

The Girl on the Train



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF PAULA HAWKINS

Born in Zimbabwe, where her father worked as a professor and financial journalist, Paula Hawkins moved to London, England at the age of 17. After obtaining a degree from the University of Oxford, Hawkins began working as a business reporter for *The Times*, later publishing a business advice book for women based on her background in politics, philosophy, and economics. After dabbling in freelance journalism and romance-novel-writing, Hawkins turned to crime fiction in the mid-2000s. Her novel *The Girl on the Train* was published in 2015 to widespread acclaim; it debuted in the number-one slot on *The New York Times* Best Seller list and remained there for 13 consecutive weeks. *The Girl on the Train* has sold nearly 20 million copies worldwide, has been translated into over 30 languages, and in 2016 was adapted into a major motion picture starring Emily Blunt and Justin Theroux. Hawkins's second crime novel, *Into the Water*, was released in 2017 to mixed reviews. Hawkins lives and writes in South London.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Girl on the Train is set in contemporary London, and it features middle-class characters who are striving to realize outdated ideals of financial success, familial togetherness, and home ownership in the midst of a rapidly-changing social environment and global economy. Anna represents the ideal modern woman who “has it all”: a home, a family, and a husband who supports her. Rachel and Megan, however, represent existential challenges to Anna's perfect embodiment of maternal instinct and femininity. Rachel, an alcoholic who has long struggled with infertility, represents the struggles of what happens when one tries yet fails to be a complete, perfect “modern woman.” Megan, a wild child who cannot—or will not—stay still and adapt to the pressures of domesticity, represents resistance to an unattainable paradigm of contemporary womanhood.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The Girl on the Train is one of many contemporary mysteries narrated by several unreliable narrators. Collectively, the narrators' purpose is to keep readers in suspense until a final, game-changing twist is revealed. Another novel in this vein is Gillian Flynn's iconic 2012 novel [Gone Girl](#), a crossover literary sensation which has been adapted into a major motion picture. Flynn's 2006 debut novel, [Sharp Objects](#), also featured an unreliable female narrator. Danya Kukafka's 2017 debut, *Girl in*

Snow, is yet another novel revolving around the murder of a young woman. Like *The Girl on the Train* and [Gone Girl](#), *Girl in Snow* features an assortment of narrators struggling to solve a heinous crime, each of whom have their own personal investment—and potential connection—to the death of the titular girl. These “girl” thrillers have been widely recognized as a literary phenomenon that reckons with modern-day misogyny and violence against women.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Girl on the Train
- **Where Written:** London, England
- **When Published:** 2015
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Thriller
- **Setting:** London, England; the suburbs of Witney and Ashbury near Oxford, England
- **Climax:** Rachel attacks her murderous ex-husband Tom in an act of self-defense. Tom's new wife, Anna—equally hurt and disillusioned by his lies—aids Rachel in delivering the final blow.
- **Antagonist:** Tom Watson
- **Point of View:** First Person, rotating between the perspectives of Rachel, Megan, and Anna

EXTRA CREDIT

Nom De Plume. Before breaking into the thriller genre, Paula Hawkins honed her novel-writing skills penning four romance novels under the name Amy Silver. In spite of the vast differences between the genres, “Amy's” early romance titles explore many of the same themes as her contemporary mysteries.

What's In a Name? Rachel Watson, the primary protagonist and narrator of the novel, is somewhat of an amateur detective. Uncoincidentally, shares a surname with one of the most famous detectives in literature: Dr. John Watson, roommate and sidekick of Sherlock Holmes.



PLOT SUMMARY

Rachel Watson is an alcoholic woman in her mid-thirties. She recently got divorced from her now-ex-husband Tom, and she's also lost her home and her job amid debilitating struggles with infertility, depression, and alcoholism. Rachel occupies herself by riding the **train** back and forth between London and her

suburb of Ashbury each day because it offers a view of the back garden at her old home, 23 Blenheim Road in the suburb of Witney. Rachel enjoys spying on a gorgeous young couple who live a few doors down at 15 Blenheim Road and imagining what their lives must be like. One morning, Rachel spies the woman who lives in number 15 kissing another man on her terrace. Rachel becomes furious at the woman's infidelity yet intrigued by what could be happening beneath the surface of her picture-perfect life.

As the novel progresses, Hawkins alternates between Rachel's narration (which takes place over the summer of 2013 after the woman at number 15, Megan Hipwell, goes missing), and the narration of Megan herself. The voice of Tom's new wife, Anna, is also interspersed. Megan's narration begins in the spring of 2012 and catalogues the tumultuous year leading up to her disappearance. During this year, Megan experiences marital problems with her possessive but passionate husband, Scott, and she visits a therapist named Dr. Kamal Abdic who helps her unspool the threads of her dark past. She also has an affair with Tom Watson, whom she meets through babysitting his daughter Evie.

Megan quits her nanny job at the end of the summer of 2012, uncomfortable with the responsibility of caring for a baby each day and increasingly nervous that Anna will discover her affair with Tom. Megan struggles to parse her romantic and sexual feelings for Tom and Scott—and all the while, old traumas create a nagging sense of restlessness within her. During this time, she confides in Dr. Abdic about her painful past—notably about a relationship during her teen years with Mac (a friend of her deceased brother Ben), and the child they had (and lost) together, Libby. Megan gradually develops romantic feelings for Dr. Abdic, and when Megan discovers that she is pregnant and realizes that the baby could be either Scott's or Tom's, she asks Dr. Abdic for advice about what to do. He assures her that she has come far enough in life to be a good mother. Emboldened by Abdic's faith in her, Megan reaches out to Tom to tell him about the baby. When he encourages her to get an abortion, an incensed Megan starts screaming at Tom, threatening to make him pay for the child. Tom picks up a rock and bludgeons Megan to death.

Meanwhile, in 2013, Rachel wakes one Sunday morning to discover that she is covered in cuts, bruises, and dirt. She cannot remember what happened the night before—except that she went to Blenheim Road and had a fight with Tom and Anna. As Rachel tries to piece together the events of Saturday night, she is shocked to learn from the news that Megan Hipwell—the woman she has been observing from the train—is missing. Rachel feels certain, because she was in Witney, that she must have seen something important. Rachel obsessively reads articles about Megan's disappearance—none of which mention the fact that Megan was having an affair. Rachel eases up on her drinking as she becomes determined to investigate

Megan's disappearance on her own. She returns to Witney to visit the underpass beneath the train station, remembering that she was there on the night Megan disappeared. While in the underpass, she has a sensorially vivid flashbacks of pain, fear, and violence.

When Rachel returns home, she finds that the police and a detective by the name of Gaskill are waiting for her. Tom and Anna have told them that Rachel was in Witney the night of Megan's disappearance—and that Rachel recently snuck into their house, carrying Evie off into the garden. Rachel insists she would never harm Tom, Anna, or Evie, and that she doesn't recall seeing Megan on Saturday. The police urge Rachel to stay away from Blenheim Road. Feeling guilty, Rachel goes to the police station the following day to inform Gaskill and another detective, Riley, about Megan's affair. During the interview, Rachel is shocked to learn that Megan worked as a nanny for Tom and Anna. Afterward, she gets in touch with Scott via email, feeling that she needs to inform him about Megan's affair. When the police call Rachel in for more questioning, she gets drunk (breaking her sobriety) and blacks out again one evening, sending more emails to Scott—and Tom—in the process. Rachel is surprised when Scott emails her back and wants to meet up to discuss Megan.

Rachel meets with Scott and describes having seen Megan kiss another man from the train. Scott shows Rachel a picture of Megan's therapist, Dr. Kamal Abdic, and asks if Abdic is the man Rachel saw. She confirms that he was. As Scott begins confiding in Rachel about his relationship with Megan, Rachel wonders how much she can trust Scott—he is, after all, a murder suspect. The next morning on the train, Rachel spots a man reading an article about an arrest made in the Hipwell case. Rachel disembarks at Witney and hurries to Scott's house. Scott pulls her inside and explains that Rachel doesn't need to worry—it's Abdic the authorities have arrested. As Rachel departs, she runs into Tom, Anna, and Evie on the street. The next day, Rachel ignores calls from Tom as she watches the news and drinks. She blacks out and falls asleep. In the morning, she discovers she placed multiple calls to Tom and Scott in the middle of the night. She calls Scott back, and Scott accuses her of lying to him—he has spoken to the police and learned that Rachel is not a friend of Megan's and that Rachel herself was at one point a person of interest in the case.

The summer stretches on. Abdic is released due to insufficient evidence. Rachel drinks heavily and experiences nightmares about the underpass in Witney. Rachel reaches out to Tom, begging him to tell her what happened the night of Megan's disappearance, but he is evasive. Scott reaches out to Rachel and apologetically invites her over. The two bond as they discuss Rachel's issues with infertility and Scott's struggles to inspire maternal instincts within Megan. Anna spots Rachel in the neighborhood and, believing Rachel is dangerous, becomes perturbed by Rachel's frequent visits to the Hipwell house. One

morning, while watching the news, Rachel learns that the body of a pregnant woman has been found in Corly Wood, near Witney—it is Megan. Rachel begins experiencing more flashbacks to the night of Megan’s disappearance: she remembers ducking from a man’s fist and seeing a woman in blue getting into a car on the other side of the underpass. Determined to recover her lost memories—and to get a read on Abdic—Rachel makes an appointment at his practice. During the session, Rachel tells Abdic about her failed marriage and her struggles with alcoholism. She tells him that she often blacks out—but that when she’s told the horrible things she said and did while drunk, she feels she couldn’t have done them.

The next morning, Rachel experiences a dream which is really a memory: a horrible fight with Tom culminating in smashed photographs and angry words. Rachel takes a walk to clear her head. At a newsstand, she sees a front-page headline about Megan being a “child killer”—authorities have discovered that Megan accidentally (or purposefully) killed her infant daughter years ago. Anna sees the headline too, and she becomes ashamed of hiring Megan to look after Evie. Anna tells Tom that she wants to leave Witney forever, but Tom shrugs her off. A few days later, when authorities recover the remains of Megan’s first child buried in a seaside town, Rachel heads over to the Hipwell house to comfort Scott. The two of them get drunk and have sex. In the morning when Rachel leaves, she runs into Anna once again. Anna lobbies Tom to call the police and get rid of Rachel once and for all, but instead, Tom asks Rachel to meet to discuss her frequent presence on Blenheim Road. Rachel insists that she’s become friendly with Scott and has no interest in disrupting Tom and Anna’s life. After another session with Abdic, Rachel returns to the underpass to try to recall more memories. Anna, having seen Rachel on the street yet again, becomes convinced that Tom and Rachel are having an affair.

Soon after, Scott asks Rachel over again. When she arrives, he drunkenly tells her that the DNA tests done on Megan’s corpse have shown that the baby she was carrying was neither his nor Abdic’s. Scott demands to know what Megan told Rachel, eventually discovering that Rachel didn’t know Megan at all. Scott attacks Rachel and imprisons her in the spare room upstairs for a short time before letting her go, after which Rachel calls the authorities and tells them what happened. They warn her again to stay away from Scott. Rachel calls Tom and begins pressing him for more details about the night of Megan’s disappearance, but he is cruel and dismissive as he orders her to stop contacting him. That night, as Rachel drifts off to sleep, she has a flashback of Tom attacking her in the underpass while the woman in blue—a woman she now believes to be Megan—looked on. Meanwhile, Anna is increasingly worried about Tom’s infidelity, so she goes through his laptop and his belongings. She finds a burner phone in his gym bag while he’s out at the pub. Later, Anna takes the phone out to the garden

and listens to the outgoing voicemail message: the phone, she realizes, belonged to Megan.

Rachel begins experiencing increasingly vivid flashbacks of drunken nights when Tom attacked her. Though Tom always told Rachel that she was the instigator in all their fights, Rachel realizes that Tom was gaslighting her: for the entirety of their relationship, he was the abusive one. Rachel, concerned for Anna, travels to Tom and Anna’s house and urges Anna to pack a bag, take Evie, and leave. Anna says that she knows Tom’s a liar—but that she refuses to leave him simply because he was having an affair with the nanny. Rachel suggests that Tom killed Megan, but Anna cannot accept such an idea.

