomy. Maria's comparison of these students to commercial directors suggests that mistreatment and dehumanization of actresses is as common in art filmmaking as it is in the stereotypically seedy commercial film world.



Carter refuses to validate Maria's discomfort at being the object of spectatorship; he dismisses her misgivings on the grounds that she simply "doesn't understand anything." This scene depicts Carter as an uncaring, belittling husband. It also suggests that he is thin-skinned and easily upset by the slightest critique of his work. BZ's reasons for showing Helene the film are vague, but it might be some kind of power play intended to make Helene feel uncomfortable or jealous of Maria.



Maria is nervous about going to Freddy Chaikin's office because she'll appear desperate and "in trouble," and she knows that it is essential to keep up appearances in her industry.



In the elevator, Maria sees an actor she recognizes with his agent. The agent smiles at her and raves about Carter's dailies. Maria smiles back but recognizes the agent's words as a signal to the actor, who pauses before telling Maria that her purse is open, giving her a look of "sexual appreciation." Maria knows that the actor's look is directed at "Carter Lang's wife," rather than at Maria herself.

The actor's look of "sexual appreciation" objectifies Maria. In viewing her as "Carter Lang's wife," the actor deprives her of personal agency, transforming her from an individual into Carter's possession.



When Maria returns home, she thinks about calling Les Goodwin to tell him about the interaction with the actor but thinks better of it. Instead, she goes upstairs and lays down on Kate's bed, clutching her blanket and trying to push aside her feelings of "dread."

Maria thinks about Les Goodwin often, but she seems determined to push away these thoughts. Kate's absence, meanwhile, deeply affects Maria: Maria surrounds herself with Kate's things to feel closer to her and to avoid being consumed by "dread."



CHAPTER 4

It's a hot, October evening—the time of day when all around town, "pretty women" don perfume and bracelets before "kissing the pretty children goodnight." Maria sits on a chaise and watches BZ throw ice cubes from his drink into the pool. They trade bits of Hollywood gossip. Not wanting BZ to leave, Maria asks him who he's hanging around with these days, though she doesn't much care about the answer. BZ is a producer on Carter's film, but he hasn't mentioned Carter once. Maria begs BZ not to leave, but he tells her he has to meet someone. When Maria asks who, BZ says Tommy Loew. Maria tells BZ she wasn't taking about *him*.

Maria's hypothetical image of the "pretty women" who "kiss[] the pretty children goodnight" is idyllic and superficial, and it likely resembles the reality she wishes she could have with Kate. Another apparent side effect of Maria's recent separation from Carter is her apprehension about being alone: she continues a boring conversation with BZ so that he'll stay a little longer. Maria probably asks BZ "who is it" to ascertain which actress Carter is sleeping with these days, but BZ refuses to play along.



BZ tells Maria to drop it and let Carter finish his film. He says that Carter desperately wanted her to be in his film and really isn't out to get her. He begs her not to be like his mother, Carlotta, who is enormously rich and perpetually engaged in legal battles with her estranged second husband.

Carter and Maria's respective careers appear to have gone in different directions since their separation. While Carter is making films, BZ insinuates that Maria is on her way to becoming an embittered, greedy ex-wife.



BZ hears music coming from the Kuliks' house and asks Maria if she's going to their party. Maria defensively tells BZ she isn't, since Larry Kulik is a lawyer "for gangsters." BZ groans at Maria's humorlessness and reminds her that Larry Kulik is a big fan of hers. Apparently, he once told Carter that what he likes Maria because "she's not a cunt." BZ changes the subject, inquiring after Les Goodwin. Maria tells BZ that Les and Felicia are in New York before ushering him out to get to his meeting with Tommy Loew.

In calling Larry Kulik a lawyer "for gangsters," Maria insinuates that Kulik is an unethical man. His use of a profane, misogynistic word to describe women (though not Maria) reaffirms his seediness. BZ insinuates that Kulik's remark about liking Maria because "she's not a cunt" is supposed to be a humorous compliment, which frames the disrespectful treatment of women as an accepted part of this culture. Still, BZ's comments about Kulik are tongue-in-cheek, and he seems to validate Maria's distaste for him while reminding her that she has a social and professional obligation to humor the important people in their social circle. Maria pushes BZ out the door after he mentions Les Goodwin and Felicia, which implies that she doesn't want to talk about them. It seems likely Les and Maria may have had a romantic relationship at some point.



Later in the week, Maria reads in the paper that BZ had attended the Kuliks' party with Tommy Loew and an actress, which annoys Maria, though she doesn't know why. She wonders if Tommy and the actress went back to BZ's after the party, "who had watched whom," and if Helene had returned from her trip to La Costa.

Maria thinks it's hypocritical of BZ to socialize with people he knows are unsavory. Her question of "who had watched whom" hints that BZ may not be heterosexual: she's wondering if Tommy and the actress had sex, or if Tommy and BZ had sex.



CHAPTER 5

Freddy calls Maria and tells her he's surprised that she wants to work again, especially after the incident last year with Mark Ross, where she walked off the set. Still, Freddy says he's happy to represent both Maria and Carter and offers to show Morty Landau "some film" of Maria's. Maria is appalled at Freddy's suggestion, since Morty is a television director. Freddy reminds Maria that Carter, too, would encourage her to take any roles she can get. Freddy's tone becomes suddenly gentle after mentioning Carter.

The fact that Freddy can only secure Maria roles for television implies that her erratic behavior negatively affected her career. Carter and Maria's separation seems to have taken a much greater toll on Maria—personally and professionally—than it has on Carter.



CHAPTER 6

It's October 10, and Maria is in Baker, which is farther than she intended to travel. That morning, she drove out the San Bernardino, up the Barstow, and continued on from there. Now, it's 115°F out, and Maria is within 60 miles of Carter's filming location in Las Vegas. She imagines him in the motel, having a drink with BZ and Helene. She imagines calling Carter to say she's in Baker, and Carter telling her to come over. But Maria doesn't know what Carter would actually say if she called, or even if she'd want to hear what he would say.

Maria drives aimlessly to avoid thinking about her problems, yet today's drive to Baker brings her closer to what is possibly her biggest problem, these days: her estranged husband. Maria seems to be drawn unconsciously to Carter in spite of her best efforts to disassociate from him.



Maria pulls off the highway into a gas station and stares at the payphone, imagining dialing Carter, and Carter telling her that her call ruined his day. She imagines Carter telling her to just kill herself already. She remembers when they tried to reconcile their relationship only to end up sleeping in separate rooms, and the self-pity she'd felt wishing she could just leave. Sun beats down on Maria's head as she drives home. This would be the last time Maria would drive on the freeway, "except as a way of getting somewhere."

Maria unconsciously wants to confront Carter and gain closure, but she refuses to call him. She resolves not to drive again, "except as a way of getting somewhere" to avoid putting herself in another situation where she's tempted to reach out to him. It seems likely that getting close to Carter was (perhaps unconsciously) Maria's goal in taking these aimless drives all along.



CHAPTER 7

It's afternoon. Maria awakens to a phone call from BZ, who is at the beach, since a fire shut down production for a week. BZ tells Maria he'll take her to Anita Garson's tonight, since Helene is bedridden and "depressed." Maria hesitates. BZ mocks her, asking if she has other plans to meet Les at a hotel. When Maria is silent, BZ insists that he knows Maria and Les Goodwin are only friends. Maria tells BZ she'll see him later.

Later, Maria chides herself for being bullied into going to Anita Garson's loud, crowded party. A rock band plays in a pink tent outside, where Maria stands next to BZ. Larry Kulik absentmindedly asks Maria about Carter while he ogles a young girl in a halter dancing on the terrace.

Maria and BZ sit at a table on the terrace for dinner, where two French filmmakers and a pair of English lesbians join them. BZ and the French director discretely leave together during the dinner, and Maria tries to talk to the cinematographer, but he doesn't speak any English.

Larry Kulik passes by the table and invites Maria to come over and use his sauna. Later that night, BZ informs Maria that he's bringing the French director, Larry Kulik, and the halter dress girl back to his place, but Maria says she has to get home. BZ tells her she isn't all that fun tonight anyway, and Maria turns away so he won't see her tears.

When Les Goodwin calls her the next morning, Maria begins to cry once more. He asks her why she's crying, and she lies and says it's because "he ma[kes] her so happy."

BZ adopts a wry tone when he talks about how "depressed" Helene is, insinuating that Helene is putting on a show and only pouting to get attention. BZ's comments give more clarity to the nature of Maria and Les's relationship, insinuating that they are lovers. Maria appears to be ashamed or uncomfortable about the relationship with Les, which is why BZ pretends to believe that Les and Maria are only friends.



Maria's boredom at the party further illustrates how alienated she feels from the people in her social circle, who seem primarily interested in parties and superficial appearances.



BZ and the director's discrete departure implies that they've left to engage in some intimate act. Again, BZ's homosexuality seems to be tolerated but not spoken about.



Larry Kulik's invitation for Maria to use his sauna is most likely a coded way of propositioning her for sex. Nobody seems to have any patience for Maria's depression—even BZ, who seems to be her only genuine friend, rejects her when she shows signs of boredom or emotional vulnerability.



Les's phone call confirms that their relationship is ongoing. Maria's tears show that she isn't actually "happy," but she lies because she sees value in convincing Les—and herself—that she is. She wants to believe that a love affair with Les can function as a path toward happiness and recovery.



CHAPTER 8

Later on, BZ tells Maria about his successful evening after leaving Anita's party, and that "everybody got what he came for." Maria asks BZ if he "get[s] tired of doing favors for people," and BZ pauses before saying that yes, he does.

When BZ tells Maria that "everybody got what he came for," he wryly acknowledges his participation in a social system in which people shamelessly use, exploit, and manipulate one another. Though BZ is often at the center of this ugly, exploitive world, he admits that he "get[s] tired of doing favors for people," which reveals that there's a sad, disillusioned side to BZ that he hides from the world.



CHAPTER 9

Carter is sitting in the living room. Maria notes that he's gained some weight. She asks him if he's going to stay, and he makes a comment about all his stuff being there. Maria realizes that Carter's response hasn't really answered her question and realizes how often she feels like Ingrid Bergman in *Gaslight* when she's around him. When Maria pushes Carter for a clearer response, he tells her he'll stay if Maria wants him to stay. Maria decides that can try to make things work, though she doesn't think it's a great idea.

*Like many other characters, Maria's impression of Carter (after apparently not seeing him for some time) involves his physical appearance. *Gaslight* is a 1944 film about a man who manipulates his wife into believing she has gone insane; it's where the term "gaslighting" comes from. In referencing the film, Maria implies that Carter is emotionally abusive. Carter demonstrates such manipulative behavior when he suggests getting back together before immediately insinuating that it was Maria's idea to do so. Maria's decision to rekindle the relationship in spite of her own misgivings demonstrates the effectiveness of Carter's psychological manipulation.*



Carter goes upstairs. Maria pauses a moment before following him to their room. Maria tells him about her plans to see Kate. Carter confronts Maria about visiting Kate multiple times since Sunday and tells her he received a complaint from the hospital about her showing up unannounced. Maria pins back her hair and looks in the mirror. She sees Carter behind her and realizes that she's become "anesthetized" in his presence, just as she had with Ivan Costello. Carter tells her not to cry, even though Maria isn't crying.

Carter accuses Maria of being a nuisance at the hospital without considering how difficult it is for Maria to be apart from their daughter. Maria looks in the mirror and sees Carter's reflection rather than her own, which shows the extent to which Maria's relationship with Carter erodes and warps her sense of self. Maria expands on this idea when she describes being "anesthetized," or made numb and unaware, by all her lovers.



CHAPTER 10

Maria lies outside in the sand and daydreams about brushing Kate's hair. The masseur calls to her from the kitchen, and she thinks about all the people she "trie[s] not to hear at BZ and Helene's." Maria recalls the moody men BZ meets abroad, and Helene's female friends, who are wives of industry men, get routine plastic surgery, and are always slightly older than Helene.

Maria would rather daydream about Kate than hang out with Helene and BZ and their friends. She "trie[s] not to hear" these people because she finds them shallow and uninteresting. Helene is portrayed as beautiful but insecure, per her habit of surrounding herself with slightly older female friends in order to emphasize her relative youthfulness. Maria's passing remark about BZ's "moody men" is another reference to his probable homosexuality. It draws on the derogatory stereotype that gay men are emotional or effeminate—"moody."



BZ's friends are more difficult to ignore than Helene's, though—especially the masseur. Maria had originally thought she recognized him, though she couldn't place him, and he hadn't recognized her. Maria remembers first meeting him at someone's house in Santa Barbara, though he was an actor's secretary then, not a masseur. Maria feels disturbed thinking back to that day, since the man looks exactly as he did then, and she does not.

Maria hears the masseur taunt BZ for having artificial lemon juice in his refrigerator. Helene wryly jokes about all BZ's friends being "purists." BZ, whose body is "perpetually tanned," turns to Carter and jokingly complains about his "bitch for a wife." The masseur orders Helene to run to the beach to ask Audrey Wise for some lemons. Helene starts gossiping about the Wises and grows too distracted to fetch the lemons.

An irritated Carter finally throws down the script he's been reading and goes down to get the lemons himself. Once Carter is gone, Maria sits up and takes in the scene around her: she sees BZ and the masseur, "their bodies gleaming, unlined," and Helene looking down at Audrey and Jerry Wise's houses from the edge of the deck. She notes that Helene is carrying a little extra weight. Maria muses that "whatever arrangements were made, they worked less well for women."