Just then, Tom comes home and confronts the two women. Rachel begs Anna to stand up to Tom, but when Tom picks up Evie and begins essentially holding her hostage, Anna is powerless. Rachel tries to run for the door, but Tom knocks her unconscious and moves her into the kitchen. As Tom tells Rachel the story of how he killed Megan, Rachel slyly reaches into a kitchen drawer and retrieves a corkscrew. She manages to run out to the garden, but Tom catches up with her. Rachel stabs Tom in the neck as a train screeches past. Anna approaches the scene, places her hands on Tom’s neck, and drives the corkscrew in further. In the aftermath of Tom’s death, Rachel takes a train journey northward toward Scotland, stopping in Megan’s hometown to visit her and Libby’s graves. Rachel remains haunted by the things that have happened to her—but free of Tom and newly sober, she is grateful to be alive.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Rachel Watson – Rachel Watson is the titular girl on the train and the novel’s primary narrator and protagonist. A divorcee and alcoholic in her mid-thirties, Rachel has also recently lost her job and seemingly her prospects for the future. She spends her days riding **trains** back and forth from London in hopes of escaping her loneliness, boredom, and misery. Rachel enjoys glimpsing a young and loving couple who live along the tracks in the suburb of Witney, where the train stops each day at the signal. This couple lives at 23 Blenheim Road, just down the street from where Rachel herself used to live with her ex-husband, Tom. One day, Rachel happens to see the wife of the house cheating on her husband—something that makes Rachel angry and obsessed because it reminds her of the humiliation that Tom’s affair caused her. Soon after, Rachel wakes up one Sunday morning covered in bumps, bruises, and lacerations but unable to remember what she did the night before. She then discovers that the young woman whom she saw having an affair, Megan Hipwell, is missing—and Rachel becomes afraid that she had something to do with Megan’s disappearance. Rachel knows that the only way to ease her mind is to piece

together what transpired that Saturday night—and to find Megan’s abductor before the authorities seek to pin the crime on the unstable, unreliable Rachel herself. Rachel’s own amateur investigation into the matter is hampered by her alcoholism—and it’s built upon a foundation of secrets and lies. She attempts to insinuate herself into Megan’s husband Scott’s life, which leads Rachel to uncover unsettling truths about her own past that have been sullied and corrupted through years of gaslighting and abuse. As Rachel pieces together the truth about Megan’s murder, she discovers the truth about the disintegration of her own life as well—and in the depths of despair and hopelessness, she finds long-forgotten strength within herself. Complicated, jealous, lonely, and at times self-destructive, Rachel Watson is a decidedly unreliable yet engaging narrator. Her journey back to self-worth speaks to the undue pressures that society places upon women—and what happens when women reach their breaking points.

Megan Hipwell / “Jess” – Megan Hipwell is one of the book’s narrators and protagonists. Megan is a young, artistic, sensitive woman with a dark past and a restless, insatiable spirit—and she’s missing when the events of the novel begin. Through flashback chapters, Hawkins provides pieces together the story of how Megan disappeared. After marrying the passionate but deeply possessive Scott, Megan quickly finds herself dissatisfied with suburban life and the demands of domesticity. Unable to even consider motherhood in spite of her husband’s longing to be a father, Megan begins delving into the depths of her trauma surrounding children in therapy sessions with the gentle, inquisitive Dr. Kamal Abdic. Megan, who suffered the loss of a her daughter Libby from a previous relationship at just 19 years old, has spent her life trying to outrun the criminal mistakes of her past. And in the process, she’s gotten herself swept up into a series of damaging and indeed dangerous relationships. Megan begins having an affair with Tom Watson, the father of Evie, the child she babysits—and when Megan becomes pregnant with a baby that may or may not be Tom’s, she finds herself placed in a life-threatening position as Tom’s violent impulses surface. Megan’s disappearance—eventually revealed to be a murder committed by Tom himself—sends shockwaves through the quiet suburb of Witney. As the headlines change each week, Megan is alternately cast as a victim, a killer, a tramp, and a misfit, demonstrating the unrealistic and damaging pressures society places upon women. Megan, like Rachel, is a woman who has lived much of her life on the brink due to her failure to embody the virtues of femininity and maternal instinct society demands of women. And ultimately, she’s made to pay with her life for her inability to live up to those crushing standards.

Anna Watson – Anna Watson is one of the novel’s narrators and protagonists. As Tom Watson’s former mistress current wife, she feels a deep sense of anxiety and protectiveness when it comes to her marriage. Anna is threatened by Tom’s ex-wife

Rachel’s proclivity for calling and texting Tom at all hours and showing up at their house at random. She fails to see the unearthed trauma and pain in Rachel’s odd behaviors, and instead dedicating herself to creating a kind of seal around her household. Anna, then, becomes a woman completely absorbed by motherhood: she overprotects her daughter, Evie, to the point of suffocation in order to distract herself from the larger problems in her life—including her inability to ever fully trust Tom. When her and Tom’s former nanny, the young and beautiful Megan Hipwell, goes missing, Anna becomes increasingly perturbed by the authorities’ failure to solve the disappearance. Anna practices tuning out her own emotions and intuitions and instead tries to conceive of Rachel as the only threat and enemy in her life. Anna refuses to acknowledge the darker truth about her life and her marriage—partly to protect herself and Evie and partly out of fear of ruining her status as a “perfect” wife and mother. Haughty, a bit self-obsessed, and totally preoccupied with image, Anna is—like Megan and Rachel—a deeply complicated and often unreliable narrator. Her fears of failing to embody society’s ideals of femininity impede her ability to know herself or take care of herself as fully as she could. Anna’s hatred of the **train** tracks which run just below her and Tom’s garden represents her fear of confronting the truth about her life and even creating the potential for escape from a situation that is quickly—and dangerously—spiraling out of control before her eyes. Anna is ultimately able to save herself from Tom, with Rachel’s help—yet what becomes of Anna and Evie after Tom’s death is uncertain.

Tom Watson – Tom Watson is the lying, conniving, murderous antagonist of the novel. Tom disguises himself as a loving husband doing his best to make ends meet for his family—but as Rachel and Anna discover toward the end of the novel, Tom’s entire life and persona is built on a fragile and disturbing web of secrets and lies. While Tom was married to Rachel (before the events of the novel begin to unfold), he made a habit of portraying himself as a victim to her drunken rages. As Rachel’s drinking, fueled by her sadness over her inability to conceive a child, began spiraling out of control, Tom told Rachel morning after morning that she’d blacked out and verbally or physically abused him. But in reality, it was Tom who brutally abused Rachel, taking advantage of Rachel’s inability to form memories while intoxicated. When the novel begins, Tom is already remarried to Anna, the real estate agent with whom he cheated on Rachel and with whom he now has a one-year-old daughter, Evie. When Anna and Tom hire Megan to look after Evie, Tom and Megan begin an affair—yet when Megan becomes pregnant with a child who may or may not be Tom’s, Tom attacks and brutally murders Megan. As Rachel struggles to unspool Tom’s lies, she nearly loses her mind in the process as she reckons with the extent to which Tom has abused, gaslit, and deceived everyone in his life. Eventually, when Tom attacks Rachel and implies that he plans to kill her, Rachel kills him in

self-defense using a corkscrew. Tom's lies are exposed, and Rachel is able to begin repairing her memories, her life, and her sense of self—all of which Tom systematically sought to ruin. Tom is sly, magnetic, and deceptive—it's impossible to fully know what motivates his violent behavior throughout the story.

Scott Hipwell / "Jason" – Scott Hipwell is Megan's hyper-masculine and volatile husband. An IT professional who runs his own business, Scott is both possessive of Megan and technologically savvy—which means that he seeks to control her by tracking her communications and whereabouts on her phone and computer. This possessiveness exacerbates the unrooted and traumatized Megan's desire to flee not just her marriage, but the sleepy London suburb in which she feels stifled and trapped. Scott desperately loves Megan and wants to build a life with her—yet Megan's fear of motherhood and her inability to remain faithful lead her to treat Scott with disinterest, creating within him a strong desire for control and fealty. This leads authorities to treat Scott as a primary suspect throughout the investigation of Megan's disappearance and, later, her murder. Scott—desperately sad, confused, and angry throughout the investigation—turns to Rachel for comfort after she reaches out to him, pretending to be one of Megan's acquaintances from the small art gallery that Megan used to own. Scott and Rachel both drink too much and are both frantic to clear their names—and because of this, they develop a needful, strange bond, and even have regretful sex once. But when Scott realizes that Rachel has been lying to him about knowing Megan, he becomes furious and frightening, imprisoning her in his spare room before letting her go and telling her that he'd break her neck if she were "worth" the effort. Unpredictable, hot-headed, lonely, and reeling from a terrible loss, Scott's ever-shifting attitude makes him unreliable and impossible to trust. He plays an active role as a character in sustaining the novel's mystery and suspense.

Dr. Kamal Abdic – Kamal Abdic is a Muslim refugee from Bosnia working as a therapist in Witney, a suburb of London. When he begins seeing Megan Hipwell as a patient, Kamal is determined to help the troubled, restless young Megan unspool the traumas of her past and make sense of how they're impacting her in the present. Together, they work through Megan's sense of self; her marriage to her husband, Scott; and her relentless need for male attention and approval. Abdic is a quiet, soft-spoken man who does his best to resist Megan's quickly-growing romantic feelings for him, as acting upon them could lose him his practice. When Megan mysteriously disappears, Abdic is briefly detained as a suspect after Rachel tells Scott that she saw Megan and Abdic embracing on the terrace of the Hipwell house one morning. But with insufficient evidence tying him to Megan's case, he's soon released. Rachel, still suspicious of the man, decides to start attending appointments of her own with him—but during each therapy session, Rachel finds herself more and more comfortable with

Abdic. She eventually confiding in him about her failed marriage; her struggles with infertility; and her sneaking suspicion that her ex-husband, Tom, lied about Rachel's actions during her drunken blackouts. Sensitive, thoughtful, and deeply invested in his patients' well-being, Kamal Abdic is a man who finds himself swept up in a maelstrom of secrets and lies.

Cathy – Cathy is Rachel's roommate and longtime friend since their university days. Niceness, Rachel believes, is Cathy's defining quality—no matter how many times Rachel gets into trouble or makes a drunken mess, she feels that Cathy will always accept her as she is. As Rachel descends deeper and deeper into her struggles with alcoholism, however, Cathy takes a stand. She serves Rachel with a formal eviction notice (though she later rescinds it) and becomes determined to help Rachel stop drinking, find a new job, and get back on her feet. Cathy's faith in Rachel's capacity for change and self-improvement never wavers, and her generosity and patience toward Rachel are seemingly boundless.

Detective Inspector Gaskill – Detective Inspector Gaskill is a middle-aged male detective who is in charge of Megan's case. Rachel first meets him when he turns up at the apartment she shares with Cathy to question her about her presence in Witney on the night of Megan's disappearance. Anna and Tom, he says, reported that Rachel came to their street—the same street where Megan lives—drunk and itching for a fight. Gaskill is immediately suspicious of Rachel, yet there is not enough evidence to tie her to anything. Despite Gaskill's warnings to Rachel to stay away from Blenheim Road—not just from Anna and Tom, but from Scott as well—Rachel continues visiting Scott and connecting with Tom and Anna. Gaskill soon realizes that Rachel isn't a threat—and soon, his suspicions shift to Scott instead. Gaskill and Detective Sergeant Riley appear again toward the end of the novel, when they come to Anna and Tom's house after Rachel kills Tom in self-defense. Satisfied with Rachel and Anna's stories, the detectives let the women go and close Megan's case, having pinned Tom as her murderer.

Detective Sergeant Riley – Detective Sergeant Riley is a young female detective working Megan's case. Riley, like Gaskill, is suspicious and wary of Rachel—but unlike Gaskill, Riley is more ready to pin Rachel down as a "sad" and lonely liar whose involvement in Megan's disappearance stems her desire to be a part of something.

The Redheaded Man / Andy – The redheaded man, whose name is later revealed to be Andy, is a commuter who lives in the London suburb of Witney. He often rides the [train](#) to and from the city at the same time as Rachel. On the fateful Saturday night when Rachel travels to Witney to confront Tom and Anna, she remembers little from her blackout except for the redheaded man helping her up the stairs near the station after a fall. Rachel begins to fear the redheaded man, believing that he harmed her in the underpass or was otherwise connected to Megan's murder—yet Andy eventually reveals

himself to be a harmless, fun-loving man who simply came to Rachel's aid in a moment of need.

Craig "Mac" McKenzie – Mac was Megan's first love and a friend of her older brother Ben. Megan and Mac had child together, Libby, who died just a few months into her short life. Several years older than Megan, Mac took in the runaway girl when she was just 16, and the two quickly began a relationship. When Megan got pregnant, she and Mac reluctantly welcomed the child—but after a disaster in which Libby perished under Megan's watch, Mac left abruptly after helping Megan bury the baby's corpse. Megan never saw or heard from Mac again. Authorities investigate him as a possible suspect in Megan's murder but learn that he died years ago.

Libby – Libby was Megan's and Mac's daughter. When Libby was just a few months old, Megan took Libby into the bath with her—but when Megan fell asleep, Libby drowned. Megan still carries the trauma of having inadvertently killed her daughter, and her aversion to motherhood and childcare stems from her fear of repeating her mistakes with Libby.

Tara Epstein – Tara is one of Megan's acquaintances. Megan often uses hanging out with Tara—which she actually does very rarely—as an excuse to get out of the house. This allows her to get away from Scott so that she can rendezvous with her lover, Tom. Tara is indifferent to Megan and happy to lie for her.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Evie – Evie is Tom and Anna's baby. She's about a year and a half old during the novel's main timeline.

Ben – Ben is Megan's long-deceased older brother. An adventurous spirit throughout his 19 short years, Ben always encouraged Megan to pursue freedom and autonomy.

Damien – Damien is Cathy's boyfriend.

Rachel's Mother – Rachel's mother is a flighty but apparently wealthy woman who constantly has a new boyfriend in her life.

Scott's Mother – Scott's slightly overbearing mother comes to town to help him cope in the wake of Megan's disappearance.

seek out (or fall victim to) dangerous situations. As Rachel Watson struggles to understand her role in the disappearance of a young and beautiful woman from an outer suburb of London, Megan Hipwell, Hawkins suggests that society is structured to overwhelm, overburden, and then ultimately abandon women in their greatest moments of need.

Hawkins uses the first of her three protagonists and narrators, Rachel, to demonstrate how society overburdens women with expectations of traditional femininity and maternal duty yet fails to support them at their most vulnerable. Rachel is a lonely, unemployed woman with a drinking problem and few attachments. Her former husband, Tom, left her a little over a year ago for another woman, and Rachel regularly overhears the people in her life describe her as a "desperate" and overweight alcoholic. Rachel does not conform to a traditional image of femininity: she is single, childless, and withdrawn. Her drinking problem—which often leaves her with gaps in her memory and contributes to her slovenly appearance—means that she's unable to take care of herself. Although Rachel's behavior concerns those around her, these people judge her rather than doing anything to help her. As Hawkins delves into Rachel's backstory, she reveals that Rachel and her ex-husband Tom struggled for years to conceive a child. Unable to fulfill society's expectation that she become a mother, Rachel drank to console herself—often to the point of blacking out. And unfortunately, these blackouts made her more vulnerable to her husband's verbal and physical rages. Tom's abuse speaks to the way that society shames rather than helps women who struggle with infertility, abuse, self-hatred, and addiction and who fail to live up to societal expectations.

Hawkins uses Megan, the second narrator and protagonist, to showcase how society fails to secure justice for women who cannot obtain it for themselves. Like Rachel, Megan Hipwell also doesn't conform to society's vision of maternity and femininity. At first glance, she seems like a confident, self-assured woman—but her past is riddled with trauma, loss, and dark secrets. She has had to fend for herself since she was only 16 years old, and society has never protected her. She doesn't feel she fits in with the posh, athleisure-clad women who live in her small suburban town—and yet Megan works to keep up appearances. Because of the façade Megan creates, she slips through the cracks of society when she most needs help. The experiences and abuses she hides in order to conform complicate the investigation of her disappearance in unforeseen ways. As investigators look into Megan's life and find more and more evidence of her departure from the feminine mainstream, they begin to actively demonize her for her choices. As Megan's dark past comes to light over the course of the investigation into her disappearance, the detectives working the case ultimately fail to prioritize Megan and suggest that her murder may have been her own fault—that is, her rebellious, promiscuous choices in life



THEMES

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WOMEN AND SOCIETY

Paula Hawkins's *The Girl on the Train* is a novel about how society's expectations of women often push them to the breaking point, leading them to

brought about her tragic end. With this, Hawkins shows how society fails to give Megan justice, both in life and in death.

Anna, Tom's new wife and the novel's third narrator, demonstrates how society pits women against one another, forcing them to value male approval and companionship over female friendships. Such a situation can put women in danger and leave them with little support. Anna recalls how being "the other woman" felt exciting in the early days of her affair with Tom. Even though she knew he was married, she found his attention thrilling and came to see Rachel as an enemy. Indeed, when Tom left Rachel for Anna, Anna felt like she had won—and this feeling of victory blinded her to his pattern of emotional abuse. When Rachel confronts Tom about Megan's disappearance, Rachel is uncertain if Anna will defend her against Tom's increasingly dangerous blows or remain complicit in his cruelty and violence. The women of the novel are conditioned to prioritize men's approval—and Rachel thus believes that Anna will side with Tom, in order to retain his love and confidence, rather than challenging his violent behavior. It's at this point that Anna witnesses Tom's abuse toward Rachel and discovers his affair with Megan, but she finds herself unable to accept the truth about her husband. She continues to see Rachel and Megan as promiscuous, threatening, or insane. This further isolates Anna with Tom, a dangerous man who has committed at least one murder. Anna's character shows how women often internalize a hatred and distrust of other women whom they view as competitors or rivals, and how this phenomenon can further women's isolation, vulnerability, and proximity to danger. Because society so often pits women against one another, women become even more vulnerable. They often fail to ask for help—even when they desperately need it—out of a desire to hide from their perceived "competitors" the very vulnerabilities that the world around them has created.

Throughout *The Girl on the Train*, Hawkins shows how society fails its most vulnerable women by constraining them into visions of femininity defined by propriety and benevolence only to disenfranchise them when they do not conform to such stifling standards. Rachel, Megan, and Anna each struggle with the societal expectations that have been placed upon them—even as their personal lives grow increasingly unstable and dangerous.



GASLIGHTING, MEMORY, REPRESSION, AND THE SELF

In *The Girl on the Train*, Paula Hawkins follows three women who are abused by the men in their lives in the form of what's called gaslighting: manipulation through questioning or invalidating a person's sanity. The novel's antagonist-in-disguise, Tom Watson, is an expert at this kind of psychological abuse—yet Hawkins also shows how women at times gaslight themselves by internalizing their

struggles—societal pressures, abuse they've suffered, or self-hatred—to the point of self-destruction. Hawkins ultimately argues that gaslighting degrades a person's sense of self by targeting and destroying the victim's memories.

Rachel is the character whose memory—and, consequently, whose sense of self—is most profoundly under attack throughout the narrative. As an alcoholic, Rachel suffers frequent blackouts: episodes in which she is unable to remember her actions, whereabouts, or thoughts because she was so drunk. All Rachel retains of these lost patches of time are the feelings associated with them—but remembering that she felt fear, regret, or shame doesn't help her pin down what actually happened. While Tom is still married to Rachel, he takes advantage of these blackouts as opportunities to physically and psychologically abuse her. He convinces her the following day that she was the one who became angry, violent, loud, and embarrassing—when unbeknownst to her, *he* was the one harming her. In warping Rachel's memories like this, Tom is undermining Rachel's sense of self. This becomes especially clear after the pair separates, and Rachel continues to drink heavily and gaslight herself as Tom used to. By losing swaths of time and struggling to convince herself that horrible, shameful things happened in the interim, Rachel's core sense of self degrades further and further. Just as Tom would try to convince Rachel, during her drunken blackouts, that she was the unstable or abusive one in their partnership, Rachel now tries to convince herself that she is a worse and more destructive person than she actually is. She erases her core sense of self by distrusting her mind, believing that even her own memories must be faulty or unreliable. Rachel's journey illustrates how integral memory is to one's sense of self. Her manufactured "memories" of assaulting or embarrassing her husband have imbued her with low self-esteem, which contributes to her worsening self-hatred and drinking problem. In other words, in poisoning Rachel's memories, Tom also poisons her sense of self.

Megan's character also demonstrates how gaslighting targets a person's memory—and therefore destabilizes their sense of self—but, for the most part, Hawkins shows how Megan actually gaslights herself. Megan pushes aside painful memories of her past in order to play the role of happy wife to her husband, Scott, and later, of alluring mistress to her lover, Tom. As Megan tries to make herself fit in with her current circumstances, she battles against terrible nightmares, which are tied to a traumatic incident from her past in which her infant daughter, Libby (to whom she gave birth at just 19), drowned while Megan was taking a bath with her. Megan's attempt to essentially gaslight herself out of experiencing the full force of her grief shows that as one's memories—no matter how painful—begin to degrade, so too does one's sense of self. Megan wants nothing more than to forget her painful past (memories of Libby, her deceased brother Ben, and her chaotic

home life as a teen), but she doesn't realize until it is too late that these memories are the foundation of who she is. As Megan remakes herself into the woman Scott and Tom each want, she erodes her past, her memories, and her sense of self.

Anna, too, finds that as her memories and sense of direction erode at the hands of her abusive, gaslighting husband, Tom, her sense of self also begins to fade. As Anna becomes more and more wrapped up in Tom—and his lies—she forgets about her own needs and those of her daughter, Evie. For instance, when Anna senses that Megan, (the nanny she and Tom have hired) is less than enthusiastic about childcare, she complains to Tom. Yet when Tom assures Anna that everything is fine, Anna decides to quiet her suspicions. Later on in the novel, after Anna discovers the truth about Megan's past—and learns that Megan may have intentionally (or accidentally) killed a child many years ago—she feels vindicated. Furthermore, Anna, disturbed by Megan's disappearance and Rachel's frequent drunken visits to their house, insists upon moving—but then she easily lets Tom talk her out of leaving Witney in order to keep him happy and avoid conflict. Anna routinely and willfully forgets about or squashes down her instincts, hopes, and desires, convincing herself that her feelings are false out of fealty to her husband. And in the process, Anna degrades her sense of self. She is so disconnected from herself toward that the end of the novel that she seems to momentarily consider aiding Tom in murdering Rachel. Anna wants to erase all reminders of how Tom deceived Rachel—memories that also remind Anna that Tom has deceived her, too, by cheating on her with Megan. Anna has been so transformed by Tom's gaslighting that she is now, in a way, gaslighting herself: she believes if she can erase evidence of Tom's cruelty, she can live with the false, idealized version of him she holds in her mind. Ultimately, Anna must make the decisive choice not to forget who she is—or who her husband is—in order to save her own life.

The gaslighting that Rachel, Megan, and Anna endure is directly tied to each woman's sense of self. As psychological abuse at the hands of various partners and self-erasure of traumatic memories slowly degrade each woman's grasp on who she is, Hawkins demonstrates how tenuous yet precious trust in oneself is.



ADDICTION, DEPENDENCY, AND ABUSE

Throughout *The Girl on the Train*, the novel's protagonist and primary narrator, Rachel Watson, endures a painful and life-threatening battle with alcoholism. But Rachel isn't the only character in the novel who struggles with addiction; Hawkins examines how Rachel, Megan, and Anna—all survivors of Tom Watson's cruelty and abuse—develop patterns of addiction and dependency to cope with or attempt to escape that abuse. Ultimately, by interweaving stories of three women struggling under the

weight of different kinds of emotional and physiological dependencies, Hawkins suggests that many women fall into harmful, isolating patterns of addiction and dependency as a response to emotional, psychological, and physical abuse.