Suddenly, Maria wraps a towel around her sunburnt body and runs into the house. When she stops vomiting, she pulls off her bathing suit and sees no blood, indicating that her period is nearly two months overdue.

CHAPTER 11

Later, when they're in the car heading home from BZ's, Carter criticizes Maria for asking Helene how much BZ's mother, Carlotta, pays them to stay married. Maria grumbles about being "sick of everybody's sick arrangements" before telling Carter she's pregnant. When Carter asks Maria who the father is, she replies, "you know." Carter stares out at the highway in silence. Maria wants to tell Carter she's sorry but can't find the right words.

Maria dislikes her world's superficiality but isn't immune to it: seeing the masseur's unchanged appearance makes her fixate anxiously on her own fading looks, as she knows her time in Hollywood will last only so long as she stays trim, young, and beautiful.



BZ's artificial lemon juice symbolizes his artificial life: beneath his deft social skills and "perpetually tanned" exterior, he is a gay man trapped in an unhappy marriage with Helene, and he sometimes gets tired of doing favors for people. BZ calls Helene a "bitch for a wife" in jest, but his words also betray his resentment about their stifling, transactional marriage. The ease with which BZ calls Helene a "bitch" also reveals the casual misogyny that is acceptable in their social circle.



BZ and the masseur's "gleaming, unlined" bodies exude health and beauty, whereas Helene's body shows signs of weariness and aging. Maria's observation that "whatever arrangements were made, they worked less well for women" refers to how BZ and Helene's sham marriage is far more beneficial for BZ than it is for Helene. While the "arrangement" allows BZ to engage discretely with other gay men, Helene's end of the bargain is less clear.



Maria's sudden nausea and missed period are symptoms of pregnancy. Carter and Maria have only recently reconciled, so there's a good chance he's not the father.



Carter is annoyed that Maria spoke indiscreetly about BZ and Helene's sham marriage. He seems to resent his inability to control Maria to the extent he was able to control her in his films. Maria's reply of "you know" reveals that Carter knows who the father of her baby is, and the fact that Maria wants to apologize implies that it isn't Carter. The pervasive silence in this scene demonstrates Carter and Maria's inability to communicate with each other about serious topics.



Finally, Carter says that while *he* might know, “Felicia doesn’t.” Maria realizes that things are going to go very badly. She backtracks and restates that she doesn’t know for sure who the father is. Still, she’s certain that she’s pregnant because she took two tests the doctor’s office. Carter is upset when Maria tells him she went to a random doctor for the tests.

Carter’s comment about Felicia (Les Goodwin’s wife) confirms that both Carter and Maria suspect that Les is the baby’s father. Carter brings up Felicia to assert dominance over Maria: he’s implicitly threatening to tell Felicia about the affair, which would likely destroy whatever relationship Maria has with Les. Carter is upset about Maria going to a random doctor because he fears his reputation will be tarnished if an untrusted doctor spreads rumors about Carter Lang’s wife having another man’s baby.



Maria has a random thought about attending a party where there had been Japanese food and women with handmade earrings, but she can’t remember where it was. She folds her scarf over her lap and whispers that she went to the doctor because he was near Saks, where she’d been getting her hair done.

Carter’s threats and anger silence and subdue Maria. Something about Carter seems to remind Maria of the Japanese party, but it’s not clear how the two are related.



CHAPTER 12

Later that night, Maria sits alone beside the pool and remembers where the Japanese party had taken place—at the home of Sidney and Ruth Loomis. Sidney was a television writer, and Ruth was a civil rights activist who was into “group therapy.” Maria hadn’t been able to make conversation with Ruth, though the reason she and Carter stopped seeing them wasn’t because of this, but because the show Sidney had been writing for had been cancelled.

This passage explains Maria’s earlier thought about the Japanese party: she’d been trying to remind herself that Carter is a cruel, self-absorbed person who only keeps people in his life as long as they are useful to him. Maria reminds herself of Carter’s cruelty to stop herself from assuming that Carter’s cruel treatment of her is justified.



Maria holds back tears and tries to focus on this version of Carter—this unfeeling “dropper of friends”—to make her feel better about how things had gone tonight. Carter stormed out of the house earlier, and Maria knows he hadn’t met up with Freddy Chaikin as he’d planned to, because earlier, an irritated Freddy called to see where he was.

Maria has to work hard to convince herself that Carter is a cruel person, and that she doesn’t deserve to be antagonized by him. This reflects the degree to which Maria has internalized his abuse.



CHAPTER 13

Carter calls Maria the next morning from a motel in the **desert**. His voice is emotionless and vacant as he gives Maria the name and number of “the only man in Los Angeles County who d[oes] clean work.” When Maria says she isn’t sure she wants to go through with this, Carter calmly tells her he’ll take away Kate if she has the baby.

When Carter gives Maria the contact information for “the only man in Los Angeles County who d[oes] clean work,” he’s connecting her with someone who can perform an illegal abortion. Carter effectively forces Maria into an abortion by threatening to take away Kate. This is particularly cruel in light of the fact that Carter doesn’t seem particularly close with Kate and is simply using her to manipulate Maria.



After Carter hangs up, Maria sits still, feeling vaguely as though “everything was happening exactly the way it was supposed to happen.” She calls back Carter and tells him she’ll do anything if he promises her she can have Kate. Carter coldly assures her that he won’t make any promises.

Maria feels that “everything was happening exactly the way it was supposed to happen” because she thinks she deserves to suffer, as punishment for her affair with Les.



CHAPTER 14

After spending the day staring at the phone and smoking cigarettes, Maria finally dials the number Carter gave her. She speaks to a man who asks her “how many weeks?” Maria doesn’t understand the question, and the man clarifies, “how advanced is the *problem*, Maria.”

When the man asks Maria about her “problem,” he is referring to her pregnancy. The man uses purposefully vague language to protect himself, since abortion was illegal in the U.S. in the late 1960s (when the novel takes place). Still, his euphemistic language is cold and transactional—not the language that Maria would use to describe what is probably more akin to an existential crisis for her.



CHAPTER 15

Maria is at BZ and Helene’s house. BZ’s mother, Carlotta, is there, too, playing solitaire and complaining about her trip to Cozumel and Machu Pichu. She playfully argues with Helene about when to serve dinner. When Helene asks about Nikki, Carlotta’s daughter, Carlotta groans and says that Nikki—like Maria—is bored by her. Meanwhile, Maria is distracted by thoughts of her recent phone call. The man had said the procedure would cost \$1,000 in cash.

Maria is repeatedly villainized for not playing along with social conventions and failing to feign interest in subjects that bore her. Carlotta’s chatter doesn’t interest Maria because Maria has more serious issues to dwell on: her looming costly and illegal abortion.



CHAPTER 16

The next morning, Maria wakes up crying for her mother, which she hasn’t done since her “bad season” in New York. She could hardly eat that year, since all the food on her plate would start to resemble coiled **rattlesnakes**. She’d also spent a lot of time ruminating over the details of her mother’s death: when exactly it had happened, what she’d been doing in New York when the accident occurred, why her mother had been in Tonopah in the first place.

Maria’s “bad season” likely refers to a depressive episode that followed her mother’s death. That she cries for her mother now suggests that this “bad season” isn’t completely behind her, and that she has unresolved grief for her mother. The rattlesnakes Maria imagined that year parallel the image of snakes she described in her opening monologue. Maria connects rattlesnakes with mother’s death because there were likely rattlesnakes present along the vacant stretch of road where the accident occurred. The accident showed Maria that tragedy can strike suddenly, unpredictably, and inexplicably. When Maria fixates on rattlesnakes, she is meditating on the random, unpredictable, and inexplicable nature of suffering.



Maria used to wonder whether her mother had been at a doctor's appointment, that the doctor had given her bad news, such as terminal cancer, and that she'd driven the car off the road on purpose. At one point in her life, Maria had saved enough money to afford a trip around the world for her mother. Instead, though, she'd lent the money to Ivan Costello, and shortly after this, her mother died.

Maria imagines hypothetical events that might have preceded or caused her mother's accident to explain why and how it happened. Her anecdote about spending money on Ivan Costello instead of her mother provides more context for why the death is so difficult for Maria to accept: she feels remorse for abandoning her mother. She almost seems to believe that her new life in the entertainment industry has degraded her morals.



Back in the present, Carter calls Maria to ask whether she called the doctor. Maria tells him that "everything's arranged."

Though Maria anguishes internally over her abortion, social custom forces her to use cold, distant language when she discusses the procedure out loud. "Everything's arranged" is so matter-of-fact that Maria might as well be calling Carter to discuss an upcoming vacation.



CHAPTER 17

Though the weather hasn't yet turned cold, Maria starts to sleep inside. She lies under white sheets, superstitiously hoping that she'll wake to find bloodstains on them and pretending to want the baby to tempt fate by "invit[ing] disappointment." She goes so far as to buy a wicker bassinet from Saks, and she cries when it won't fit in the Corvette.

Maria thinks that "invit[ing] disappointment" will offset the balance of the universe and will her pregnancy out of existence. Her wishful thinking is an attempt to create meaning and balance where there is none.



When Maria returns from her shopping, her answering service tells her she's received three calls from Mr. Goodwin in New York, and that he wants her to call him back as soon as possible. Maria ignores the messages.

Maria ignores Les Goodwin's calls to avoid telling him about the pregnancy. She likely believes their relationship will sour once they are forced to deal with this ugly reality.



CHAPTER 18

The voice at the other end of the phone tells Maria to meet him at 5:00 on Monday, and that he'll be in touch about where sometime soon. After the phone call, Maria drives to the beach, but the sand is dirty, the tide is red, and the shoreline is buried underneath piles of kelp. Maria heads back to town and drives around aimlessly before pulling into a gas station, buying a Coca-Cola, and making a phone call.

Maria's phone call concerns her illegal abortion; she and the man continue to make arrangements without directly mentioning the procedure. Maria drives around aimlessly to put off the difficult task of telling Les about the pregnancy.



To Maria's surprise, Felicia Goodwin picks up Maria's call. An exasperated Felicia tells Maria they've been trying to reach her for days now, and that Les had been worried something happened to her. She tells Maria they'll be gone in a few days because they're buying a house. Maria asks if Les finished writing his script, and Felicia gratefully takes this as an excuse to pass the phone to Les. Before Maria can hang up, Les is on the other line.

Les demands that Maria tell him what's been going on with her. Maria tells Les nothing and tells him to call her later. Across the street, she spots a woman wearing a muumuu enter a supermarket and feels as though she's "watching the dead still center of the world, the quintessential intersection of nothing." She wonders why she told Les Goodwin to call her.

CHAPTER 19

A bank teller responds skeptically to Maria's request to withdraw \$1,000 in cash, so Maria lies and tells him she's taking a trip to Mexico. Maria returns to her car and counts the cash. She realizes that she's been thinking about Les Goodwin all day, and that it's become hard to distinguish him from the rest of her former lovers. Over the past month, she's begun to regard all of them as part of a collective whole, with "no beginnings or endings, no point beyond itself."

Maria tries to remember her past sexual encounters. She recalls driving out to the **desert** and drinking beer with Earl Lee Atkins when she was 16, the smell of Lava soap on his body. She remembers Ivan Costello in his bedroom in New York and in the motel in Maryland. She thinks of Carter and Les Goodwin. She remembers things clearly, yet none of her memories "seem to come to anything," and she feels as though everything was a dream.

Felicia seems to know nothing about Maria's affair with Les. Maria's discussion with Felicia reveals the unequal consequences Maria and Les have suffered as a result of their affair. While Maria must endure the physical, emotional, and legal consequences of an illegal abortion, Les's life continues on unaffected: his wife suspects nothing, and he's about to buy a new house.



Seeing the woman performing the mundane task of grocery shopping exacerbates the direness of Maria's situation. When Maria feels as though she's "watching the dead still center of the world, the quintessential intersection of nothing" she's commenting on the arbitrary, meaninglessness of life. There's no clear reason why the other woman's life seems normal and Maria's is falling apart.



Maria's inability to distinguish Les from her other lovers reflects her cynical attitude toward romance and human connection. She sees all her past romances as a singular failure that has "no beginnings or endings, no point beyond itself." She sees her lovers not as people but as means that have failed to achieve an end: Maria used to believe that love and connection could transform and repair her, but she now believes that love has "no point beyond itself."



Maria associates the desert with the past, and the nostalgia and longing that go along with it. Here, she ties the desert to her first sexual encounter. Maria's observation that none of her memories "seem to come to anything" parallels a similar statement she made about Silver Wells in her opening monologue. In both instances, Maria suggests that reflecting on one's past experiences does not necessarily lend clarity to the present, nor does it imbue the totality of their life with some larger sense of purpose or meaning. Life doesn't lead anywhere—it simply moves forward in time until it ends. In this case, none of Maria's love affairs have affected her in a meaningful way; they've simply existed, ended, and faded into the past.



CHAPTER 20

When Les Goodwin calls Maria, she insists that everything is all right. Les doesn't believe Maria and begs her to meet him when his flight gets in at 4:00 on Monday. Maria tells him she can't meet him at the airport but doesn't say why. She agrees to meet him later on Monday night.

Maria repeatedly rejects Les's efforts to help her. This is perhaps because she assumes that his concern is feigned, and that he will only disappoint or leave her if she tells him the truth about the pregnancy.