Rachel falls into a dangerous pattern of alcohol addiction and dependency as a way of escaping or numbing the pain of her abusive relationship with Tom. While still married to Tom, prior to the events of the novel's main plot, Rachel turned to alcohol to numb the pain of being unable to conceive a child—and to escape the cruelty, vitriol, and shaming which Tom showed her as a result of her infertility. Alcohol became a way for Rachel to pass the time during her unhappy marriage to Tom; she felt she couldn't leave him, but as her alcoholism worsened, Tom began using her addiction as an excuse to leave her for another woman, Anna. Hawkins directly connects Rachel's alcohol abuse to the way Tom mistreated, disparaged, and abused her. Rachel's deepening descent into alcoholism at the start of the novel is a way of coping with the losses she's faced in recent years: drinking distracts her from the loss of her dreams of being a mother, the loss of her marriage, and the loss of the life she imagined living. Her alcoholism is also an unfortunate consequence of her brushes with violence and profound mistreatment at the hands of the person who was supposed to love and care for her the most.

Though Rachel's alcoholism is the most obvious addiction within the novel, Hawkins also shows how Megan and Anna's peculiar dependencies, though non-chemical in nature, come to define their lives in the wake of prolonged exposure to abuse. When Megan embarks on an affair with Tom, she is initially trying to escape memories of abuse and mistreatment at the hands of a past lover, Craig "Mac" McKenzie. Mac began having sex with Megan when she was a 16-year-old runaway. He fathered Libby, the child whom Megan brought into the world at just 19—yet he ignored and abandoned her in her moment of need, when Libby died in infancy. As a result of this trauma, Megan has come to depend upon constant, steady male attention. Megan's feelings of restlessness and her desire for risky sexual relationships demonstrate her dependency on positive male attention to make up for the trauma she suffered in the wake of her relationship with Mac. Megan seeks out an ever-present yet ever-shifting combination of intimacy, risk, and attention in order to stave off the pain of all she has been through. As a result, Megan engages in tumultuous sexual relationships not just with her husband, Scott, but with her therapist Kamal Abdic and with Tom Watson.

Anna, Tom's new wife, engages in patterns of addiction and dependency throughout the novel as well—and, like Megan, her dependency is not on a substance or an object, but on a person. As her marriage with Tom begins to deteriorate, Anna clings to her infant daughter, Evie, for comfort. Anna slowly becomes more and more dependent upon closeness to and inseparability from her child as her suspicions about Tom—which she isn't yet

willing to admit to herself consciously—deepen. She believes that because she and Tom married after a prolonged affair during his relationship with Rachel, the other women in her London suburb judge her and don't want to associate with her. This, Hawkins suggests, isolates Anna even further, making her more and more vulnerable to Tom's continued abuse. Anna's emotional dependence on her own child manifests as clinginess and a constant fear that someone will take her child away from her. Anna attempts escape her unspoken fears of being physically abused or emotionally abandoned by her husband through an intense focus on childrearing.

Throughout the novel, Hawkins demonstrates how Rachel, Megan, and Anna develop addictions, crutches, and cravings as the result of their experiences with debilitating abuse on multiple levels. Their stories are, Hawkins suggests, cautionary tales of how women's issues are sidelined in mainstream society—and of how because of this, women are often forced to turn to dependencies which further endanger them.



SECRETS AND LIES

Paula Hawkins's *The Girl on the Train* is an intricate and suspenseful modern-day mystery in which none of the main characters—not even the protagonist, Rachel Watson—is particularly reliable. In the world of the novel, truth is constantly obscured, and any information that comes to light is immediately subject to suspicion and uncertainty. Through the creation of this environment, Hawkins ultimately suggests that a relationship, a community, or indeed a society rooted in secrets and lies only breed more secrets and lies, creating a world in which nothing—and no one—can be trusted.

There are several major instances in which information is obscured from the characters in order to suggest that secrets, lies, and falsehoods create an unstable, uncertain world. Early on in the book, Hawkins creates an environment full of secrets and lies, which mirrors the intricate deceptions (small and large) that define real life. The book features several unreliable narrators—Rachel, Megan, and Anna—who are too busy focusing on the lies they tell themselves to get at the heart of the secrets and lies all around them. With this, Hawkins suggests that failing to confront the secrets in day-to-day life contributes to a larger and deeper network of secrets and lies in wider society. The novel is full of characters who can't be trusted. For instance, Rachel is reluctant to discuss her infertility or unemployment with her roommate, Cathy. Megan fails to divulge the truth about the infant daughter, Libby, whom she unwittingly killed years ago. And Tom pathologically deceives and abuses the women in his life. By creating an environment in which her readers must question every piece of information a character divulges—or seems to divulge—Hawkins argues that the world as her readers know it is structured around complex webs of secrets, lies, and half-

truths. Society, Hawkins suggests, cannot function any other way—and yet a society built on untruths and secrecy is a dangerous place which may very well consume itself.

Through Rachel's character, Hawkins delves deeper into the secrets which have ruled the world of the novel—and which, she suggests, rule the real world as well. "I feel so horribly vulnerable now that I've seen what he is; now that there are no secrets between us," Rachel says after uncovering the terrible truth about the role of her ex-husband Tom in the murder of Megan Hipwell. Achieving a state in a relationship in which there are "no secrets" is a state in which vulnerability, repulsion, danger, and fear flourish. Knowing the whole truth about a person, Hawkins suggests, is a liability. This, she argues, contributes to the ongoing web of secrets, lies, false narratives, and half-truths which govern the world. By creating a narrative in which the climactic energy of the story comes from a series of startling, disturbing revelations Rachel makes about the private lives of those around her—those closest to her, even—Hawkins suggests that an economy of secrets and lies is, in many ways, integral not just to a suspenseful narrative but indeed to a functioning society. Knowing the truth, Hawkins suggests, isn't easy or pleasant—and sometimes, it could even be dangerous.

Toward the end of the novel, as Rachel reckons with all that has happened to her, she describes sending an email to Megan's husband Scott apologizing for "all the lies." She wonders if she will ever be able to know "peace" given the web of lies that have come to define not only her life but the lives of those around her. In this short yet revealing passage, Hawkins dissects how secrets and lies spread through a community and poison everything they touch—even as unwitting individuals continue to spread and proliferate them. Rachel didn't know the whole truth about Tom's deceptions and deviances—and thus, she feels that she became complicit in allowing them to continue. Hawkins uses Rachel's profound guilt to suggest that just as Rachel wonders how many lies she's been a part of, people tend to live according to what they can see and what they know. One might not realize how many profoundly deep-seated lies make up the fabric of their everyday lives—and this, Hawkins suggests, perpetuates a pervasive atmosphere of secrets, lies, and false narratives.

Throughout *The Girl on the Train*, Hawkins uses a plot constructed around a dense web of secrets and lies in order to mirror the convoluted, unreliable structure of the world itself. As the characters in the novel struggle to uncover one another's secrets and get to the root of the lies and deceptions all around them, Hawkins suggests that relationships and connections based in secrecy and dishonesty will only create a wider societal environment predicated on the constant, poisonous spread of lies and uncertainty. By creating a narrative in which no one can be trusted, Hawkins shows just how frustrating, confusing, and hopeless it feels to live in a

world based on secrets and lies.



MOTHERHOOD, DUTY, AND CARE

Throughout *The Girl on the Train*, the novel's three main characters—Rachel, Megan, and Anna—all struggle with motherhood in different ways as they attempt to embody society's idea of a good mother. Rachel feels like a failure as a woman because she cannot have a child. Megan, having botched motherhood once, now finds the idea of caring for a child repugnant and frightful. Anna, who uses motherhood as an outlet for her fears and anxieties about her marriage, smothers and over-parents her daughter, Evie, even as she ignores the dangers that her husband, Tom, poses to them. Through these women's journeys, Hawkins suggests that there is no such thing as a perfect mother—and that to pursue perfection in motherhood actually pushes women toward dangerous behaviors.

Hawkins uses the character of Rachel to demonstrate how the pressure to perfectly embody maternal traits can inspire self-destructive behavior within women. Rachel longs terribly for a baby, and her inability to conceive a child has made her feel not only that motherhood is unattainable, but that a true experience of womanhood is incomplete without children. All she wanted while married to her now-ex-husband, Tom, was to become a mother. However, her struggles with infertility and the couple's precarious finances meant that after only one round of in vitro fertilization (IVF), there were no options left for Rachel to become the mother she always dreamed of being. A lack of support from Tom both financially and emotionally left Rachel feeling responsible for her own infertility—a deep shame which led her to drink heavily in order to erase the pain of what she was going through. Buckling under the societal pressure to become a mother, Rachel began engaging in a destructive behavior that would certainly hamper any attempts at becoming pregnant or creating a healthy emotional environment for a potential child. Rachel's self-destructive binge drinking, Hawkins suggests, is a larger symptomatic response to the outsized expectations of maternal duty that society pushes upon women. In other words, the societal pressure to effortlessly become the perfect mother—not Rachel's infertility—is what actually destroys her chances at becoming one.

Megan is the character with perhaps the most complicated relationship to motherhood and childcare in the entire novel. Throughout Megan's arc, Hawkins explores how society shames and demonizes women who struggle with or fail at motherhood. Megan takes a job as a childminder, or nanny, to Anna and Tom's daughter, Evie—yet she loathes childcare and resents the idea that she should, as a woman, have some natural predisposition toward maternal instinct. She dreads the idea of becoming pregnant herself and, seemingly without warning, quits her job with the Watsons when the pressures of

caring for Evie become too great. Later on in the novel, as readers learn the truth about Megan's past, her complex and painful relationship to childcare becomes more understandable. When Megan was just 19, she gave birth to a child whom she did not entirely want. The baby girl, named Libby, was born in a cabin in the woods. Megan hadn't had any doctor's appointments or taken any prenatal care throughout her pregnancy, hoping the baby might simply disappear—yet when the child arrived, Megan loved her fiercely. Tragically, however, when Megan took a bath with Libby sometime during Libby's first year of life, Megan fell asleep—and Libby slipped into the water, where she drowned. By contextualizing Megan's disdain for motherhood and childrearing through a backstory directly related to a profound, painful trauma in Megan's past, Hawkins shows how difficult it is for women who have suffered the loss of a child to forgive themselves—largely due to society's overemphasis of maternal dutifulness and perfect care. Megan failed her child, but because society demonizes women who make mistakes in motherhood, Megan feels that she is inadequate not just as a mother figure, but as a human being. Megan becomes pregnant again toward the end of her life and decides to keep the child—a radical act of reclaiming the idea that just because she is not perfect, she is still worthy of love, dignity, and the chance at experiencing motherhood once again.

Through the maternal, devoted Anna, Hawkins shows how even mothers whom society views as “perfect” can often fail their children in crucial moments. Anna's life revolves around caring and expressing love for her infant daughter, Evie. Still, however hard she tries, Anna is not a perfect mother, or even one who does what's right for her child. Anna is married to Tom, an abusive, manipulative, deceitful, and even violent man—but she overlooks his aggressions and lies in order to maintain the image of a perfect family. She is also inattentive to her daughter due to exhaustion at times. On one instance, a devastated Rachel sneaks into the house, picks up Evie, and brings her out into the yard without Anna noticing—a consequence of Rachel's own unfulfilled longing for a child. Through Anna, Hawkins shows how even mothers whom society views as perfect examples of maternal duty, care, and responsibility can often fail their children in crucial moments. Anna is so locked into a prescribed idea of what maternal love looks like that she ignores the mistakes in her own parenting and caregiving, desperate to keep up an idealized front without taking the difficult, painful steps required of a truly good mother in the background.

In examining the judgment and pressures that three very different women experience as they wrestle with prescribed ideals of motherhood, Hawkins urges her readers to consider the painful—and even harmful—consequences of attempting to achieve perfection as a mother.