CHAPTER 21

A ringing telephone awakens Maria, who had been dreaming that she had the baby, and that she, the baby, and Kate were living with Ivan Costello on West 12th Street. In her dream, Maria didn't know Carter, though Kate was still his daughter. Maria thinks she dreamed of Ivan Costello because the phone call that woke her came in the middle of the night, which was when he used to call her. She remembers how Ivan would make her tell him how much she wanted him. Maria pulls the phone cord out of the jack and realizes she can't remember what she saw in Ivan, or in any of her former lovers.

The men who appear Maria's dreams vary, but Kate remains a constant presence in her mind. Pursuing romances with disappointing men seems to be Maria's misguided attempt to secure what she really desires: a sense of purpose and stability.



CHAPTER 22

Maria visits Kate, and a nurse scolds her for not calling in advance and says it would've been better for Maria to postpone her visit until after Kate adjusted to her new medication. Maria isn't happy to hear about the new medication and tells the nurse she wouldn't be able to visit next week, because she's going away next week, to Cozumel, Mexico. Before Maria leaves, she tells the nurse that when Kate wakes up in the night and says "oise, oise," it's because she's having a nightmare. Maria suddenly realizes that she superstitiously expects to die during her procedure. She inwardly reflects on her belief in punishment—that boarding a plane in a bad mood causes the plane to crash, or that unhappy marriages result in cervical cancer diagnoses, for example.

Maria makes an excuse about a trip to Cozumel to account for the time she'll be away to have the abortion. Her fear of dying during the procedure stems from her belief that she deserves to suffer for having an abortion, and for engaging in the affair that resulted in her pregnancy in the first place. The Maria who exists now is different woman from the future Maria who addresses the audience in the beginning of the novel: the future Maria sees no meaning in anything, but this Maria still clings desperately to the notion that everything happens for a reason, and that people deserve what they get.



When Maria returns home that night, she feels that her house is full of negative energy. She writes three letters but throw each of them down the toilet. She calls Carter's motel in the **desert** early the next morning, but he doesn't answer. Maria decides that if she has the abortion, "they would never be able to touch her again."

When Maria promises herself that after she undergoes her unwanted abortion, "they would never to touch her again," she is referring to powerful men like Carter who have molded her identity and the course of her life. Maria will go through with the procedure to keep Kate in her life, but this is the last straw for her.



CHAPTER 23

Maria paces around the house. She thumbs through an old issue of *Vogue* and reads a profile of the wife of an Italian industrialist, admiring how the woman seems “to make decisions and stick by them.” After this, Maria pays bills, which “sometimes len[d]s her the illusion of order,” though finding an old bill from an unriden tricycle she’d bought for Kate makes Maria shake. Later, the voice on the telephone calls to tell Maria to meet him in the parking lot of the Thriftmart, “under the big red T.”

When Maria heads out to meet the man, the air is dry, clear, and still, which Maria thinks takes away the “perspective” and “depth” of her present circumstances. Maria drives carefully, as though there is no gravity. She passes by Taco Bells and oil rockers and sees the “big red T” from miles away.

Maria wishes she could be like the woman in Vogue, who can “make decisions and stick by them.” In comparison to this woman, Maria has no confidence in her identity and no control over her decisions. Paying bills gives Maria “the illusion or order,” enabling her to pretend that she is in control, but the plan backfires when the unexpected resurfacing of a receipt for Kate’s tricycle reminds Maria of her helplessness: she is helpless to make Kate well enough to ride a tricycle, and helpless to prevent Carter from taking away Kate.



Maria looks for meaning in the weather: she seems to think that the atmosphere ought to reflect the bleak gloominess of her circumstances, but the clear sky suggests otherwise. In fact, the day is jarringly normal.



CHAPTER 24

The man, who is dressed all in white and has “a eunuch’s soft body” tells Maria that they’ll take her car. As they drive, he asks her if she’s familiar with the area, and Maria tells him she is not. In a “bland, ingratiating” voice, the man says the area is nice for kids before asking Maria about her car’s gas mileage. He tells her he drives a Cadillac because it feels good, despite its poor gas mileage. Maria thinks the man is speaking in coded language but realizes there is no subtext beneath his small talk. The man tells her he’d probably get a little Camaro if he ever switched cars. Maria pulls into the driveway the man gestures toward and thinks about how she is no longer a woman about to have an abortion, but a woman parking her car and listening to a man rattle on about cars.

The man’s “bland, ingratiating” voice, white clothing, and “eunuch’s soft body” reflect his pure, untarnished state. In contrast, Maria feels as though her extramarital affair, illegitimate pregnancy, and looming abortion have rendered her impure and damaged. The man’s superficial small talk liberates Maria from her own thoughts, allowing her to forget the wretchedness of her unwanted abortion and pretend that today is just a normal day.



CHAPTER 25

The abortion takes place on a bedroom floor covered in newspapers. Maria remembers reading that the chemicals in the ink of newspapers are antiseptic. In fact, this is just one of the tricks one can do with newspapers: for example, they can also be used to insulate a quilt in an emergency. Maria thinks she probably learned this from reading her mother’s old American Red Cross handbook. She tries to imagine herself at age 10, in Silver Wells, to repress what’s about to happen to her in this bedroom in Encino.

Maria concentrates on the antiseptic properties of newspaper ink and her mother’s American Red Cross handbook to disassociate from what she’s experiencing. This moment also illustrates the difficulty Maria has connecting her past to her present. As a child, she could never have imagined that a factoid about the antiseptic properties of newspaper ink would reemerge in her adult life in such a horrific context.



The doctor tells Maria to say something if the room is too cold, since he won't be able to adjust the air conditioning once they begin. Maria says she's fine, but the doctor says that Maria is underweight and turns down the air conditioning anyway. He then talks Maria through the procedure, repeatedly instructing her to relax. Maria muses to herself that the pain of the procedure "signifie[s] nothing beyond itself."

Meanwhile, the man in white sits in the living room and watches a movie. As the doctor scrapes, he tells Maria the sound "should be the sound of music to [her]." He reminds her not to scream, because it might alert the neighbors. When everything is over, the doctor tells Maria that she'll experience some light spotting and will resume her normal periods next month, since this month's is "in that pail."

The doctor leaves to use the bathroom. Later, Maria will try to recall whether or not he took the pail with him. The doctor gives Maria some medicine, and she and the man in white leave together. Maria flashes a broad smile at the man as he tells her about the Paula Raymond movie he watched while Maria underwent her operation.

CHAPTER 26

Maria orders a steak later that night while she's out to dinner with Les Goodwin. She tells him she'd also like three drinks, and to go somewhere with loud music afterward. When Les asks Maria what's wrong, she replies, "I am just very very very tired of listening to you all."

CHAPTER 27

Maria thinks about Silver Wells. She wishes she could see her mother and recalls the last day they spent together. It had been a Sunday, and Maria had flown in from New York. Benny Austin had joined them for Sunday supper. When Benny and Maria were alone at the table, he explained that Maria's mother had been somewhat depressed lately, and that Maria's father didn't want to talk about it.

Maria's remark that the abortion "signifie[s] nothing beyond itself" echoes her earlier remarks about her past lovers. She's trying to convince herself that the abortion doesn't have to alter the course of her life—she can forget about it once she leaves this bedroom.



The man in white's experience watching a movie is mundane, to the point of being darkly humorous, when compared to Maria's horrific experience in the bedroom. Meanwhile, the operating doctor fails to understand how traumatic the abortion is for Maria. He insinuates that Maria wants the abortion with his crass remark that the sound of his scraping "should be the sound of music to [her]." His comment about the aborted fetus sitting "in that pail" is graphic and insensitive to Maria's feelings. The man's position of privilege renders him unable or unwilling to understand Maria's pain.



Maria's smile shows that she's trying to believe what she told herself in the operation room: that the abortion doesn't have to mean anything, and that she can put it behind her.



When Maria tells Les that she's "very very very tired of listening to you all," she uses the second-person plural, "you all." This suggests that Les is a stand-in for all the disingenuous Hollywood people Maria is tired of hearing. Maria chooses not to tell Les about the pregnancy and subsequent abortion, which suggests that she fears that his knowing about it would drive a wedge between them. Les seems to be the lover Maria likes best (if she likes any of them), yet they don't seem capable of conversing beyond basic small talk.



The trauma of the abortion motivates Maria to take comfort in memories. Maria criticizes her Hollywood social circle for its superficiality, but Maria's father's reluctance to talk about her mother's depression suggests that an aversion to honesty and emotional vulnerability is a more universal problem.



Maria watched her mother once she returned to the table but found nothing to be out of the ordinary. Her father mentioned buying a few rights of zinc. Benny complimented Maria's mother's spare-ribs and said she should go into business. Maria's mother, Francine, joked about her and Maria opening a hash house. When Francine expressed concern over Maria being too thin, Maria's father (Harry) stood up, threw his napkin down on the table, and told his wife that Maria "can't win if she's not at the table," which she "wouldn't understand." When her plane took off later that night, Maria watched her mother, father, and Benny Austin "waving at the wrong window" for as long as she could.

Harry's outburst is eerily similar to the type of logic Carter uses to subdue and devalue Maria. Maria's final image of her mother, in which she, Harry, and Benny are "waving at the wrong window" evokes the meaninglessness of life. Though in retrospect Maria wants to impose meaning onto her final image of her mother, the actual moment is flawed and ultimately meaningless: her parents aren't waving at the right window, and the day is significance only in retrospect. In and of itself, it is arbitrary and meaningless.



CHAPTER 28

Carter tells Maria that Helene is going to Pebble Beach for the weekend with Carlotta and suggests that they join her there. Maria declines, and Carter accuses her of wanting to be miserable. Maria says that BZ's mother isn't her mother.

Carter doesn't mention the abortion, though he must know it has taken place. None of the men in Maria's life seem to be capable of giving her the stability and emotional validation she wants from them. Maria's comment about Carlotta not being her mother implies that painful thoughts of motherhood and grief have been on Maria's mind since the abortion.



CHAPTER 29

Maria's pain and bleeding begin a few weeks later. The doctor on Wilshire Street assures her that whoever did the operation did a good job. He gives her some Edrisal, though it does nothing to alleviate the pain, Maria keeps gin bottle beside her bed that night and wishes she could talk to her mother.

The trauma of the abortion causes Maria's unresolved grief for her mother to resurface. Maria masks her pain with pills and alcohol.



CHAPTER 30

While they are out to eat, Freddy Chaikin tells Maria he got her a guest-starring role on *Interstate 80*. Maria tries to feign excitement. Freddy insists the part will be good for Maria's career, and that working will help Maria get past her marital troubles. He also jokes with her that "ten percent of nothing doesn't pay the bar bill."

Freddy sees the distraction of work as an adequate solution to Maria's marital problems. Freddy is one of the people Maria is tired of listening to: he claims to be sympathetic to Maria's problems but offers jokes instead of genuine compassion. He claims to joke when he tells Maria that "ten percent of nothing doesn't pay the bar bill," but the reality is that Freddy and Maria's relationship is mostly transactional and will only continue so long as they remain useful to each other.



CHAPTER 31

Maria's bleeding goes away and comes back. Her pain starts to interfere with her work on *Interstate 80*, and she becomes incapable of standing upright. That night, there's so much blood that Maria goes through three pads in 15 minutes. She thinks about calling Les Goodwin, since Felicia is out of town, but she calls Carter instead. Carter orders Maria to get a doctor or go to the emergency room. Maria claims that Carter just wants to avoid feeling guilty in case anything happens to her.

When Maria hangs up on Carter, she notices a piece of bloody bodily tissue on one of the used pads. She drops off the tissue at the doctor's office on her way home from work the next day. The doctor tells Maria the tissue is a piece of placenta. Maria sleeps through night for the first time in weeks and is an hour late to work the next day.

In her opening monologue, Maria described how the depression she suffered years ago in New York started to show up on camera. Now, history repeats itself, as the physical pain of her abortion prevents her from standing up straight. Maria falls back into her old habits when she turns to the men in her life for consolation.



That Maria sleeps soundly for the first time in weeks suggests that expelling the placenta might allow her to move forward in her life and put her grief behind her. Thinking of the placenta as a symbol of closure could also be an attempt to attribute meaning where there is none, though. In her extended reflection at the beginning of the novel, Maria warns the audience against actively looking for answers and patterns, so it's worth considering this point when Maria does the very thing she warned about.



CHAPTER 32

Larry Kulik reminds Maria that she promised to use his sauna. Before Maria can protest, Larry says there have been rumors floating around that she's gone insane. He says that he's "a good friend to people [he] like[s]" and encourages her to consider his offer.

In claiming to be "a good friend to people [he] like[s]," Larry is offering Maria a deal: he'll save her reputation or help her get work if she goes out with him.



CHAPTER 33

Maria starts to have strange dreams a few nights later. In one recurring dream, she's in contact with someone connected to "a shadowy Syndicate." Sometimes the contact is Freddy Chaikin. Whoever the man is, he always talks about "a business proposition" that involves her house in Beverly Hills before asking about the condition of the house's plumbing.

Expelling the placenta doesn't bring Maria closure, and the abortion continues to haunt her. In Maria's dream, the "shadowy Syndicate" represents the secretive process required to schedule the abortion. When they ask about the house's plumbing, they are referring to the condition of her reproductive organs, just as the man in white asked Maria how advanced her "problem" was when they were scheduling the operation over the phone.



The man dressed in white and the doctor appear next. At this point, Maria always tries (unsuccessfully) to wake herself. Next, the plumbing becomes clogged, the pipes burst, and gray water fills the sinks. In her dream, Maria knows she can't call a plumber, since she knows "what would be found in the pipes, what hacked pieces of human flesh."

The clogged plumbing symbolizes Maria's reproductive organs. That Maria dreams of "hacked pieces of human flesh" in the pipes reflects her guilt, as she seems to believe she is guilty of murdering her child. This scene also explains why Maria was fixated on the pail where the man placed the aborted fetus: she imagined him taking it to the bathroom with him and unceremoniously flushing the remains down the drain.



CHAPTER 34

The heat finally breaks in November. Carter leaves for New York to make final cuts for his film, and Maria continues to have ominous dreams. When the sink backs up in her Beverly Hills home, she starts looking for another place to live and finds an apartment on Fountain Avenue.

Maria brings Kate home for three days for Christmas. They drive up and down La Brea to find a Christmas tree and have dinner with the Goodwins in their new house. At dinner, Kate becomes overwhelmed, screams, and breaks a mirror. Maria apologizes and leaves early. She and Kate hold each other tightly that night. When Maria drops Kate off at the hospital the next day, it's only she who cries.

In January, it begins to rain. Maria wears real shoes and a sweater she bought in New York when she was 19. She doesn't speak out loud or read the paper for days, too afraid of reading upsetting news stories about harm befalling children: children being found in abandoned refrigerators, or a **rattlesnake** found in a child's playpen. The mothers in all these stories are always reported to have been "under sedation," though Maria contends that "instantaneous peril" is the real issue at hand. Maria muses how she, too, is under sedation: she eats frozen enchiladas for dinner, watches TV, and doesn't leave her apartment on Fountain Avenue.

CHAPTER 35

Maria sits next to a woman at the Ralph's Market snack counter who tells her she's mentally ill. Maria responds to the woman sympathetically but distantly, distracted by the line to use the pay phones. Her apartment's telephone is currently out of order, and she's anxious about not being able to be reached in the event that something happens to Kate.

Meanwhile, the mentally ill woman rambles on about her health, revealing that she's considered suicide. Sensing Maria's disinterest, she begins to cry. When Maria touches the woman's arm sympathetically, the woman screams at Maria, "get your whore's hands off me."

The backed-up sink reminds Maria of her dream, which reminds her of her abortion. In this way, she's beginning to lose her grip on reality.



Maria believes Kate will give her life stability and meaning. But the reality is that Kate's medical condition complicates Kate's ability to reciprocate Maria's love, which is suggested in the fact that only Maria cries when she returns Kate to the hospital. Maria is more drawn toward an idealized version of her life with Kate than the life they'd actually experience together.



Maria's mental health deteriorates. In donning her old sweater, she symbolically regresses to the version of herself she was at 19, the year her mother died. In noting the mothers' "sedation," the newspaper stories insinuate that inattentive mothers are to blame for their children's peril. Maria's argument about "instantaneous peril" recasts these tragedies as unfortunate but arbitrary consequences of living in a dangerous world where "peril" may strike at any moment. She redirects blame away from sedated mothers and toward the cruel indifference of fate.



Maria resents the insincerity and inattention of everyone in her social circle, yet she treats the mentally ill woman with a similarly detached, feigned sort of compassion.



When Maria tries to help the mentally ill woman, the woman rejects and degrades her by calling her a "whore." Maria's sincere attempt at compassion is so strange to the woman that she views it as a threat. In a world where pretense and superficiality are the status quo, authenticity and connection appear sinister.



CHAPTER 36

Maria talks on the phone with Carter, who is trying to understand why Maria is renting an apartment on Fountain Avenue when she has a perfectly good (and expensive) house in Beverly Hills. Maria insists that it's only temporary. Maria hangs up the phone, smokes a joint, and resumes watching a television news film about a woman whose house slid into the Tujunga Wash.

After this, Maria watches a news report about an earth tremor near Joshua Tree, and an interview with a Pentecostal minister who had a vision that millions of people would die in an earthquake in March. Maria muses how "the notion of general devastation" (minus her recurring thoughts of the **rattlesnake** in the playpen, which is "punitive") relaxes her. She falls asleep before the news is over.

The next morning, the shower drain seems blocked. Maria vomits into the toilet. Afterward, she packs her things and returns to the Beverly Hills house, deciding that "there would be plumbing anywhere she went."

Maria's insistence that her housing situation is only temporary parallels her earlier insistence that sleeping outside was temporary. She seems to believe that a superficial change in scenery is enough to catapult her in and out of sanity.



Maria compares tragedies she read about in the newspaper the other day to "the notion of general devastation" she sees on TV. While the "general" existence of danger in the world doesn't faze Maria, the notion of a rattlesnake in a playpen remains "punitive" because she still believes she should be punished for her inability to resist having the abortion.



Maria sees the blocked drain as evidence that her nightmares are coming true. Her observation that "there would be plumbing anywhere she went" acknowledges that a superficial change of scenery won't absolve her of her guilt.



CHAPTER 37

Maria and Carter decide to divorce and use Helene as their witness. Maria takes tranquilizers the night before the hearing and oversleeps. When she meets Helene at the Bistro for lunch, late, she observes how "healthy" Helene looks with her nice clothes, streaked hair, and jewelry. Helene, in contrast, says that Maria looks "spectral" and suggests that they go to the Springs together. Helene then spots Allene Walsh across the room with a woman Maria recognizes as an actress named Sharon Carroll and insinuates that they are romantically involved with each other.

Helene continues to gossip. She shows Maria the new ring Carlotta gave her for hanging out with BZ on set in the desert and gushes about the wild times everyone is having there. Helene's face goes flat for a moment, but she regains her composure to tell Maria to pull herself together, since it's only a divorce—Helene has gone through two herself.

Maria continues to spiral out of control, self-medicating with tranquilizers to numb herself to the pain of her imminent divorce. That Maria and Helene assess each other exclusively according to their physical appearances reflects the superficiality of their friendship. Helene shows how little she cares about Maria when she is too busy gossiping about the women across the room to pay attention to Maria, whose "spectral" (ghostly) appearance clearly suggests that she is not well.



Helene's enthusiasm for the new ring Carlotta reinforces the fact that she's entirely happy to stay in a loveless marriage to BZ, so long as she is sufficiently compensated. In this way, she prioritizes material wealth and glamor over human connection. Helene reveals that she's been hanging around the desert filming location for Carter's latest film, on which BZ is a producer. It's unclear why her face falls flat, but perhaps she let slip something that she hadn't meant to say. Helene can't relate to Maria's depression because she doesn't see relationships as meaningful outside of their ability to benefit her financially.



Helene and Maria meet Carter and the lawyers outside the courtroom in Santa Monica. Maria testifies that Carter “repeatedly struck and in other ways humiliated” her, and the charge of “mental cruelty” is “uncontested.” Maria feels as though the Maria the lawyers are talking about is some other person. As they all sit together waiting for the officials to finalize the divorce papers, Helene eagerly gossips with Carter about the “two dykes” she and Maria saw at the Bistro earlier that day.

Prior to the implementation of no-fault divorce law (in 1969, California was the first state to introduce such legislation), a couple had to provide grounds for divorce. This might be why Maria testifies that Carter “repeatedly struck and in other ways humiliated” her, though these accusations could be truthful. In any case, the fact that Helene immediately starts gossiping with Carter after she testifies against him for his “mental cruelty” toward her supposed friend reinforces how superficial Maria’s inner circle is. In addition, Helene’s use of a homophobic slur to describe the women at the Bistro suggests that some women in the world of the novel have internalized men’s misogynistic treatment of them and treat fellow women in a similarly disrespectful way.



CHAPTER 38

The next time Carter sees Maria, she tells him she’s been working and hanging out with BZ and Helene. Carter tells Maria not to “get into that.”

Carter accuses Maria of self-pity when she stays in but proceeds to criticize the people she socializes with when she goes out. BZ and Helene are close friends of Carter’s, so it’s unclear why he cautions her not to “get into that.” Perhaps Helene and BZ’s transactional marriage is concealing more than BZ’s homosexuality.



CHAPTER 39

Maria remembers when she first met BZ. It was the summer Carter was cutting *Angel Beach*, and he brought Maria along to the beach house to meet BZ, who had some money to put up, and to screen the film. When they arrived, BZ was sitting in the living room, projecting pornography. Carter remained oblivious to the odd atmosphere. BZ continued to roll the film, but he fixed his gaze on Maria the entire time. Maria remained silent. BZ briefly critiqued the rough cut of *Angel Beach* Carter had sent him, suggesting that Carter had “miss[ed] the story” by not focusing on how Maria’s character felt about being assaulted.

*This odd scene provides some context for the nature of Maria and BZ’s friendship. BZ’s choice to leave the pornography rolling and stare at Maria seems to be a power play directed toward Carter. He uses a similar approach when he critiques *Angel Beach* and makes a big show of paying more attention to Maria and her character than Carter did when he was cutting the film. It’s heavily implied that BZ is gay, so he probably isn’t interested in Maria sexually. So, his aggression can better be explained as a general drive to lash out against the people or institutions that stifle his identity –against an industry man like Carter, for example.*



When the reel ended, Carter told BZ the film was “a commercial piece.” BZ shrugged and changed out the reel, Maria felt strange and not in control of herself. Carter remarked on the film’s “opticals.” BZ continued to stare at Maria.

Carter seems to be more upset by BZ’s critique of the film than his assertiveness with Maria, which says a lot about his self-absorption and lack of consideration for Maria. Maria’s role in all of this is unclear. BZ is using her to undertake his act of aggression, but her strange, uncontrolled feeling could be construed in a positive light as her response to finally being seen, especially since Carter never seems to see her.



CHAPTER 40

Back in the present, BZ tells Maria that she, him, Helene, and maybe Larry Kulik should go to Mexico City tonight. Maria complains that she doesn't want to, but BZ insists that she does.

BZ's approach to dealing with a world he knows to be corruptive and superficial is different than Maria's. Whereas Maria rejects society, BZ seems to think that they might as well enjoy themselves, even if know their world is pointless and vapid.



CHAPTER 41

Every night, Maria thinks about how Les Goodwin will "keep her from peril." She imagines Les lying beside her in a house by the sea. Kate is there, too. In her dream, Maria makes the bed with fresh sheets. When the tide was low, she and Kate gather mussels, which they'll eat later. In Maria's fantasy, it's just the three of them, and nobody has a past.

Maria's use of the word "peril" is a reference to Chapter 34, when she ruminates on horrific news stories. Maria has accepted the existence of "peril" but still longs for a world in which she can control her destiny and keep herself and Kate safe from tragedy and misfortune. Nobody has a past in Maria's idyllic fantasy, because for her, the past is inextricably tied to "peril" and a lack of control.



In reality, Maria wakes each day in Beverly Hills, and everybody had a history. There is no seaside house, and the mussels on the shore are toxic. Maria fears that BZ and Larry Kulik and the rest of that crowd are the only ones who really know her, and worries that Les Goodwin wouldn't love her if he knew what kind of person she's become. Maria doesn't call Les. Instead, she buys a silver dress and tries not to think about the baby.

Maria fears that the years she has spent immersed in the toxic culture of Hollywood has corrupted her past the point of return. The only people who really know her now are other corrupt people, like BZ and Kulik. Maria used to think Les could save her. Now that she sees herself as beyond redemption, she resolves to give in to the corruption and phoniness.



CHAPTER 42

Maria tells Carter she's leaving tomorrow to go to New York for a few days, though she only thinks to do this upon running into Carter. After parting ways with Carter, Maria imagines fetuses that look like jellyfish floating through the East River. She doesn't end up going to New York.

Maria is torn between a nihilistic impulse to self-destruct and the immobilizing forces of unresolved guilt and grief. Here, the guilt she feels about having an abortion manifests in a horrific vision of fetuses floating through New York's East River, which ultimately dissuades her from going through with a trip she strategically creates and destroys in a matter of minutes.



CHAPTER 43

A long time ago, Maria did a photo shoot in Ocho Rios with a girl named Ceci Delano, who'd had an abortion. Ceci had said it was a difficult time to get an abortion in New York, since there'd been many recent arrests. Ceci finally found someone to perform the procedure: in exchange for falsely testifying as a witness in the bust of a party-girl operation, Ceci was sent to Doctors' Hospital for "a legal D & C," financed by the District Attorney's office. Ceci had told the story like it was funny. Maria tries to think about her own abortion in the same way but can't find the humor in it.

Ceci Delano had intended for her story to be funny, but it also shows how in a patriarchal society, men are the gatekeepers of women's choices. Ceci Delano receives a "legal D & C," (dilation and curettage, the most common method of early abortion) paid for by the District Attorney's office—but only after she appeases the men in power. Maria recalls Ceci Delano's story to convince herself that she can treat her own abortion with the same degree of flippancy, but she remains unable to do so. Maria remains torn between giving in to nihilism and holding out hope that her life can still be meaningful.



CHAPTER 44

Maria receives a letter from a hypnotist through the studio that produced *Angel Beach*. The letter explains that a person's problems can be traced back to their days in the womb. Maria calls the phone number included in the letter.

Maria seems to know that unresolved grief from her mother's death is contributing to her current downward spiral, which is why the hypnotist's mention of the womb piques her interest.



CHAPTER 45

The hairdresser scolds Maria over her split ends before shifting his attention to a new girl who's just walked in. The girl tells the hairdresser about an operation she's just had for a pelvic abscess and talks casually about show business. She invites the hairdresser to come over for a drink once he's done with Maria, but he gives her a noncommittal response. Maria leaves without having her hair dried. Even in her dressing room, she can still hear the girl talking, and she muses that the girl is "a presentiment of something."