SYMBOLS

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



TRAINS

Throughout the novel, trains symbolize the main characters' collective desire for escape—from societal expectations, from the drudgery of their lives, and from increasingly dangerous relationships and situations. For Rachel, riding the train to and from London each day is both a burden and a release. Broke, constantly inebriated, and adrift in the wake of divorce and unemployment, Rachel is a veritable wreck at the start of the novel. She takes the train to the city every day—even though she has no job to commute to—in order to mask the depths of her failure from her roommate, Cathy. But as Rachel rides the rails, she begins watching the occupants of houses in her former neighborhood and spinning elaborate fantasies about their lives. The train Rachel rides each day takes her directly past the home she used to share with her now-ex-husband, Tom—a house that he now shares with his new wife, Anna, and their infant daughter, Evie. Rachel's train journeys each day symbolize her competing desires to escape from her present circumstances and to retreat into the stifling life she lived with Tom: a life defined by scarcity, loss, and pain.

For Megan and Anna, who live just a few houses apart from each other on Blenheim Road, the train tracks that run through their backyards serve as a constant reminder of how badly both women want to escape domesticity, motherhood, and their abusive relationships. Megan spends her time dreaming of more, imagining how she might escape from the stifling drudgery and repetitiveness of suburban domesticity. Thus, for Megan, the trains outside her window represent an escape from the neighborhood where she feels trapped. Anna, meanwhile, finds herself frightened and disturbed by the constant back-and-forth of trains throughout the day. Anna knows that something is off in her relationship with Tom—but she is too frightened to stand up to him or uncover the truth about who he is. She's also afraid to admit that being a wife and mother, which she always dreamed of, isn't enough for her. Anna's fear of the trains parallels her fear of confronting the ways in which her life is insufficient. She doesn't even like looking at the trains—she is too perturbed by the collection of bodies hurtling through space, moving to-and-fro while she stays rooted in the same place.





QUOTES


Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Riverhead edition of *The Girl on the Train* published in 2015.

Rachel: One Quotes

“ I know that on warm summer evenings, the occupants of this house, Jason and Jess, sometimes climb out of the large sash window to sit on the makeshift terrace on top of the kitchen-extension roof. They are a perfect, golden couple. [...] While we're stuck at the red signal, I look for them. Jess is often out there in the mornings, especially in the summer, drinking her coffee. Sometimes, when I see her there, I feel as though she sees me, too, I feel as though she looks right back at me, and I want to wave.

Related Characters: Rachel Watson (speaker), Megan Hipwell / “Jess”, Scott Hipwell / “Jason”

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

In the first chapter of *The Girl on the Train*, Rachel—the primary narrator and protagonist—offers up a glimpse into her daily routine. Rachel has recently lost her job and her marriage. A directionless alcoholic, Rachel spends her days riding the train to and from London, pretending to go to work so as not to draw the ire of her roommate, Cathy. While on the train, Rachel passes the street where she used to live, Blenheim Road, and has taken to spying on a “golden couple” who live several doors down from her old house.

In this passage, as Rachel observes the couple—whom she's named “Jason” and “Jess”—Rachel imagines what their perfect lives together must be like. Jason and Jess are a touchstone of Rachel's days: they remind her of everything she had and everything she lost. They help her feel seen, even though the idea that they could spot her from far above the train tracks is obviously impossible. Through Jason and Jess, Rachel gets to hang on to a fantasy of a life she once had.

As the novel unfolds, readers will come to see that Rachel's own marriage was far from perfect—and that Jess and Jason (later revealed to be Megan and Scott) are not the “golden” pair Rachel believes them to be. This passage ties in with the ideas of how secrets and lies build up over time based on misunderstanding, misdirection, and misinformation. It also touches upon the ways in which women are taught to see other women as threats or competitors. Rachel wants what Jess has—and Hawkins suggests that this desperate, raw desire may motivate Rachel to do unspeakable things later on in the book.

☛ I have lost control over everything, even the places in my head.

Related Characters: Rachel Watson (speaker), Tom Watson, Cathy

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

As the book follows a typical day in Rachel's life, it becomes clear that she's lonely and alienated—not just from other people, but from her own emotions and mental health. Here, Rachel admits that she's "lost control over everything" both in her life and within her own mind. Rachel lives in a small apartment with a friend from university, Cathy. Rachel isn't even a tenant, merely subletting a room from her friend. She has no social or romantic life to speak of, she has been let go from her job, and she drinks heavily each day to numb the pain of her current situation.


As Hawkins teases out Rachel's backstory, she will delve into Rachel's struggles with infertility during her marriage to her ex-husband, Tom—as well as Tom's physical and psychological abuse of Rachel over the years. As a result, Rachel is reeling from a sustained period of gaslighting and has become dependent on alcohol to numb the pain she experiences. But nevertheless, she has moments (such as her admission in this passage) where she realizes how profoundly she has "lost control" over her body, her mind, and her destiny.

Megan: One Quotes

☛ Sometimes I don't even watch the trains go past, I just listen. Sitting here in the morning, eyes closed and the hot sun orange on my eyelids, I could be anywhere.

Related Characters: Megan Hipwell / "Jess" (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, taken from the start of Megan's first chapter of narration, Megan describes sitting outside on her terrace which overlooks a set of train tracks. In the previous chapter, readers saw Megan—or "Jess," as Rachel calls

her—from Rachel's point of view as an enviable, beautiful, in-control woman.


Now, as Megan offers her own side of the story, she confesses that she would rather be "anywhere" but where she is. Megan, like Rachel, views trains as a symbol of escape from her current circumstances. Megan feels trapped by domesticity and severed from her own potential as an artist, a wanderer, and a free spirit. Megan's restlessness is the product of other traumas that will unspool as the novel unfolds—but in this passage, Hawkins zeroes in on how repressing one's true self in order to fulfill societal expectations can negatively impact a person's life. This is especially true for women who are constantly scrutinized and condemned by society for deviating from the status quo of being a wife and mother.

Rachel: Two Quotes

☛ I don't have words to describe what I felt that day, but now, sitting on the train, I am furious, nails digging into my palms, tears stinging my eyes. I feel a flash of intense anger. I feel as though something has been taken away from me. How could she? How could Jess do this? What is wrong with her? Look at the life they have, look at how beautiful it is!

Related Characters: Rachel Watson (speaker), Megan Hipwell / "Jess"

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 30-31

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Rachel has just seen "Jess," the woman she observes from the train each morning, kissing a man who is not her husband. Rachel looks to Jess, who lives just a few doors down from Rachel's former house in a similarly styled home, as an emblem of all Rachel herself could have had: a beautiful home, a loving marriage, a strong sense of self.

Now, however, as Rachel watches Jess commit an act of infidelity (just as Rachel's husband did toward the end of their marriage), she becomes pained and incensed. Rachel's violent reaction to Jess's infidelity demonstrates how even women are complicit in societal judgment and condemnation of other women for any act that challenges or upsets the status quo. Rachel, unbeknownst to Jess, now knows one of Jess's darkest secrets—and Hawkins suggests

that what she does with that information has the potential to change both of their lives forever. The mystery at the heart of the novel is still taking shape—and what Rachel witnesses in this passage as she rides past on the train will come to define the lives of Rachel herself as well as the woman she knows as Jess.

●● Something happened, I know it did. I can't picture it, but I can feel it. The inside of my mouth hurts, as though I've bitten my cheek, there's a metallic tang of blood on my tongue. I feel nauseated, dizzy. I run my hands through my hair, over my scalp. I flinch. There's a lump, painful and tender, on the right side of my head. My hair is matted with blood.

Related Characters: Rachel Watson (speaker), Tom Watson

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

This passage introduces the central mystery of the novel, as Rachel wakes up in her room inexplicably disoriented, hungover, and in pain. This is not a normal, run-of-the-mill hangover, however: Rachel's wounds are intense and seem to indicate a fight or a beating. Rachel can't remember what happened to her because last night, after drinking heavily, she blacked out completely—anything could have happened to her.


Now, Rachel must figure out how to piece together the previous night—a night which will become deeply consequential once Rachel learns that a disappearance took place in Witney, the suburb she used to live in with her ex-husband, Tom. This passage is significant because it creates a central struggle for Rachel: she has no idea what her actions were on a very important night, and she cannot trust even herself to learn the truth. In this way, the novel centers around Rachel's journey to rediscover herself and piece together the truth of this night, even as society continually shames her for her failures and her alcohol dependency rather than believing her and trying to help her. Figuring out what happened will require her to address her past traumas, her alcohol abuse, and the memories that she's repressed—and how all of these problems are interrelated.

Rachel: Three Quotes

●● Maybe it was then. Maybe that was the moment when things started to go wrong, the moment when I imagined us no longer a couple, but a family; and after that, once I had that picture in my head, just the two of us could never be enough. Was it then that Tom started to look at me differently, his disappointment mirroring my own? After all he gave up for me, for the two of us to be together, I let him think that he wasn't enough.

Related Characters: Rachel Watson (speaker), Tom Watson

Related Themes:     

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, as Rachel rides the train into London one morning, she's still shaken by her most recent drunken blackout. This prompts her to think about where, exactly, she took a wrong turn in life. This passage is significant because it demonstrates Rachel seeking to take the blame for everything that has gone wrong in her life. As a woman, Rachel has been conditioned to scrutinize and even demonize herself before she considers anyone else's responsibility in her struggles. Rachel believes that her infertility means that she's deficient as a woman, and that her failure to conceive a child is what shattered her marriage. After failing to conceive, Rachel began drinking heavily—and she believes that this combination of faults pushed her husband away. Essentially, Rachel has been taught to see her hopes and dreams as follies and liabilities rather than legitimate wants and needs.

In this passage, Rachel effectively continues to gaslight herself into believing that she is responsible for the end of her marriage and for her descent into alcoholism. She does not consider her own grief legitimate and instead ruminates endlessly on how she failed her husband. Yet as the novel unfolds, Rachel will come to see that it is her husband who abused her for years and convinced her that she was unworthy, defective, and too selfish to ever be a good wife or mother.

Megan: Three Quotes

☪☪ I'm walking in the woods. I've been out since before it got light, it's barely dawn now, deathly quiet except for the occasional outburst of chatter from the magpies in the trees above my head. I can feel them watching me, beady-eyed, calculating. A tiding of magpies. One for sorrow, two for joy, three for a girl, four for a boy, five for silver, six for gold, seven for a secret never to be told.

I've got a few of those.

Related Characters: Megan Hipwell / “Jess” (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 58



Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, as Megan Hipwell takes a thoughtful walk through a nearby forest, she enjoys the solitude of being in nature and considers a flock of nearby magpies. As Megan recalls an old nursery rhyme about magpies, Hawkins ties the rhyme's themes of sorrow and joy, motherhood, and secrets and lies directly to the book's narrative. Megan admits here that she has her own secrets that are “never to be told,” hinting at a dark past. As Megan's story unfolds, it will become clear that the magpie rhyme is a kind of portent: Megan was previously a young mother who lost a child. Now, she is married to a successful man yet fears becoming pregnant again, as she does not want to lose her freedom or fail at being a mother once more. Megan's secrets and lies pile up within her until she cannot bear them anymore and begins making poor, risky choices to avoid confronting them. This passage foreshadows the sorrow and secrecy that will continue to mark Megan's life even as she seeks solace and comfort within herself.

Rachel: Four Quotes

☪☪ The thing about being barren is that you're not allowed to get away from it. [...] My friends were having children, friends of friends were having children, pregnancy and birth and first birthday parties were everywhere. I was asked about it all the time. [...] When was it going to be my turn? [...] I was still young, there was still plenty of time, but failure cloaked me like a mantle, it overwhelmed me, dragged me under, and I gave up hope. [...] I was wrong to suggest that we should share the blame; it was all down to me.

Related Characters: Rachel Watson (speaker), Tom Watson

Related Themes:  


Page Number: 78


Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Rachel reflects on the struggles she has experienced with infertility and the pressures to become a mother quickly and easily. Rachel recalls being pressured by friends, family, and mere acquaintances alike to talk about her journey toward motherhood—even as natural conception and in vitro fertilization (IVF) alike failed time and time again. Rachel describes the “failure” she began to feel not just in terms of conceiving but in terms of being a full and complete woman. In a society in which women's worth is often measured by their competence as caregivers and maternal figures, Rachel shouldered the sole blame for her inability to become pregnant, convincing herself that she would never know happiness if she could not be a mother. Rachel's self-hatred stems from the traumas of being constantly prodded and provoked about one of the most painful, private struggles in life. Thus, over the years, she has convinced herself that every aspect of her life is “cloaked” in failure because of her inability to conceive.