Maria's observation that the girl is "a presentiment of something" situates her within the predictable cycle of Hollywood, in which fresh new faces are used, corrupted, discarded, and replaced. This girl is young and beautiful, but she's overeager, and the hairdresser's bored response to her invitation to come over for drinks suggests that she's already becoming obsolete. Another way in which Maria and the girl are vaguely connected is in their respective pelvic operations. The girl doesn't go into much detail about her supposed "pelvic abscess," but she could be using the vague condition to euphemistically reference an abortion.



CHAPTER 46

Maria recognizes "the signs" of "the idle lonely": they arrive at the grocery store on Saturday evenings. They purchase only one lamp chop, cat food, and a newspaper. They have just a slight sign of "vulnerable tightness around the mouth." To avoid looking like these women, Maria buys food for a full household: gallons of juice, pasta, huge boxes of laundry detergent. Meanwhile, Maria eats only cottage cheese.

Maria knows she is quickly joining the ranks of "the idle lonely" but thinks she can redeem herself in the eyes of her superficial society if her appearance suggests otherwise. She stocks up on food to give the impression that she is happy and has people in her life. Maria is stuck in a self-defeating situation: she's lonely because she's surrounded by superficial people who are incapable of forming genuine, communicative connections, yet in her efforts to combat this loneliness, she becomes as disingenuous as the very people she despises.



CHAPTER 47

The hypnotist tells Maria she's in the water and can hear her mother's voice. Maria disagrees. The hypnotist always seems cold to Maria, and his house is dusty and disorganized. When he asks Maria what she's thinking about, she describes driving Sunset and turning left at the New Havana Ballroom.

Maria is torn between confronting her past and rejecting it, between action and inaction. Although she was initially interested in hypnosis because the hypnotist mentioned the womb in his initial letter, when he mentions Maria's mother in their session now, she refuses to play along and describes the trip she took to get to the hypnotist's office instead.



CHAPTER 48

That spring, Maria occasionally finds gay men to invite her to parties. At first, these men appreciate her for her willingness to listen to them dramatically recount their suicidal ideations, and particularly because her days as a model have made her well-versed in the fashion sense that interests them. For example, she can distinguish between “the right bracelet” and its knockoffs. In the end, though, Maria’s “performance” is unconvincing, and the men patronizingly tell her to just drink some more. Maria is drinking a lot these days, since it stops her from dreaming.

Maria's depiction of the men who take her to parties draws on certain stereotypes about gay men: for example, she considers them to be overly dramatic and obsessed with fashion. Maria's eagerness to be accepted by these men suggests that she is trying to navigate her disillusionment with Hollywood the way BZ (who is also gay) does: she feigns amusement, goes to parties, and plays the game. However, Maria's "performance" doesn't conceal her disillusionment as effectively as BZ's conceals his, and the men reject her. Maria continues to self-medicate with alcohol to suppress her grief and dull the pain of further social alienation.



Maria recalls a recurrent dream she's had lately, in which a loudspeaker orders a string of children into a gas chamber. It's Maria's job to whisper reassuring words into the children's ears, “because this was a humane operation.”

Maria continues to dream about dead or dying children. These dreams reflect Maria's guilt about the abortion, as well as her anxiety about not being able to protect Kate: she feels powerless to rescue her daughter from the hospital or provide her with relief from her medical condition. Maria's brief hospital visits and unfulfilling holiday with Kate feel as pointless as the reassuring words Maria whispers to the doomed children in her dream.



CHAPTER 49

Maria finishes speaking with the columnist and hangs up the phone, and Helene tells her that she's having a hard time dealing with Leonard, her hairdresser, being in New York for several days. Maria relays to Helene some gossip the columnist shared with her: Carter is dating Susannah Wood. Helene reminds Maria that she knew this already and changes the subject. She continues to vent about Leonard, claiming that his absence makes her almost “frightened.” Maria responds with disinterest but comforts Helene when she begins to cry.

Helene continues to demonstrate her self-absorption and shortcomings as a friend. She chastises Maria for being bothered by Carter's new relationship with Susannah Wood, yet she cries when Maria isn't immediately sympathetic toward how “frightened” she is in Leonard's absence. Helene's distress reveals the debilitating effects of her superficiality: she is defined exclusively in terms of how others see her and has no sense of identity in the absence of others.



CHAPTER 50

Maria has done everything there is to do in town. She's stayed at a motel and eaten crab at the marina restaurant, walked along the beach, and driven around. Now, she sits on the beach in Oxnard and watches some boys who are sitting near their car and smoking a joint. The boys' motorcycles are parked near the curb. Every so often, they look in Maria's direction and laugh.

Maria sees an old man sitting on a bench at the next beach and a nurse wheeling around a patient. She closes her eyes and imagines that the nurse is about to inject her with a needle. When Maria opens her eyes, she sees that the boys are rifling through the parked cars. She gets up and goes to the pay phone, planning to call [Les Goodwin] to rescue her. Maria wonders if hearing Les laugh would change everything: would cheer her up, would make the degenerate boys go away, would make the nurse talk to her patient. But Les Goodwin doesn't pick up, and everything continues as it was.

The boys are now standing beside Maria's car, watching to see how she'll respond. Maria walks toward the car. As she nears them, they form a semicircle. Maria unlocks her car, acutely aware of them watching her. As she sits down in the front seat, one of the boys "raise[s] a hand in recognition of what had passed between them." Maria thinks about this moment later on, imagining different ways the situation could have gone: "it ended that way badly, or well, depending on what you wanted," she decides.

*Oxnard is a seaside city west of Los Angeles. It's not clear why Maria has traveled here. The presence of the bikers makes this moment resemble a scene from *Angel Beach*, the second film of Carter's in which Maria starred. Maria envied her character in *Angel Beach* for the girl's ability to control her own fate. Here, Maria's comparative lack of control is evident in her inability to stop the biker boys from laughing at her.*



Maria's imagined scenario of the nurse injecting her with a needle recalls her earlier meditations on sudden peril. This shows how consumed Maria is by the constant, looming threat of danger and by her own powerlessness to avert it. Once more, Maria envisions Les as her savior, her path toward stability, and her protection against danger. Maria seems to be incapable of envisioning a world in which she rescues herself; she repeatedly relies on others—usually a lover—to reground her.



*The fragmented, vague manner in which Maria relays the sequence of events makes it difficult to ascertain exactly what happens. The central focus of this moment is the power dynamic that exists between Maria and the bikers, a presence the one boy acknowledges when he "raise[s] a hand in recognition of what had passed between them." It's unclear what "ha[s] passed between them," though, and whether Maria is omitting certain parts and skipping to the end, or if she's providing the entire scene. This is one moment in the narrative that explicitly draws the reader's attention to the possibility that Maria might not be a reliable narrator. One stylistic element to note here is the scene an obvious reference to *Angel Beach*: choppy, fragmented bits of narration resemble a cut roll of film, and (the setting of a beach backdrop, the biker gang, and the vulnerable, lone Maria) is exactly the same. At the end of *Angel Beach*, Maria is assaulted, and Carter's cut concluded with a shot of the gang that was filmed in such a way that the frame gave off the impression that the girl hadn't fully understood what had happened to her. Maria preferred the studio's ending, which allowed the girl to walk away, unscathed, and appearing in control of her destiny. This moment in the novel resembles Carter's cut: Maria's observation, that "it ended that way badly, or well, depending on what you wanted," implies she hasn't fully understood what has just happened to her.*



CHAPTER 51

Maria sits in her motel room in Oxnard and waits for Les Goodwin to call, which he said he'd do around 9:30 or 10:00, after his screening. When Les calls to tell Maria he'll be available soon, Maria takes two Librium, washes her face, and straightens up the room "to erase any sign of herself." She places a bucket filled with ice, two glasses, and a bottle of whiskey on a tray. When Les finally arrives, he tells her he almost didn't come, because they'd cancelled the preview. Maria tells him she knows, and that she drove up because didn't want him to call her to say the preview had been cancelled, and that he couldn't come.

Les suggests they go somewhere else, so he and Maria drive up the coast, rent a room by the sea, and lie together in bed. They make plans to picnic at Big Sur the next day. Les tells Maria he has to call Felicia, and Maria tells him to wait until she's dressed. She dresses, leaves the motel, and walks down to the water. Maria shivers in her thin cotton dress and watches men working on a culvert that had washed out.

When Maria returns to the motel room, Les tells her not to cry. Maria says there's "no point" in doing any of the things they'd planned to do. Les apologizes and says that they will, "later." On the drive back, they both lament the bad timing of their romance. Les regrets lying to attend their rendezvous and talks about all the stress he's been under lately. They both talk about other people: "Kate, Carter, Felicia." The only thing they don't mention is how Maria "had left the point in a bedroom in Encino."

CHAPTER 52

Maria writes a list of things she won't do, including "walk through the Sands or Caesar's alone after midnight," or "carry a Yorkshire in Beverly Hills."

Maria's reasons for being in Oxnard are clearer now: she and Les have arranged a tryst. Maria's efforts to clean the motel room and "erase any sign of herself" betray her reason for meeting Les in the first place: being with him will make her forget herself.



Maria wants Les to wait until she's dressed to call Felicia because she feels guilty about their affair. Although the seaside setting of the lovers' tryst resembles many of the scenarios Maria constructed in her fantasies, Les's obligation to call Felicia shows Maria that her love affair doesn't exist in a vacuum the way it does in her fantasies: she and Les are both inexorably tied to their pasts.



Maria and Les talk about all the logistical, superficial reasons their romance won't work but fail to address the core reason their relationship is doomed: Maria "had left the point in a bedroom in Encino." Maria continues to hide the abortion from Les because she fears his judgment and rejection. At the same time, her decision to remain emotionally withdrawn and disingenuous ensures that their relationship will never develop into the stable, meaningful connection she craves.



Maria is more concerned with things she won't do than things she will do. As her emotional well-being deteriorates, she grows increasingly passive.



CHAPTER 53

Carter drops by to tell Maria that he'll be out of town for a few weeks, since his film has been entered at Cannes. Maria says she hasn't seen the film and hadn't even realized there'd been screenings. Carter is offended. Maria's visits with Carter are always unpleasant. After he leaves, she often visualizes the life they could have had together: Carter playing outside with Kate, Carter tending to Kate while she's sick, Carter blowing out the candles of a birthday cake.

The night before Carter leaves for Cannes, Maria tells him that she saw his film and thought it was "beautiful," but Carter doesn't respond to her peace offering. Instead, he tells her to call BZ if she needs to reach him. Over the next few weeks, Maria scans *Daily Variety* and *The Hollywood Reporter* for mentions of Carter, who has been traveling throughout Europe and "discussing the *auteur* principle."

Maria talks to Helene on the phone. Helene tells her that Carter is spending another week in Paris, which she learned through BZ, who talked with "them" on the phone. Helene begins to relay something that "she said," but Maria interjects, stating, "you think you're telling me something, Helene, you're missing the point."

Later that afternoon, Maria gets into a minor accident in her Corvette, receives a call from her bank about her overdrawn account, and is refused a refill on her barbiturate prescriptions, which leaves her almost "relieved."

Maria's daydreams of domestic life with Carter and Kate are a projection of her broader desire for stability, control, and meaning—but she can't seem to attain these things in real life.



Maria's efforts to repair her relationship with Carter go mostly unreturned or unappreciated, but she continues to reach out because she doesn't have much else in her life. While Carter has his career to occupy him, Maria has nothing.



Helene strategically uses the pronouns "them" and "she" to insinuate that Carter is with another woman. Maria can see that Helene is trying to get a rise out of her and refuses to play along, informing Helene that she's "missing the point."



Maria's mental health continues to deteriorate. That she feels "relieved" when she is refused a barbiturate prescription refill suggests that she's now too indifferent to her life to care about being self-destructive.



CHAPTER 54

Maria stands on Western Street and waits for the agent from Freddy Chaikin's office to return from the Writers' Building to come get her. Maria is annoyed that Freddy Chaikin hadn't come himself, since he was the one who had set up the meeting with the director who was interested in casting her in his bike movie. When the agent arrives, he tells Maria that they've missed the director, who is likely preoccupied with the girl being cast as the lead. The agent avoids eye contact as he tries to convince Maria that her part—the teacher—is the role that drives the film forward. Maria leaves when the agent reveals that the leading actress is the director's girlfriend.

Freddy Chaikin's absence is a clear sign of Maria's growing insignificance: she's no longer important enough for her agent to bother showing up in person. Maria's irrelevance is also reflected in the fact that she wasn't considered for the lead role in the bike picture. Maria is upset to find out that the leading actress is the director's girlfriend because it confirms how expendable and replaceable she is. Years ago, she was this lead actress—the girlfriend of a director, cast in the lead role in a movie.



Once inside her car, a “humiliated” Maria weeps for herself, “for her mother,” and “for Kate.” She realizes that today is the day that her baby would’ve been born.

“Humiliated” by rejection, Maria craves the stability and unconditional love that she thinks her mother, Kate, and her unborn child will never be able to bring her.



CHAPTER 55

Maria has a flashback to her relationship with Ivan Costello. Costello had warned her upfront that he wasn’t interested in marriage or children, and that he’d squander away all her money. Maria had told him she was fine with this. After a pause, she’d said it’d be fine if she got pregnant, since “at least [she’d] have a baby.”

Although Maria insisted that she could be satisfied with the lacking, unstable lifestyle Ivan offered her, her longing for a baby reveals that she wanted the stability and purpose that Ivan couldn’t provide.



CHAPTER 56

Maria tells the hypnotist she won’t be returning for future sessions. The hypnotist pauses before telling Maria that she shouldn’t blame herself for her inability to restart her career. As Maria leaves the hypnotist’s office, he tells her that “some people don’t want to know.” Maria leaves, drives to the New Havana Ballroom, and calls Ivan Costello for help.

The hypnotist’s vague statement that “some people don’t want to know” is a fairly apt description of Maria, who will resort to any means of distract to avoid introspection—to avoid knowing herself. Maria’s decision to call Ivan reveals how desperate she is for distraction, since Chapter 55 has revealed Ivan to be a particularly uncaring lover.



CHAPTER 57

Ivan Costello asks Maria who her friend is “who loves” her. It’s 8:00 in New York, and Ivan is drunk. Maria can’t make herself tell Ivan what he expects to hear—“you”—and says she doesn’t know. She realizes she doesn’t even like him. Ivan berates Maria for her poor life choices, prompting Maria to end the call. Though Ivan leaves four messages with Maria’s service, she responds to none of them and calls Larry Kulik instead.

Maria’s inability to play along with Ivan’s drunken games reflects her growing exhaustion with upholding social norms: she’s too indifferent to give people the answers they want to hear.



CHAPTER 58

Maria sits in the ladies’ restroom at the Flamingo with a Cuban woman and an attendant. The Cuban woman remarks that the place is “like a cemetery,” but the attendant says it’s that way everywhere. The Cuban woman asks Maria if she’s sick. Inwardly, Maria thinks how she can’t go back to the craps tables because Benny Austin is there; she’d never expected to see Benny again, but there he was. He excitedly called Maria the spitting image of her mother and ordered a round of Cuba Libres. When Benny started talking about “as it was,” Maria ran to the bathroom.

This moment with Benny Austin is the scene Maria references in her opening monologue. Benny knew Maria before she left for New York and became corrupted by the entertainment industry. In Benny, Maria might have found the genuine connection and stability she’s been searching for, but she abandons him because she can’t stand to hear him talk about “as it was.” Maria seems to want an impossible thing: stability without roots.



Maria imagines Benny waiting for her all night, never once considering that “Harry and Francine Wyeth’s daughter” would bail on him. When Maria hears her name being paged, she ignores it, finishes smoking a cigarette, and heads back to Larry Kulik’s suite.

Maria is ashamed of the person she has become, but her unwillingness to confront her past renders her powerless to regain any sense of her former self.



CHAPTER 59

Larry Kulik tells Maria to invite Benny Austin up to his suite, which is currently full of Larry’s upscale friends and some girls, including the Cuban woman from the ladies’ room. Maria calls Benny and apologizes, telling him that she got sick and needs some rest. She promises to see him the next time he’s in Los Angeles, though Maria knows Benny never goes there. Benny is understanding and calls Maria “honey.” Maria feels instantly ashamed. She suddenly asks Benny if he remembers the last time he saw her, recounting the dinner where they all ate spare ribs. Benny tells her he remembers.

The people in Larry Kulik’s room don’t matter to Maria, yet she rejects Benny Austin and remains with them instead. Maria craves reassurance and stability but rejects Benny, who affectionately calls her “honey.” As Maria’s mental health deteriorates, it becomes more difficult to ascertain her reasons for doing anything. Although Maria repeatedly claims to have trouble with the past, she now voluntarily raises the subject of the past with Benny. It seems as though Maria no longer pairs action with consequence: she no longer subscribes to reason.



After hanging up with Benny, Maria emerges from the bedroom to find more people gathered in Larry’s suite. A comedian announces “new talent” when Maria enters the room, but Larry corrects him, saying “she’s not talent.” Maria wakes up early the next morning and tells Larry she’s taking the 7:00 flight out. Larry is annoyed and asks if she “want[s] to get paid for her time or something.”

When Larry corrects the comedian to clarify that Maria is “not talent,” he reduces her to nothing. He attempts to devalue her further by asking if she “want[s] to get paid for her time or something,” insinuating that she is a prostitute.



CHAPTER 60

It’s May. Maria, dressed in the silver vinyl dress she bought to feel better, leaves a party with an actor she met there. As Maria and the actor drive through the canyon in his Ferrari, she thinks she might be feeling good for the first time in a while. When they arrive at the actor’s house, he introduces Maria as “Myra” to the partygoers. Maria doesn’t like the actor, but she likes that he doesn’t know her. People pass around joints, and Maria dances in the kitchen.

Maria further deteriorates. Now, as the actor calls her “Myra,” she’s even deprived of her name. Maria’s new anonymity appears to reinvigorate her: she dances carelessly around the kitchen and appears to be at ease for the first time in months.



The actor appears in the doorway and brusquely invites Maria to have sex with him. Maria follows the actor to his bedroom. Right before he finishes, he breaks a popper under his nose and gruffly orders Maria not to move. He tells her to wake him in three hours, “with [her] tongue,” and immediately passes out. Maria dresses and leaves the house quietly, only to realize that she doesn’t have a car.

Maria’s sexual encounter with the actor is cold, impersonal, and unfulfilling. Her response to the encounter is equally impersonal; nothing about it appears to faze her.



Maria finds the actor's keys in the Ferrari and drives toward the freeway. She stops in Las Vegas for cigarettes and arrives in Tonopah by 8:00, though she's not sure what she's going to do there. She ponders seeing her parents' graves, but they're buried in Silver Wells, not Tonopah. Maria's journey ends when she's pulled over for speeding. The officer eyes her in her bare feet and silver dress. When he sees that the car is registered to someone else, he calls it in and learns that the Ferrari has been reported stolen.

Maria's aimless driving is far less structured than it was in the beginning of the novel. She used to have a routine: she'd leave around the same time each day, pack an egg, stop somewhere for a coke. Now, she can't hold onto a thought long enough to impose any sort of structure on her trip. She arrives in Tonopah, only to realize that she wants to visit her parents' graves, only to then realize that her parents' graves aren't there. Her thinking is fragmented and illogical. Maria's self-destructive behavior reaches a new low when she is arrested for stealing the actor's car.



CHAPTER 61

The police allow Maria to make one call. She contacts Freddy Chaikin, who pulls some strings to get the actor to drop charges, and the marijuana that was found on the car floor removed from the police report. By dusk, Maria and Freddy are flying across the **desert** in a rented jet. Freddy hands Maria a drink. When Maria takes a sip, all of her recent self-destructive behaviors rise to the surface, and she vomits on the floor. Freddy, who has just undertaken a "day-long effort to protect Carter," tells Maria he doesn't understand her "self-destructive" behavior, but he laughs it off. Maria goes to sleep.

Maria describes Freddy's damage control as his "day-long effort to protect Carter" because she knows that Freddy is acting on behalf of Carter's reputation rather than her own.



CHAPTER 62

The actor sends Maria roses. He calls to apologize but ends up berating her for not telling him who she was.

The actor was content to dehumanize Maria when she was nobody, but once he learns that she's connected to Carter Lang, such dehumanization is unacceptable.



Helene, who comes over a lot these days, enters Maria's house without knocking and asks about Maria's "baroque morning-after," which she heard about through BZ, who told her that Freddy called Carter about the debacle. Helene tests the color of a tube of Maria's lipstick on her wrist and tells Maria that everyone is legitimately concerned about her. Maria insists that she's okay, but Helene suggests that being under the covers in the middle of the day, going home with Johnny Waters, and being arrested in Nevada suggests otherwise. Maria tells Helene she's in bed because she has a headache, and Helene tells Maria she's just trying to help her before asking how Johnny Waters is in bed.

Helene's reasons for visiting Maria so often seem to be motivated by her desire to be a spectator to Maria's ongoing nervous breakdown than by genuine concern for Maria. The former is supported in how Helene refers to the day after Maria's arrest as a "baroque morning-after." Helene sees Maria's self-destructive spiral as stylish and entertaining and takes pleasure in watching it unfold. Johnny Waters is the name of the anonymous actor.



Next week, Freddy Chaikin calls some television producers and asks them to cast Maria “as a personal favor to Carter.” He also explains that they’ve got “a slightly suicidal situation” with Maria. Maria hears about these calls through Helene.

Even after their divorce, Maria has to rely on her connection to Carter to find work. Her identity remains professionally useless independent of his. The alliterative phrase Freddy uses to explain Maria’s condition to producers—“a slightly suicidal situation”—trivializes her mental health crisis.



Helene tells Maria that she saw a photo of her on the wall of the employment agency on Beverly, that she looked years younger in it, and that BZ thinks Maria should go to the beach for a few weeks.

Helene takes cruel pleasure in telling Maria how old and ragged she’s become, again illustrating how superficial and devoid of real care their friendship is.



Maria receives a note from Benny Austin, who tells her that she’s like a daughter to him, and that she can call him if she ever needs help. He also says that he has all her dad’s papers, including the mineral certificates, to give her, and includes a phone number for Maria to call to reach him.

Benny’s note invites Maria to revisit her past more meaningfully than ever before. Her father’s old papers present the opportunity to resurrect the nonexistent Silver Wells. This could be a transformative experience for Maria, whose damaged identity is so wrapped up in the unreachable past that died when her parents and Silver Wells ceased to exist.



Maria is out at a bar, swaying to the music, when Felicia Goodwin grabs her arm and tells her they’ll drive her home. Maria grows belligerent and insists that she can drive herself. The next thing Maria knows, she’s crying, Helene has her arm, and BZ is getting her coat. Maria lets Helene guide her outside. She gets sick in the car.

It’s unclear what—if anything—has caused Maria to drink so heavily tonight. Benny’s letter might have caused Maria’s drunkenness, but the way the novel jumps from scene to scene makes it difficult to follow Maria’s logic. The novel’s fragmented, aimless form mimics Maria’s state of mind: as she stops looking for meaning in cause-and-effect relationships, she stops thinking of her own actions in this manner, as well.



Maria wakes up in Helene’s room. At first, she thinks she’s alone, but then she sees BZ and Helene on the chaise. She thinks of “the faintest ugly memory” she has “of what had brought BZ and Helene together,” but the image is so horrible that Maria imagines herself anesthetized to clear the thought from her mind, and even this doesn’t erase the image.

Something about “what had brought BZ and Helene together” is so offensive or horrific to Maria that she’d rather be anesthetized than dwell on it. It’s unclear what about their relationship is so horrible, but Maria’s reaction hints that their marriage, which is all for show, is even more debased than it seems.



CHAPTER 63

Maria apologizes for drinking too much last night and says she can’t remember anything, but Helene, who has a bruise on her cheek and puffy eyes, tells Maria to drop it. An image of BZ holding a belt and Helen laughing flashes through Maria’s head. Suddenly, Helene bursts into tears. BZ appears in the doorway to tell Maria that he retrieved her car from the bar.

It’s apparent that the combination of alcohol and repressed, sad people led to violence—perhaps mixed with sex—last night. How much of the night Maria can’t remember versus how much she’s simply willing herself to forget is up for debate.



When BZ sees Helene crying, he tells her to pull herself together or “get out of the game.” At this point, BZ reasons, Helene should know that things are “play-or-pay.” Helene tells BZ to “go tell that to Carlotta,” and BZ hits her. When Maria begs him to stop, BZ turns to her, laughs, and claims that she wasn’t complaining last night.

This scene reveals that there’s a darker, more violent side of Helene and BZ’s arrangement that is rarely visible to the world. BZ’s comment about Maria not complaining last night implies she was a willing participant in the violence—which seems to have a sexual component to it—and it’s even possible that she’s the one who bruised Helene’s face. Being antagonistic seems fun to BZ, though, so he could be lying about what happened.



CHAPTER 64

Maria calls the number Benny Austin gave her from a Las Vegas highway but finds that it’s been disconnected. Later, when she enters her room at the Sands and sees that it has purple walls, she considers asking the bellboy to give her a different room, since her mother used to claim that purple rooms could make a person insane. Instead, she stays in the room, takes some aspirin, and tries not to think about BZ and Helene.

Benny’s disconnected phone line symbolizes Maria’s detachment from her past life. In Chapter 52, Maria vowed not to walk alone through the Sands casino past midnight, and the fact that she’s rented a room there suggests that she’s already on her way toward breaking this promise.



The next morning, Maria goes to the deserted post office and tries to have the clerk place a letter in Box 674, the number Benny gave her, but the clerk tells her she needs a stamp. Maria pays for the stamp and then sits on a bench near Box 674, smokes, and scans the F.B.I. wanted posters. She moves across the street to a diner and eats a grilled cheese sandwich. A few days later, a woman unlocks Box 674 and finds Maria’s letter to Benny. When Maria approaches her and asks if she knows Benny, the woman accuses Maria of tampering with her box.

It seems as though Benny has given Maria false or outdated contact information. Maria’s decision to return Las Vegas to reclaim her past through the symbolic gesture of retrieving her father’s papers could have been the pivotal moment in which she found clarity and stability. However, Benny’s flakiness—or perhaps deceit—deprives Maria of closure and only reinforces her detachment from the past and her suspicion that life is meaningless: she went to Las Vegas in pursuit of reasons and answers, but she found nothing.



CHAPTER 65

Maria eats an egg roll. A girl and two men sitting across the room watch her and try to guess her age. The girl guesses 36. Maria wears dark glasses for the remainder of her time in Las Vegas and doesn’t talk to anybody, gamble, swim, or sunbathe. She decides she’s there “on some business” but can’t decide what the business is. She spends her time driving and walking in and out of random hotels on the Strip and downtown.