☪☪ On the train on the way home, as I dissect all the ways that today went wrong, I'm surprised by the fact that I don't feel as awful as I might. Thinking about it, I know why that is: I didn't have a drink last night, and I have no desire to have one now. I am interested, for the first time in ages, in something other than my own misery. I have purpose. Or at least, I have a distraction.

Related Characters: Rachel Watson (speaker), Megan Hipwell / “Jess”

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 85

Explanation and Analysis



In the wake of Megan Hipwell's disappearance, Rachel becomes obsessed with the case. Megan is the woman whom Rachel observed daily from the train, and Rachel is preoccupied with finding out what happened to Megan and with bringing her home safely. Rachel feels that Megan was living the life Rachel herself always dreamed of—a life that was, in many ways, parallel to the failed marriage Rachel


experienced just a couple of years ago. Rachel feels that it is her “purpose” to find Megan—she perhaps believes that if she restores Megan to the perfect, “golden” life she had, Rachel herself will be able to finally attain happiness, safety, and the marital and familial bliss she feels she was denied. Rachel’s investment in Megan’s case distracts her from her vicious cycle of drinking, blacking out, and loathing herself—but the word “distraction” implies that Rachel is not very far from lapsing into old patterns at the slightest provocation or sense of failure.

Megan: Four Quotes

☝☝ Who's to say that once I run, I'll find that isn't enough? Who's to say I won't end up feeling exactly the way I do right now—not safe, but stifled? Maybe I'll want to run again, and again, and eventually I'll end up back by those old tracks, because there's nowhere left to go.

Related Characters: Megan Hipwell / “Jess” (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 95

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Megan reflects on her restless, insatiable personality. Her life has been marked by discomfort, wanderlust, and the need to constantly move forward in order to forget her past. Megan, who has newly embarked on an affair with a mysterious unnamed man, considers “running” again—but she begins to fear that she will never be able to outrun herself or attain lasting happiness and satisfaction. She recognizes that no matter where she goes or who she ends up with, she will eventually end up feeling “stifled” a wife and still traumatized by her dark past. As Megan considers “end[ing] up back by those old [train] tracks,” she hints at suicidal ideation even as she invokes the symbol of the train, which represents the possibility and allure of escape from one’s present circumstances. Megan’s whole life is driven by the shining potential of escaping and starting over—yet part of her knows that, at a certain point, she will have nowhere left to escape to.

Rachel: Five Quotes

☝☝ I'm thinking about her now. I have to convince Scott that I knew her—a little, not a lot. That way, he'll believe me when I tell him that I saw her with another man. If I admit to lying right away, he'll never trust me. So I try to imagine what it would have been like to drop by the gallery, chat with her over a coffee. Does she drink coffee? We would talk about art, perhaps, or yoga, or our husbands. I don't know anything about art, I've never done yoga. I don't have a husband. And she betrayed hers.

Related Characters: Rachel Watson (speaker), Anna Watson, Tom Watson, Scott Hipwell / “Jason”, Megan Hipwell / “Jess”

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 107

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Rachel becomes determined to meet with Megan’s husband Scott in order to tell him about what she saw from the train: Megan kissing another man just days before her mysterious disappearance. Rachel has already confided in the police about Megan’s affair—but because of what Tom and Anna told the authorities about Rachel’s instability and alcoholism, the detectives on the case did not believe her.

Rachel believes if she can tell Scott the truth, Megan’s mysterious lover might be identified—and Rachel will be one step closer to figuring out what happened to Megan. In order to do this, however, Rachel must begin a web of lies based around the idea that she was an acquaintance—even a friend—of Megan’s. In fact, Rachel never met Megan and only ever observed her from the train—but she spent enough time imagining what Megan was like that she now feels prepared to lie about knowing her. This passage is significant because it develops the novel’s themes of secrecy and dishonesty. Telling this one lie or harboring will necessitate more and more deception from Rachel—and when people lie to one another in this way, it creates a world in which no one can be trusted.

Anna: One Quotes

☝☝ When I wake again, Tom's not at my side, but I can hear his footfalls on the stairs. He's singing, low and tuneless, "Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you. . ." I hadn't even thought about it earlier, I'd completely forgotten; I didn't think of anything but fetching my little girl and getting back to bed.

Related Characters: Anna Watson (speaker), Evie, Tom Watson

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 108

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Hawkins introduces Tom's new wife, Anna's, narration and point of view into the novel. Readers thus get a glimpse of what Anna's daily life is like, much like they've seen Rachel and Megan's lives through their narration. This passage opens on Anna's birthday—but Anna has "completely forgotten" that it is her own special day. She thinks of nothing but her "little girl," her daughter Evie, to the point of excluding all else.

This passage is significant because it demonstrates the ways in which Anna has erased herself from her own life in the quest to become the perfect wife and mother. Anna is dependent on motherhood to distract herself from the shame of having begun her relationship with Tom through an affair, as well as from the many hints that point to Tom's continuing infidelity. She thus sidelines her own wants and needs each day in order to devote herself entirely to becoming the mother she feels society expects her to be.

Anna: Two Quotes

☝☝ We need to get away from here. We need to get away from her.

Related Characters: Anna Watson (speaker), Scott Hipwell / "Jason", Evie, Tom Watson, Rachel Watson

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 140

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, as Anna notices that Rachel has been coming by Blenheim Road more and more often, she tells Tom that she wants to move away. Anna doesn't know that Rachel is spending more and more time on the street because she's visiting with Scott—she believes that Rachel is trying to gain access to her and Tom's home because of Rachel's jealousy about their marriage and their child, Evie.

Anna has been conditioned to see other women as threats or competitors. She doesn't consider the ways in which the men around her—such as Tom, a liar and a cheat, and Scott, a murder suspect—might be making her and her child's existences unsafe. Instead, Anna places blame on Rachel, a


woman who doesn't fit in with society's expectations. She views Rachel as an enemy, the most significant roadblock to her happiness and security. As the novel progresses, Anna will continue to see Rachel as a threat rather than a potential lifeline during a dangerous time for both of them—but in the end, as Tom's violence is brought to light, she must strive against this impulse and side with Rachel in order to survive.


Rachel: Eight Quotes

☝☝ "Honestly, Rachel, I don't understand how you could have kept this up for so long."

I shrug. "In the morning, I take the 8:04, and in the evening, I come back on the 5:55. That's my train. It's the one I take. That's the way it is."

Related Characters: Rachel Watson, Cathy (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 157

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Rachel's roommate, Cathy, at last discovers that Rachel has not been commuting to and from work every day—Rachel lost her job months ago and has simply been riding the train to London each morning in order to keep up appearances. Cathy is shocked and dismayed—but more than anything, she feels sad for Rachel, who was so terrified of being seen as a failure that she lied to her closest friend and roommate.

However, Cathy's incredulous inquiry as to how Rachel kept up such a major lie doesn't faze Rachel. As Rachel insists that riding the train each day is just "the way it is" for her now, the quote shifts from an examination of how one upholds complicated lies into an interrogation of what it means to crave escape—yet to remain afraid of actually changing one's circumstances. Rachel rides the train twice a day—and yet the train, a symbol of escape and change, only maintains the monotony and seclusion that defines Rachel's life. Rachel's secrets trap her, just as the stifling, unchanging train journey each morning has for months. Rachel doesn't seem to believe that she can change her circumstances, given her flat and emotionless delivery in this passage. Yet she continues to take the train each day in hopes that perhaps one day, something will be different—something will free her past traumas and from her own and lies.

Megan: Six Quotes

☝ "I fell asleep," I say, and then I can't say any more, because I can feel her again, no longer on my chest, her body wedged between my arm and the edge of the tub, her face in the water. We were both so cold.

Related Characters: Megan Hipwell / "Jess" (speaker), Dr. Kamal Abdic, Libby

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 169

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Megan confides her darkest secret to her therapist, Dr. Kamal Abdic. When Megan was just 19, she gave birth to a baby, Libby—but when Megan took Libby into the bath with her one afternoon, she fell asleep, and Libby drowned. Megan has carried this unspeakable trauma with her throughout her life. Her belief that she killed Libby—and that she should be punished for it—is the root cause of her nightmares, her restlessness, and her repulsion toward motherhood. Megan has kept this monumental secret from everyone in her life, trying to heal her own wounds in private—but this has only led to more dangerous behavior and more entrenched fears.

Now, as Megan confesses her life's greatest tragedy, she receives absolution from Kamal, who insists that Megan can still be a good mother—and a good person—in spite of her past mistakes. Megan has operated her life on the fringes of society for so long because she believed that failing as a mother also meant she was a failure as a woman. Now, she sees a path forward toward self-forgiveness and liberation.

Rachel: Ten Quotes

☝ It's different, the nightmare I wake from this morning. In it, I've done something wrong, but I don't know what it is, all I know is that it cannot be put right. All I know is that Tom hates me now, he won't talk to me any longer, and he has told everyone I know about the terrible thing I've done, and everyone has turned against me: old colleagues, my friends, even my mother. They look at me with disgust, contempt, and no one will listen to me, no one will let me tell them how sorry I am. I feel awful, desperately guilty, I just can't think what it is that I've done.

Related Characters: Rachel Watson (speaker), Rachel's Mother, Tom Watson

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 179

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Rachel wakes up full of intense guilt, shame, and self-loathing. She finds herself recalling traumatic emotional sensations from her past. When Rachel was still married to Tom—and still struggling and failing to conceive a child with him—she fell into patterns of drinking heavily, blacking out, and waking the next morning to Tom's accounts of the violence she'd unleashed while drunk. Now, Rachel is so accustomed to those patterns that even after having getting divorced, she still wakes each morning after drinking with the sinking feeling that she's done something unforgivable.

Rachel has been made to feel that her drinking—a coping mechanism rooted in her failure to get pregnant—makes her socially deviant and thus deficient as a woman. She beats herself up for failing to live up to society's expectations of her in so many ways. With the added memories of Tom's reprimands—which Rachel will later learn were actually Tom's attempts to gaslight, confuse, and isolate her—Rachel feels completely worthless. She can't remember what she's done because when she's drunk—and when she blacked out while married to Tom—she usually doesn't do anything other than send inappropriate emails. Tom was the one abusing Rachel during her blackouts, not the other way around—yet Rachel has been abused and conditioned into believing she is at fault for many vague but terrible acts.

Anna: Four Quotes

☝ She held up a newspaper with the headline WAS MEGAN A CHILD KILLER? I was speechless. I just stared at it and, ridiculously, burst into tears. [...] Diane glanced slyly up at me and asked, "Are you all right, sweetie?" She was enjoying it, I could tell.

I had to leave then, I couldn't stay. They were all being terribly concerned, saying how awful it must be for me, but I could see it on their faces: thinly disguised disapproval. *How could you entrust your child to that monster? You must be the worst mother in the world.*

Related Characters: Anna Watson (speaker), Evie, Megan Hipwell / "Jess"

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 196

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Anna is at a neighborhood meetup with other local mothers when one of them, Diane, brings in a newspaper with a headline about Megan, Anna's former nanny, having killed a child many years ago. Anna, whose entire life is devoted to being the perfect wife and mother, is both emotionally traumatized and deeply embarrassed to have made what she believes is a grave mistake in judgment by hiring Megan. Anna knows that the public front she portrays is everything: she must care for her child perfectly or draw the ire of society. In hiring Megan—now an alleged “child killer”—Anna believes that she dropped the ball publicly and in a major way, drawing the ire of the mothers she relies on for socialization and support. However, Anna's fears are largely constructed in her own head, as she seems to be misconstruing her friends' genuine concern for haughty contempt. She puts so much pressure on herself that she questions and distrusts anything short of perfection.

disappearance—Rachel must tell herself that Megan was a bad person worthy of whatever she had coming to her. This passage thus demonstrates how women lie and gaslight themselves into assuming the worst in one another rather than actually holding men accountable for their misdeeds.


Megan: Seven Quotes

☹️ I'm just turning to walk to the station when a man comes running along the pavement, earphones on, head down. He's heading straight for me, and as I step back, trying to get out of the way, I slip off the edge of the pavement and fall.

The man doesn't apologize, he doesn't even look back at me, and I'm too shocked to cry out. I get to my feet and stand there, leaning against a car, trying to catch my breath.

Related Characters: Megan Hipwell / “Jess” (speaker), Dr. Kamal Abdic

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 214-215

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Megan is leaving a meeting with her therapist, Kamal, when a man on the street knocks her over and keeps on moving. This passage doesn't directly tie in with the mystery of Megan's disappearance—it's actually a red herring, or false lead. The jogger who knocks her down wasn't targeting her, and he wasn't the one who abducted her.

Instead, Hawkins uses this passage to foreshadow the violence Megan has yet to face—and to demonstrate how easy it is for even casual violence against women to go unnoticed, unpunished, and uncorrected. Megan is shocked when the jogger doesn't even stop to help her up; his actions speak to a larger cultural and societal disregard for women who are not where they're supposed to be, or who are in the wrong place at the wrong time. Readers can extrapolate that the jogger saw Megan (a woman walking home alone at night) as being somewhere she wasn't meant to be. Thus, knocking her over was a kind of justified retribution against her. This attitude, Hawkins suggests, underlies much of the violence that's committed against women. Women can always be painted as instrumental in their own abuse and indeed their own deaths because of society's expectations that women adhere to a strict code of conduct. Anything outside of that code, Hawkins suggests,

Rachel: Eleven Quotes

☹️ Megan isn't what I thought she was anyway. She wasn't that beautiful, carefree girl out on the terrace. She wasn't a loving wife. She wasn't even a good person. She was a liar, a cheat.

She was a killer.

Related Characters: Rachel Watson (speaker), Scott Hipwell / “Jason”, Megan Hipwell / “Jess”

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 209

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Rachel tries to excuse her newfound attraction to Scott Hipwell by internalizing a disdain for Scott's wife, Megan, who is missing. Rachel has fallen into the societal trap of judging other women for their most basic mistakes and jumping to conclusions about them without considering the fullness of their lives—and, even worse, she's doing it knowingly and for her own personal gain. Rachel wants to feel close to Scott because she misses male companionship and attention—but she knows that to get involved with a man whose wife is missing is socially taboo. In order to justify her desire to spend more time with Scott—and to ignore the fact that Scott is a suspect in the

is grounds for people to suggest that a woman out of line deserves whatever becomes of her.

Rachel: Thirteen Quotes

“Every time I passed that hole in the wall I thought about it. Tom said he was going to patch it up, but he didn't, and I didn't want to pester him about it. One day I was standing there [...] and I [...] remembered. I was on the floor, my back to the wall, sobbing and sobbing, Tom standing over me, begging me to calm down, the golf club on the carpet next to my feet, and I felt it, I felt it. I was terrified. The memory doesn't fit with the reality, because I don't remember anger, raging fury. I remember fear.”

Related Characters: Rachel Watson (speaker), Megan Hipwell / “Jess”, Dr. Kamal Abdic, Tom Watson

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 230

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Rachel visits a therapist, Dr. Kamal Abdic, and talks with him about her past. She initially began going to Abdic in order to evaluate him on her own as a potential suspect in Megan's disappearance. But after attending several sessions, Rachel comes to find solace in talking to Abdic about her struggles with alcoholism, infertility, and lost time due to blackouts.

As Rachel recalls a drunken memory that doesn't match up with what she was told about her actions while blacked out, she begins to question what else about her life doesn't “fit with the reality.” While married to Tom, Rachel would often get drunk and, according to her ex-husband, act out violently and inappropriately. Now, though, Rachel has begun to question whether she was actually the one being abused while in the state of “deepest black,” divorced from the capacity to form new memories or recall things that happened during that time. With this, the book suggests that sometimes people's perceived faults are actually rooted in what others have told them; Rachel's burgeoning doubt about her memories suggests that she wasn't a violent drunk but that Tom gaslit her to believe that she was. This passage thus marks a change in Rachel: she is no longer going to accept the things that others tell her about herself, and she is instead going to begin taking her own memories, feelings, and traumas more seriously.

Anna: Six Quotes

“I'm doing the things she did: drinking alone and snooping on him. The things she did and he hated. But recently—as recently as this morning—things have shifted. If he's going to lie, then I'm going to check up on him. That's a fair deal, isn't it?”

Related Characters: Anna Watson (speaker), Tom Watson, Rachel Watson

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 242

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Anna snoops on Tom's laptop as she chugs red wine. Tom has been out of the house more than usual and has lied about meeting up with his ex-wife, Rachel—as a result, Anna is afraid that Tom is cheating on her with Rachel. A part of Anna has always known that because her relationship with Tom began as infidelity, he has the capacity for lying and deception—but now she truly begins to fear that he is deceiving *her*. Yet Anna is so focused on being the perfect, trusting, loving wife that she perceives her own behavior—a response to Tom's shady behavior—as shameful or deviant in and of itself. Worst of all, she fears that she is becoming Rachel.

At the same time, a part of Anna is beginning to piece together what has made Rachel the woman Anna knows: a woman who's been reduced to a drunken, weepy, desperate shell in the wake of Tom's cruelties. Because Anna was the one Tom wanted and the one he prized for so long, Anna saw Rachel as something she would never become. Now that the tables have turned, however, Anna at last understands Rachel's motivations—and she sees how easy it is for women to be pushed to the brink by the men in their lives.

Rachel: Fifteen Quotes

“Everything is a lie. I didn't imagine him hitting me. I didn't imagine him walking away from me quickly, his fists clenched. I saw him turn, shout. I saw him walking down the road with a woman, I saw him getting into the car with her. I didn't imagine it. And I realize then that it's all very simple, so very simple.”

Related Characters: Rachel Watson (speaker), Megan Hipwell / “Jess”, Tom Watson

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 271-272

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Rachel—who has stopped drinking and started going to therapy—has flashbacks to memories she thought she'd lost forever. She is both saddened and furious to learn that most of these memories are of being physically and emotionally abused by her ex-husband, Tom, while she was “blackout” drunk. Rachel long believed that the memories she formed during blackouts would never be accessible to her—yet they end up surfacing over the course of several days. Rachel thus begins to see the truth that she avoided for so long through heavy drinking, longing for Tom, and ignoring the inconsistencies in her own body and mind. Rachel now realizes that not only did Tom abuse her for years—but that he was the one who abducted and murdered Megan several weeks ago.

As Rachel confronts the terrible truth, she realizes that she has been complicit in her own gaslighting and repression. She fought realizing the truth about Tom for years, even as she was haunted by vague memories of being attacked and ridiculed by a “faceless” man. Now, she has let down her guard and allowed herself to accept that Tom, the man she believed she loved for so long, is the architect of her misery (as well as Anna and Megan’s). As a woman, Rachel has been conditioned her whole life to blame herself for any trouble or violence she encounters—but now, she sees that she has been harming herself through gaslighting and self-manipulation. She vows to never let herself fall prey to those mechanisms again.

the more frequently he had to lie about aspects of his present in order to keep up appearances. Tom’s devious behavior, insatiable sex drive, and penchant for violence against women are all parts of himself he sought to keep well-hidden through a careful, intricate web of deceptions. In pointing out that Tom “lies about everything,” Rachel seeks to force Anna to doubt everything her husband says. When the foundation is rotten, Rachel suggests, nothing built upon it can have any measure of integrity. Tom successfully gaslit both Rachel and Anna into believing his lies for a long time—but now that certain core truths have been exposed, his mountain of secrets is about to come tumbling down.

Megan: Nine Quotes

☝☝ "Did you hear what I just said?" he snaps, turning his back on me and striding back up the path towards the car. "You'd be a terrible mother, Megan. Just get rid of it."

I go after him... [...] I'm yelling at him, screaming, trying to scratch his fucking smug face, and he's laughing... [...] It's not even rejection, it's *dismissal*. [...]

He's not laughing anymore.

He's coming towards me. He has something in his hand.

I've fallen. I must have slipped. Hit my head on something. I think I'm going to be sick. Everything is red. I can't get up. [...] Someone is speaking to me. *Now look. Now look what you made me do.*

Anna: Nine Quotes

☝☝ "I don't believe you," I say. "Why would he lie about that?"
"Because he lies about everything."

Related Characters: Rachel Watson, Anna Watson (speaker), Megan Hipwell / “Jess”, Tom Watson

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 279

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Rachel confronts Anna about Tom’s incessant lies—and his murder of Megan. Anna is reluctant to believe Rachel—she doesn’t see, as Rachel does, that Tom’s entire life is built on a foundation of secrets and lies. In the pages to come, Hawkins will show how indiscriminate and indeed pathological of a liar Tom truly is. There is nothing he has told either Rachel or Anna about his past that is true—and the deeper his lies about his past become,

Related Characters: Megan Hipwell / “Jess”, Tom Watson (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 304

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Megan confronts Tom Watson in the woods. She tells him that he may be the father of the child she is carrying, since they were having an affair a few months ago while Megan was employed as the Watsons’ nanny. Tom cruelly suggests that Megan abort the child, as she’d be a “terrible mother.” But Tom doesn’t know that Megan has recently restored her faith in herself as a woman and a mother after wrestling with the trauma of losing a child years ago. Megan is not going to take Tom’s “dismissal” or cruelty—but as she lashes out against him, he reacts violently and murders her with a rock.

In Megan’s final moments of consciousness, all she can hear

is Tom's insistence that she and her outspokenness are responsible for her own demise. This passage is significant because it demonstrates how society—male-dominated as it is—demonizes women for their perceived deviations from the status quo and uses any slip-up or imperfection as justification for violence against them. Megan's final moments are marked by shame and cruelty as her abuser and murderer insists that if she'd just been more reserved or more compliant, he wouldn't have had to hurt her in the first place.

Rachel: Nineteen Quotes

●● Tom's lips are moving, he's saying something to me, but I can't hear him. I watch him come, I watch him, and I don't move until he's almost upon me, and then I swing. I jam the vicious twist of the corkscrew into his neck.

His eyes widen as he falls without a sound. He raises his hands to his throat, his eyes on mine. He looks as though he's crying. I watch until I can't look any longer, then I turn my back on him. As the train goes past I can see faces in brightly lit windows, heads bent over books and phones, travellers warm and safe on their way home.

Related Characters: Rachel Watson (speaker), Megan Hipwell / "Jess", Anna Watson, Tom Watson

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 317

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Rachel kills Tom after a prolonged and increasingly violent encounter at Tom and Anna's house. Tom has beaten Rachel and sexually harassed her. He's also accused her of being responsible for Megan's death because of the angry, violent feelings Rachel inspired in Tom on the night he killed Megan.

Now, as Rachel fails to escape down to the train tracks and as Tom corners her, she uses a corkscrew stolen from the kitchen in order to vanquish Tom once and for all. Rachel's use of a corkscrew (an object associated with drinking) to finally finish Tom's reign of terror in her and Anna's lives represents Rachel conquering more than one of her demons. The train that screeches past at the exact moment of Rachel's triumph symbolizes her hard-won escape from the traumas of her past—traumas associated with Tom's gaslighting, physical abuse, and lies. Rachel is free now from Tom's control over her life—and the train represents escape, change, and forward motion rather than a vehicle that keeps Rachel on a stagnant life path marked by inescapable trauma.



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.

RACHEL: ONE

Friday, July 5, 2013. As Rachel Watson rides the morning **train** into London, she spots a pile of clothes by the tracks, which disturbs her. Her ex-husband Tom always told her she had an “overactive imagination”—with that in mind, Rachel tries to calm herself as the 8:04 train from the suburb of Ashbury to Euston Station in London picks up speed. In spite of the rickety tracks, Rachel loves riding the train: twice a day, she gets to watch the houses go by and get a glimpse into other people’s lives.

That evening, on the **train** back to Ashbury, Rachel opens a canned gin and tonic. As she takes her first sip, she lets the taste transport her back into memories of her first-ever vacation with Tom, when they went to Spain. Rachel polishes off the gin and tonic quickly, but she’s not worried—she has three more. “TGIF,” Rachel thinks to herself ironically. It is a Friday—yet in spite of the beautiful weather forecasted for the weekend, Rachel’s only plan is to drink in order to fill the empty 48 hours ahead of her.