The couple’s interest in Maria’s age is another example of people’s shallowness, and the girl’s incorrect guess leaves Maria feeling insecure. Maria hides behind dark glasses because she knows that her worth diminishes as she ages. Her decision that she’s in Las Vegas “on some business” reflects her attempt to assign meaning to her trip in the absence of Benny and her father’s papers. Maria isn’t particularly successful in this endeavor, though, and she spends her time in Las Vegas much like she spends her time in Los Angeles: drifting aimlessly from place to place, driving, and trying not to think.



When Maria returns to her room each night, she replays the events of that day. After a week, she begins to lose a sense of where her body ends and her surroundings begin. Her skin grows acutely sensitive, and she starts to hear voices.

Maria’s aimlessness deteriorates to the point that she can no longer distinguish self from other people or objects.



Maria runs into Freddy Chaikin at Caesar's, Freddy is appalled when he learns how long she's been there, though Maria retorts that it hasn't even been two weeks. Freddy insists that Maria come to a party later that night and gives her the room number, 1202.

Freddy is concerned about Maria, but like many people in Maria's life, Freddy seems to think that Maria's troubles can be cured through superficial means such as partying and taking things less seriously.



When Maria asks a hotel clerk to help her find room 1202, he assumes she wasn't invited and refuses to help her.

This is another reference to the list Maria assembles in Chapter 52. In the list, Maria promised herself that she'd never walk through Caesar's Palace past midnight. It's insinuated that Maria breaks this promise when she returns to Caesar's to attend the party. The clerk's humiliating rejection is more evidence that Maria is considered worthless and powerless without a man to vouch for her. Maria might superstitiously believe that she deserves this humiliation for breaking the promise she made to herself about walking through Caesar's.



Maria returns to the Sands and examines herself in the mirror. She orders a double bourbon from room service. When the bellboy arrives with her drink, Maria tells him she doesn't know anybody in town. The boy offers to introduce Maria to some men. She agrees and tells him to return in an hour. Once the boy leaves, Maria goes to her car and drives into the **desert**. She calls Freddy Chaikin from Los Angeles and asks him to pay the hotel bill and bring her clothes back with him.

Maria flees Las Vegas as suddenly as she arrived. As she continues to spiral out of control, her behavior becomes increasingly impulsive and disjointed. Maria's sudden decision to abandon the bellboy and his friends for the desert roads suggests that she wants to stop being devalued and humiliated by men and return to the pure, untarnished environment she associates nostalgically with childhood.



CHAPTER 66

Maria and Carter stand on the sun deck of Helene and BZ's house. Carter comments on Maria being underweight and tells her he's been trying to reach her for weeks. He explains that he's going to start filming a new picture in the **desert** in 10 days and wants her there with him. Maria accuses Carter of only being concerned that she can't take care of herself. Carter tells her that there are all kinds of rumors going around about her.

While Carter may be genuinely concerned about Maria, his concern seems rooted in a deeper desire to control her. His invitation for Maria to join him on set in the desert seems like a strategic attempt to exploit her emotional vulnerability, coercing her into travelling to a place where he can more easily monitor her by framing the trip as a nostalgic reunion of sorts.



Carter becomes irritated when Maria asks him to explain what, exactly, people are saying about her, and he raises his arm to strike her. But just then, a long-haired girl in a short nightgown appears in the doorway. The girl introduces herself as Jeanelle. Once Jeanelle leaves, Maria begins to cry and asks Carter if he's going to be having sex with Susannah Wood on the set of his new film. Carter tells Maria that she's totally lost it.

Carter loses his temper when Maria challenges him, again suggesting that his main concern is trying to control her. He tries to insinuate that she's the one who's crazy despite his own violent impulses, again gaslighting her. Carter's sympathy for Maria is conditional; he offers her compassion only so long as she doesn't talk back or question his authority.



Inside, Jeanelle rambles nonsensically. Helene lies on the couch, staring silently at the ceiling. In an overly cheerful voice, BZ tells her Maria is going to join them in the **desert** and sends Jeanelle into the bedroom to get some coke. Once Jeanelle leaves, BZ orders Helene to get rid of her, but Helene only whispers that BZ “started it.”

Helene and BZ seem to be in the middle of an argument, but both of them are so skilled at keeping up appearances that it’s impossible to know what the argument is about. Subtle signs of discontent in their marriage have become more apparent in the aftermath of their big blowout in Chapter 63.



CHAPTER 67

Carter tries to convince Maria to go to the **desert** with him, BZ, and Helene. When Maria declines the invitation, Carter tells her she’s welcome to stay behind and kill herself. Maria stays home. She finds a new doctor to prescribe her barbiturates and takes long drives in the evenings.

Carter probably expected Maria yield to him the second time he invited her to join him in the desert. He tells her to stay home and kill herself because he feels humiliated and disempowered by her rejection.



One night, Maria sees a lighted cigar in her darkened living room and hears Ivan Costello’s voice chide her for not calling her answering service. A visibly drunk Ivan tells Maria to come to him, but she says no. Ivan tells her that’s fine, that she’ll “like it better” if she resists. Later that night, Ivan tells Maria he came to her to “make [her] remember.” Maria tells him she can’t and orders Ivan to leave her alone.

Given that Maria is taking barbiturates, which can cause hallucinations as a serious side effect, it’s unclear whether this passage is happening in reality or in Maria’s mind. Maria resists Ivan’s advances, but he ignores her, insisting that she’ll “like it better” if she resists. The narrative doesn’t describe their ensuing sexual encounter, but it’s insinuated that Ivan violently assaults Maria—or at the very least, Maria passively chooses to go through the motions of another unfulfilling, numbing sex act with a man she doesn’t care about. Whether this passage really happened or not, Maria’s sudden decision to expel Ivan from her home suggests that she’s growing tired of using meaningless sex to distract herself from her meaningless life.



That afternoon, Maria calls Les Goodwin and says that “something bad” is going to happen to her. Les tries to make her laugh and gets annoyed when he’s unsuccessful. He complains about needing to do a rewrite and having a fight with Felicia. Maria hangs up on Les and drives into the **desert**.

Maria calls Les for comfort in the aftermath of her violent encounter with Ivan (or her hallucination), but Les offers only shallow attempts at humor in response to Maria’s genuine cries for help. Maria drives into the desert as a last resort, having exhausted all the remaining men who are available to comfort her.



CHAPTER 68

In an internal monologue, Maria recounts how her name started to appear in the paper after she married Carter, which led to her receiving mail from “mad people.” Though the mail initially bothered her, she no longer needs someone to write her a letter for her to prove she is on their mind, since she can simply sense it now.

It took marrying Carter for people to start paying attention to Maria. Her remark about being able to sense when someone is thinking about her implies that now that she’s a public figure who has suffered a public nervous breakdown, she simply assumes people are thinking “mad” things about her and has learned not to care.



CHAPTER 69

On Maria's first night at the motel, Carter turns away from her in bed. The next night, he sleeps in the other room and tells Maria that things haven't improved, and that she clearly doesn't want them to. Some nights, Carter can't sleep and rattles around the room, intentionally banging open drawers and slamming the door to wake up Maria. When Maria tells Carter he can't disturb her since she wasn't sleeping in the first place, he berates her and tells her to die.

Carter is still angry with Maria for twice rejecting his offer to join him in the desert. He seems to sense that he was her last resort and resents her for it. This is hypocritical of him, however, since he, too, is seeing other people. Carter's rage escalates when his attempts at physical intimidation don't faze her. Carter finds fulfillment in making Maria feel meek and insecure, so when she asserts herself by not reacting to his physical rage, he no longer has any use for her and tells her to die.



After dressing and drinking a coke, Maria drives out to the shooting location. Carter tells her that she's making Susannah nervous—that an actress needs space to work. Maria reminds him that *she* has worked as an actress. Carter avoids eye contact and suggests that Maria do something with Helene to pass the time.

Carter emphasizes Susannah's professionalism while downplaying Maria's acting experience to make Maria feel insecure and obsolete.



CHAPTER 70

The town in the **desert** the movie crew is staying in is located between Death Valley and the Nevada state line. It's a small town (though not as small as Silver Wells) and contains a motel that the sheriff's wife operates, two gas stations, a small store, a coffee shop, a church, and a bar called The Rattler Room that only sells beer. There's also a bathhouse with a hot spring that attracts "old people, believers in cures and the restorative power of desolation." A woman whom Maria runs into at the coffee shop tells her the town isn't bad—she's lived in worse. Maria agrees.

Maria sees the small desert town as a window into her past. Maria's nostalgic portrayal of the bathhouse is reminiscent of the nostalgia she has for certain elements of her childhood in Silver Wells. She idealizes the "old people" who frequent the bathhouse for actually having values and beliefs, for "believ[ing] in cures and the restorative power of desolation." In contrast, the people she's staying with have no values and believe in nothing.



CHAPTER 71

A teenage boy who mans the gate to the bathhouse tells Maria she must be with the movie, since he knows everyone in town. Maria tells the boy that it's her husband who is with the movie, and that she actually grew up in a town nearby, but the boy hardly pays attention. Maria wonders why she came to the bathhouse, which is filled with old people with wrinkled skin and terminal diseases and fears. She tries to engage with the boy, but he's only interested in the film.

Maria's expectations for the town fall short. The boy seems more interested in the movie crew than in connecting with Maria over their shared experience growing up in a small town. Yet again, Maria tries and fails to forge a meaningful connection. The old people, meanwhile, aren't hearty relics of a more resilient, virtuous time—they're wrinkled, decaying, and afraid. Just as Maria has a hard time relating her past to her present, she also has a hard time reconciling her idealized images of the past with reality.



Later, Maria sits in Susannah Wood's room with Carter, whom Susannah orders to turn up the music. Maria worries that somebody will complain about the noise, but Carter turns up the music anyway. Susannah mocks Maria's anxiety, suggesting that she's afraid of getting arrested again. BZ tells Carter to turn down the music, but Carter ignores him. Maria stands up and announces that everybody in the room makes her "physically sick." Helene tells Maria not to say anything unless it's "funny."

Later on, Maria asks Carter if he likes sleeping with Susannah, and Carter says not particularly. When Maria comes to BZ's room later that night, he tells her that Carter is with Harrison, the film's lead actor, working on a tricky scene. BZ says he told Carter that he and Maria would meet them in Las Vegas—Helene is already there. Maria nurses a glass of bourbon and says she's tired of Harrison and Susannah. BZ tells Maria that she's "getting where" he is.

CHAPTER 72

After their third week in the **desert**, Susannah is beaten in a Las Vegas hotel room. Though Susannah is okay, her face is bruised, which stalls filming. The publicity department becomes involved and sends Harrison Porter to do a Telethon for Southern Nevada Cystic Fibrosis. The paper doesn't mention Susannah's assault. Carter is annoyed by Maria's pleas for more information and tells her, "Susannah doesn't take things quite as hard as you do." He tells Maria to leave if she's going to keep bothering him about the incident. Maria begins to pack her bags.

BZ, who is in town for meetings at the studio, appears in the doorway. He tells Carter the studio isn't happy with his dailies. When BZ asks what's up with Maria, Carter tells him to ask her himself and leaves the room.

Once they're alone, BZ tells Maria that it was Harrison who beat up Susannah, and that Carter had been with Helene when the assault occurred. Maria is silent, and BZ tells her to stop acting like "it makes some difference to [her], who anybody [sleeps with.]" BZ insists that if Maria really cared about things like that, she'd "be gone already."

Carter exerts dominance over Maria by following Susannah's orders to turn up the music instead of Maria's request to turn it down. Although Susannah antagonizes Maria first, Maria commits the graver social offense by not being "funny" and making everyone feel uncomfortable. Maria's claim that everyone makes her "physically sick" is true: while Helene thrives on gossip and superficiality and exudes a sheen of good health while in social settings, Maria only grows paler, thinner, and weaker.



Though BZ shares Maria's disillusionment with life in Hollywood, he prefers to play along and tends not to divulge his true feelings to Maria very often. Though they have a mutual understanding, that understanding remains largely unspoken. The candidness BZ exhibits in this scene marks a turning point in their relationship. When Maria confides in BZ about how exhausted she is with everyone, BZ admits, without pretense, that Maria is "getting where" he is. This suggests that the depth of BZ's disenchantment with life is more serious than he's let on.



Susannah's bruised face is clearly what's most important to Carter, since it robs him of the ability control his filming schedule, and he's annoyed by Maria's concern for Susannah. "Susannah doesn't take things quite as hard as you do" is an insult designed to dismiss Maria's concern for Susannah while comparing the two women, suggesting that Susannah comes out on top.



Carter's parting comment to BZ implies that Maria needs to know something, but Carter doesn't want to be the one to tell her.



Carter and Helene's affair comes as a shock to Maria. BZ downplays both the betrayal and Maria's hurt, claiming that if Maria cared about something as trivial as this, she'd "be gone already." To BZ, Maria's decision to stick around is evidence enough that she doesn't care about things as deeply as she claims.



Much later that night, Carter sees Maria awake at the edge of the bed, staring in the void, and asks her what she wants. Maria claims to want nothing, which enrages Carter, and he goes off on Maria for her aging, weathered appearance and “menopausal depression.” Maria tells him to stop “talk[ing] crazy.” Carter tells her to get out but takes it back once she starts to pack. Maria asks Carter why he antagonizes her, and he tells her it’s “to find out if [she’s] alive.”

Maria appears to heed BZ’s advice: when Carter asks her what she wants, she claims to want (or to care about) nothing. Maria’s indifference infuriates Carter, who, per his own admission, purposefully manipulates Maria “to find out if [she’s] alive.” Carter’s admission of manipulation is itself manipulative: he tries to reframe his abuse and manipulation of Maria as a favor: he’s looking out for her, making sure she’s “alive.”



CHAPTER 73

There are 10 days remaining in the **desert** shoot. Carter tells Maria to come out and watch, but Maria doesn’t go and sits in the motel office instead. She studies the sheriff’s framed photos of accidents that hang on the office wall and imagines being in the car when they happened. She envisions the **rattlesnake** she thinks must be on the embankment. The next day, Maria borrows a gun from the film’s stunt man and shoots road signs along the highway. When Carter asks her why she did it, she replies, “I just did it.”

The images of car wrecks remind Maria of her mother’s death. When Maria imagines rattlesnakes that lie coiled on the embankment, she’s meditating on the idea that danger can emerge out of nowhere and with little warning. Maria performs her road sign shooting spree aimlessly and without emotion. She can think of no explanations for her actions other than that she “just did it.” Just like her relationships, which Maria has described as having no point beyond themselves, Maria’s shooting spree is meaningless.



Sometime later, Carter confronts Maria about her perpetually “glazed expression” and encourages her to come out with everyone today. Maria says she will but goes to the coffee shop instead. The woman who runs the shop invites Maria to her trailer at the edge of town. At the trailer, the woman mentions how someone named Lee ran off with a girl from Barstow, which causes Maria to cry. The woman asks her if she ever “made a decision,” explaining that she made hers “at a meeting” in 1961 and has “never shed one tear since.” Maria replies, “No.”

BZ’s advice seems to have struck a chord with Maria. She’s been forced to reevaluate how much she actually cares about anything. The “glazed expression” on her face suggests that she cares less than she thought she did. When the woman asks Maria if she ever “made a decision,” she’s alluding to the decision to join a 12-step program like Alcoholics Anonymous. Maria’s simple response, “no,” is an answer to the woman’s specific question. It’s also an answer to whether Maria ever “made a decision,” in the general sense. In responding “no,” Maria indirectly affirms her commitment to an indifferent, uncaring existence. She has not “made a decision” about anything in a long time, nor does she ever wish to make a decision again.



CHAPTER 74

In an internal monologue, Maria remembers her father teaching her to assess the probabilities of a craps layout when she was 10 years old. “it goes as it lays,” her father would say. “Don’t do it the hard way.” The other lesson “was that overturning a rock was apt to reveal a rattlesnake.” Maria thinks that while these lessons still “hold up,” they seem “not to apply.”

This chapter is taken from a personal account Maria delivers while she is hospitalized in the aftermath of BZ’s death. Maria’s father’s advice to treat life as a craps game seems to inform the philosophy she follows today: play the cards you’ve been dealt, and “don’t do it the hard way,” or take things at face value without overcomplicating them in an attempt to find a deeper meaning. The other lesson, “that overturning a rock was apt to reveal a rattlesnake,” offers a similar lesson: if you are looking for trouble, you’re apt to find it, so don’t attack things that are best left alone. When Maria claims that these lessons “hold up” but seem “not to apply,” she means that while both of these lessons are reliably true, their relevance to her situation isn’t immediately apparent. There’s also a contradiction imbedded in them both: the general idea of both lessons is that it’s best to take things at face value and not search too hard for hidden meaning. But in order to apply a lesson to one’s life, it becomes necessary to search for meaning. Therefore, while both lessons may be true, realizing this truth (finding the reason for it) isn’t possible without contradicting the lessons themselves.



CHAPTER 75

Maria sits in the motel. BZ arrives and offers to “entertain” her, but Maria says she doesn’t feel like talking to anybody. BZ tells her that Carter is having sex with Helene. Maria says that nothing matters.

BZ seems to be testing Maria here, comparing her response the second time he tells her about Carter and Helene to the first time he broke the news. Maria’s response, that nothing matters, confirms that she and BZ are now on the same page. They have fully committed to the belief that life is meaningless.



CHAPTER 76

In an internal monologue, Maria states that Carter and Helene can tell themselves that it was Maria’s craziness that caused BZ’s death, if that’s what makes them feel better. Maria regards Carter and Helene as people who “still believe in cause-effect,” and “that people are either sane or insane.” She recalls one time that Helene visited her in Neuropsychiatric. Maria had tried to explain to Helene that she was innocent of the “carelessness” and “selfishness” of which Helene accused her, because she “knew precisely what BZ was doing.” Helene had screamed.

In another internal monologue that takes place during her hospitalization, Maria criticizes Helene and Carter’s response to BZ’s death. Carter and Helene are unlike Maria because they “still believe in cause-effect.” This means that they believe that there are always logical ways to explain why things happen and why people behave the way they do. Their belief that “people are either sane or insane” supports an absolutist view of morality in which sane people act logically and insane people act illogically. Maria challenges these views when she tries to explain to Helene the baffling contradiction that she “knew precisely what BZ was doing” when he died and allowed it to happen anyway.



Maria calls herself “a radical surgeon of [her] own life.” Implicitly addressing Helene and Carter, she states “Never discuss. Cut,” before likening herself to “the only man in Los Angeles County who does clean work.”

Maria metaphorically compares herself to “a radical surgeon of [her] own life,” insinuating that she “cut” Helene and Carter out of her life sometime after she was hospitalized. Maria’s subsequent comparison of herself to “the only man in Los Angeles County who does clean work” repurposes the phrase Carter used to describe the doctor he selected to perform Maria’s abortion. Maria’s decision to remove two toxic people from her life without their consent (“Never discuss. Cut.”) allows her to reclaim the consent Carter denied her when he coerced her into having an abortion, and to reclaim the respect she was denied when Carter and Helene had an affair behind her back.



CHAPTER 77

Maria tells Carter a story about a man at the trailer park who told his wife he was going for a walk to talk to God, only to be bitten by a **rattlesnake**. Carter ignores Maria and tells her she has one last chance to tell him what she wants. Maria says nothing, and Carter leaves the motel. There are only three days left in the shoot.

This chapter returns to Maria’s pre-hospital days. Maria’s anecdote about the man is presented as a moralizing tale, when in reality, it contains no moral lesson. The man’s quest to talk to God didn’t cause the rattlesnake bite, nor did his decision to go for a walk or live in a place where rattlesnakes also live. In reality, the man was bitten by a rattlesnake because tragedy can strike anyone at any time, and the man just happened to have the misfortune to cross paths with a rattlesnake that day. The anecdote also reaffirms the lesson Maria’s father taught her: in turning to God to help him understand the world, the man overcomplicated things and suffered the consequences. The man would’ve fared better had he taken things at face value—without the guidance of religion—and let the answers come to him intuitively. Maria’s response to Carter when he asks her what she wants gradually deteriorates to the point that she can no longer use (or no longer needs to use) language to answer him. First she doesn’t know what she wants, then she wants nothing, then she has no need to answer the question at all.



CHAPTER 78

In an internal monologue, Maria recalls that she didn’t mind being in Neuropsychiatric, except for the times when Helene and Carter visited her. The only thing she hates about the place she is now is that she isn’t with Kate.

That Helene and Carter joint visit suggests that they’ve remained in a relationship in the aftermath of BZ’s death. Though Maria wants to be with Kate, the sad reality is that her chances of this happening have never been slimmer. Maria is now institutionalized and has cut off contact with Carter, who presumably has custody of the child, given both the divorce Maria’s compromised position.



CHAPTER 79

Carter comes in with Helene and tells Maria that they shot the last master after she left that afternoon, and that filming is nearly complete. Helene says that Susannah was excellent. BZ and Maria say nothing. Helene gushes about how well Carter and Helene work together.

This chapter takes place back in the desert. If it weren't enough that Helene is involved in an affair with Maria's ex-husband, she also makes a point of flaunting Carter's relationship with Susannah in an effort to make Maria jealous. Harkening back to the opening lines of the novel, Helene's cruelty almost has begun to parallel Iago's in its absence of discernable motive. Helene neither hates nor feels particularly threatened by Maria, so there's no clear answer to explain why she treats her so carelessly.



CHAPTER 80

In an internal monologue, Maria mentions how Ivan Costello called her while she was institutionalized to tell her that she's "lost [her] sense of humor." Maria wonders if humor is the only thing she's lost.

Ivan Costello isn't the first character to accuse Maria of having "lost [her] sense of humor." The irony is that the humor everyone thinks is lost on Maria is always at her expense and always attached to matters that are very important to her.



CHAPTER 81

Helene compliments Susannah Wood on her great performance that day. BZ agrees. Susannah and Helene discuss their plans to go to Vegas and see Sylvie Roth, Cassie, and Leona. BZ says he doesn't want to go. When Helene asks him what he does want, he says "exactly nothing." Maria drops the ice tray she'd been holding.

Maria reacts with great shock to BZ's admittance that he wants "exactly nothing" because she understands him enough to take his answer seriously. To Maria, BZ's announcement that he wants "nothing" is practically a declaration of death.



CHAPTER 82

In an internal monologue, Maria reveals that, while “Carter and Helene still ask questions,” she stopped asking herself questions once she realized that “the answer is ‘nothing’” Knowing this, her only plans for the future are to rescue Kate and “do some canning.” In fact, Maria thinks, there might be some money to be made in canning. This latter observation leads Maria to realize that, after all this time, she’s still her parents’ daughter. She thinks that maybe her parents and Benny “knew the answer too, and pretended they didn’t.” Maria decides that “you call it as you see it, and stay in the action,” though “BZ thought otherwise.”

Maria’s monologue takes place during her hospitalization. Her realization that “the answer is ‘nothing’” evokes BZ’s answer to Helene in the previous chapter. With this in mind, Maria seems to insinuate that it was BZ’s death that inspired her to stop asking questions. Maria’s proposed plans for the future are simple and straightforward. They embody the lessons her father taught her and hearken back to the simpler way of life she experienced growing up in Silver Wells. Maria’s commitment to these plans reflects her inner desire to regain all that she lost when she exchanged her simple, straightforward life in Silver Wells for a superficial life in Hollywood. Maria speculates that her parents “knew the answer too, and pretended they didn’t,” proposing that while her parents might have been privy to life’s meaninglessness, they chose to “stay in the action” and play the hand life dealt them, regardless. Maria and her parents’ stance differs from BZ’s, though. When Marie specifies that “BZ thought otherwise,” she refers to his decision to end his life and exit the game.



CHAPTER 83

BZ is surprised when Maria opens the door, since he assumed she’d be in Las Vegas with everyone else. Maria asks BZ why he’s so sad. BZ puts down the bottle of vodka he brought with him. He removes a handful of Seconal pills from his pocket and offers some to Maria. When Maria declines, BZ accuses her of “still playing” the game and warns her that she’s eventually going to get tired of playing and be just like him. BZ explains that he came to Maria tonight because the two of them “know something” the others don’t and have “been out there where nothing is.”

This chapter takes place in the desert. BZ thinks that once a person “know[s] something” about life’s meaninglessness and has “been out there where nothing is,” they have no choice but to exit the game. He sees suicide as the only bearable option for a person in his and Maria’s enlightened, disillusioned position.



BZ lies on the bed next to Maria and takes her hand. They listen to a fight break out in the bar across the street. Maria begins to drift off to sleep but opens her eyes in time to see BZ washing down the pills with a glass of water. BZ tells Maria to hold him and go back to sleep.

This is the climax of the novel, yet it’s hardly a climactic moment: Maria sees BZ takes the pills, makes no effort to stop him, and promptly falls back asleep. The subdued manner in which the scene unfolds emphasizes Maria’s and BZ’s very different approaches to their adjacent brands of nihilism: whereas BZ believes he has an existential imperative to succumb to nothingness, Maria believes that life is equally as meaningless as death, and she embodies this indifference by choosing neither life nor death. She simply stays in the game, because those were the cards she was dealt. Maria’s indifference is reflected in the subdued atmosphere of her and BZ’s final moments tighter.



The next thing Maria knows, Carter is shaking her awake. All the lights are on, and Helene is screaming. Maria closes her eyes to block out the light, Helene is screaming, and her thoughts about what will happen next. She squeezes BZ's hand.

Carter and Helene are upset by BZ's death because they can't make sense of it, while Maria calmly squeezes BZ's hand because she knows there's nothing to make sense of.



CHAPTER 84

In an internal monologue, Maria mentions that Carter called her today, though she refused to speak with him. Maria offers “one thing in [her] defense,” which is that she “know[s] something Carter never knew, or Helene, or maybe you,” which is “what ‘nothing’ means.” Despite this, she “keep[s] on playing.” BZ would’ve asked Maria “why,” to which she now replies, “why not.”

From the hospital, Maria justifies her complicity in BZ's death on the basis that she knows “what ‘nothing’ means,” which is “something Carter never knew, or Helene, or maybe you.” In using the second-person perspective to address her audience directly, Maria invites the audience into her world, allowing them to decide for themselves whether they will try to ascribe meaning to her story, or whether they will take what she says at face value. The final words of the novel are a hypothetical conversation between Maria and BZ. In response to BZ's question of “why” Maria “keep[s] on playing,” Maria offers a simple response, “why not.” Their differing answers outline their different approaches to nihilism. Because BZ's brand of nihilism maintains that life is intrinsically meaningless and without value, he chooses death as a preferable alternative. But Maria's philosophy attributes an equal meaninglessness to life and death. “Why not” isn't an affirmation of life, but an amoral indifference. She lives simply because it's the hand she was dealt.





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