Monday, July 8, 2013. Rachel is back on the 8:04—but she wishes that rather than going into London, she could stay in the comfortable **train** seat all day. About halfway through her journey each day, there is a signal stop on the line, and the train comes to a halt. If Rachel sits in the right seat of the right carriage, she can catch a long glimpse of her favorite house, number 15 Blenheim Road in Witney. Number 15 is a two-story Victorian overlooking a garden. Rachel has named the occupants of the house, whom she sometimes spies from the tracks, “Jason” and “Jess.” Jason and Jess are a “golden” couple: Jason is dark-haired and handsome. Jess is tiny, pale, and blond. Jess is often out on the deck in the mornings—but this morning, she is not, and Rachel imagines all the places she could be.

That evening, on the **train** back to Ashbury, Rachel opens a bottle of wine and pours it into a plastic cup. She recognizes some other frequent commuters on the train and hopes they aren’t judging her for drinking on a weeknight. As the train rattles along, Rachel waits to catch a glimpse of Jason and Jess once again—but neither of them is on the deck or in the garden. Rachel cannot remember the last time she had meaningful contact with another person.

The opening scene of the novel introduces Rachel—and her state of mind. She is attuned to detail, yet she doesn’t trust her own mind because of things her ex-husband told her about herself—things that may or may not be true. She observes the world around her carefully, yet her own life is on autopilot. Rachel is a woman of many contradictions—and Hawkins uses the symbol of the train to hint at Rachel’s desire for change, excitement, and escape.



Rachel longs for the past and hates her present—she exists now only to pass the time. She tries to numb herself to her present circumstances by drinking to excess. Though readers don’t yet know what has brought Rachel to this dark place, it is clear that Rachel is in distress and on the brink of self-destruction.



Rachel uses Jason and Jess—the perfect ideal of marital happiness—to salt the wounds of her failed marriage. The fact that Rachel rides the train each day to glimpse this “golden” couple cements the idea of trains as a symbol of the desire for change and escape—Rachel wishes she could be living a life other than her own. Meanwhile, the simple detail of Jess deviating from her normal routine subtly suggests that there’s more to her than meets the eye. Perhaps her seemingly idyllic life isn’t as perfect as Rachel imagines it is.



Rachel’s reflection about her lack of meaningful interaction characterizes her as a profoundly lonely person. She drinks on the train to numb herself, and she finds escapism and vicarious pleasure in observing Jason and Jess.



Tuesday, July 9, 2013. Rachel notices that the pile of clothes from last week is still lying on the tracks; she remembers reading somewhere that being hit by a **train** can rip one's clothes off. At the signal stop, Rachel sees Jess standing on the patio. Rachel recalls when she herself used to live on Blenheim Road—a few doors down, at number 23. Rachel tries very hard not to look at number 23 during the daily stoppages—catching sight of her ex-husband's new wife, Anna, watering the roses or taking care of her new baby fills Rachel with pain.

Hawkins continues plumbing the dark depths of Rachel's psyche. Trains are an ongoing symbol of escape, so by having Rachel think about a moving train hitting someone and ripping their clothes off, she hints at the consequences of escapism. For women who long to escape their current circumstances and assert their independence, there are physical, sexual, and existential threats. By mentioning Rachel's pain about Anna's perfect experience of motherhood alongside the dark image of the clothes beside the tracks, Hawkins hints at how difficult it is for women to "have it all." For every life like Anna's, there's also a life like Rachel's, lived in the shadows and on the fringes.



That evening, on the 5:56 back to Ashbury—a slower **train** than the morning one—Rachel dreads returning home. Rachel is a lodger, or sub-letter, who lives with a very kind friend from university named Cathy. The two of them are not very close—yet Rachel has been living in Cathy's flat for two years. In spite of how long she's lived there, Rachel still feels like a guest in someone else's home. She feels she has lost control not just of her physical circumstances but of the "places in [her] head" as well.

Rachel's relationship with Cathy is friendly but distant. Rachel doesn't feel any true connection to Cathy and seems to resent Cathy's nice, accommodating personality. Rachel and Cathy are not the same kind of woman—and Rachel hates being contrasted against someone who embodies feminine care and generosity better than she does each and every day. Meanwhile, Rachel's feeling that she's lost control of "places in [her] head" echoes Tom's opinion that she has an "overactive imagination." Regardless of whether or not this is true, it does suggest that she feels a lack of agency over her own thoughts and memories—which is perhaps related to her alcohol dependency.



Wednesday, July 10, 2013. It is a stifling hot morning on the **train**. Rachel looks out the window for Jason or Jess during the signal stop, but she cannot see either of them. She wonders what the two of them do for work—Jason, she surmises, could be a doctor. The boldly dressed Jess, she believes, is some kind of stylist or artist or photographer. Jason and Jess, Rachel feels, are everything she lost—and everything she wants to be.

Rachel continues to try and lose her thoughts in escapist fantasies, using the train as a kind of midpoint or neutral space in which she can allow these dreams to deepen and expand. She seems to idolize Jess despite not knowing her, wishing that she had Jess's confidence and seemingly happy relationship.



That evening, Rachel is sweaty and uncomfortable as she rides the **train** home. She anxiously watches an expensively dressed man sitting across from her type on his computer. When he looks at her, she senses distaste in his face. Rachel knows she is not a "desirable" woman like she used to be: she has gained weight, and her face has grown puffy from drinking. One night recently, she overheard Cathy and Cathy's boyfriend Damien discussing the possibility of trying to set Rachel up with a friend of theirs—Damien, however, said he didn't know anyone who would be "desperate" enough to go out with Rachel.

This passage cements the fact that Rachel has been told she is undesirable and lovable—and that she has come to believe that these things are true. Rachel has low self-esteem and a fear of not measuring up to men's fantasies of how women should be, which seems to fuel her alcohol dependency. Yet whether the source of these anxieties stems from within, from society, or from the people in her life (or perhaps all three) remains to be seen.



Thursday, July 11, 2013. On the morning **train**, Rachel picks at a bandage on her finger. Last night, after drinking a bottle of wine, she cut herself while trying to cook dinner. After cutting her finger, Rachel went upstairs to tend to the wound—but she fell asleep and left the uncooked meal downstairs to rot. When Cathy and Damien came home, Cathy asked Rachel to clean up the kitchen, which was covered in blood. After doing so, Rachel drank another full bottle of wine and fell asleep. This morning, her phone tells her that last night she called Tom four times over the course of the night—but she doesn't remember what she said in the messages she left him.

As the **train** comes to the signal, Rachel spots Jess on the patio and notices that Jess seems sad. Rachel waits for Jason to emerge onto the patio, but he does not come outside. Rachel wills herself not to look toward number 23—but she cannot stop herself. She can't see inside the house, but she imagines Anna playing with her baby, washing up, and cooking breakfast. Rachel closes her eyes and remembers the message she left for Tom last night: she told him that she still loved him. Rachel knows she is going to feel terrible all day, yet she is comforted by the fact that this is not the worst thing she's done while drunk. In the past, Rachel acted out in public, hit the walls of her house with a golf club, and got fired from work after getting too drunk during lunch with a client.

That night, on the **train** home, Rachel finds that she has been unable to stop thinking about Jess all day. She wonders why Jess looked so lonely this morning—and where Jason could have been. She imagines what they must be like together and all the different ways in which they might take care of each other. Rachel's phone rings. Startled, she answers it—and finds Tom is on the other end. Tom asks Rachel to stop calling him. In a concerned voice, he urges her to get herself together and go to some AA meetings. Rachel hangs up the phone without saying a word. She pulls the bandage off her finger and presses her thumbnail into the wound as two young girls watch in horror.

MEGAN: ONE

Wednesday, May 16, 2012. One year earlier. Megan Hipwell—whom Rachel knows as Jess—sits on her patio drinking coffee as the morning **train** stops just below her garden. Megan is annoyed by the train—it interrupts her fantasy of basking in the sun on the beach somewhere far away. As Megan listens to the train roll past, she wishes she were on it. As she hears the sound of her husband Scott calling out to her and asking if she wants another coffee, she feels the spell of her fantasy break.

In this passage, Hawkins shows how Rachel's low self-esteem about her failure to embody a feminine-enough identity fuels her drinking, which leads to more behaviors that cross society's lines of acceptable female traits. Hawkins wants to show that Rachel is trapped in a vicious cycle. Meanwhile, the gaps in Rachel's memory about calling Tom further suggest that she doesn't have much control over her own thoughts or actions. This, in turn, contributes to her disrupted sense of self.



Again, Rachel's unhappiness and low self-esteem seems to be rooted in her inability to live up to women like Anna who successfully embody the role of wife and mother. The reader also learns that Rachel's drunken antics are nothing new—in the past, she's done far worse things than leave emotionally vulnerable voicemails. This doesn't make Rachel's most recent lapses in judgement any less embarrassing, but it shows that Rachel has developed her own method of judging her darker behaviors. Rachel believes that as long as she's not approaching rock bottom, she's relatively fine—even if she's still engaging in self-destructive behaviors.



Rachel is seemingly fixated on Jess because she at once idolizes her and empathizes with her unhappiness. This passage cements the idea of Rachel as a woman trapped in a vicious cycle of self-harm. She loathes herself for being dependent on alcohol, for being attached to the past, and for being unable to change her present or invest in her future. It seems that she has lost the core of who she is and is struggling (and failing) to get it back.



By introducing another character and letting her narrate her own story—set one year before the start of Rachel's—Hawkins varies and deepens the portraits of women on the brink that she seeks to convey throughout the novel. Megan, like Rachel, has a desire for escape that directly ties in with the symbol of trains. It's clear that there is more to Megan there Rachel assumes—a secret unhappiness lurking below her outwardly idyllic life.



That evening, Megan sits on the porch again, enjoying a martini. She reflects on her day—earlier, while working on an application to a fabrics course, she was distracted by a woman’s horrible screams coming from down the street. She ran out to the garden—and though she couldn’t see anything happening down the road in the other yard, she heard a woman begging another person to give her baby back. Megan ran up to the terrace and looked down to see two women, a few gardens over, fighting over a small child. At last, one woman carried the baby inside while the other stumbled around the garden in circles. The incident, Megan feels, is the most excitement she’s had in weeks. Now that she doesn’t have her art gallery, which recently closed down, her days are empty—she hates being a “happily married suburbanite.”

Tuesday, August 14, 2012. Megan gets dressed simply—even shabbily—to go to her new day job as a nanny for the people down the road. Bored and curious after the incident in May, Megan took the childminding job at number 23. Scott was excited, hoping being around a baby so much would make Megan want to have one of her own—but so far, the job has had the opposite effect. Megan misses her job at the gallery and resents spending so much time with a child.

Thursday, August 16, 2012. Megan quits her job as a nanny for Anna and Tom Watson—finally, she feels free. She worries that Scott will be mad at her—but as a self-proclaimed “mistress of self-reinvention,” Megan only feels excitement about what role she’ll inhabit next. She decides to tell Scott that she quit because Tom was hitting on her in order to prevent him from being angry with her for giving up the job.

Thursday, September 20, 2012. After a sleepless night, Megan feels itchy and restless; she wishes that she could shave her head or take a trip. She misses her big brother, Ben, who always told her that they’d ride their motorbikes all around the world: from Paris to Spain, down the Pacific Coast of the U.S., and throughout South America. Ben, however, died in a motorcycle accident when he was still a teenager. Megan has never gotten over his death—and when she feels especially sad about it, she has to fight the impulse to run away. She has decided to begin seeing a therapist—Scott recently suggested it after noticing how little she’s been sleeping. Megan, however, feels that her sleeping problems are tied to her dissatisfaction with being merely someone’s wife.

Megan clearly loathes having a simple, quiet life as a “happily married suburbanite.” She wants to do something and be somebody—and, as this passage shows, she loves controversy, drama, and excitement. Megan, as a character who longs for the uncertain and the unknown, is a contrast against Rachel, a character who has resigned herself to the same old mistakes and patterns day in and day out. Meanwhile, given that Tom and Anna live a few doors away from Megan and Scott, it’s significant that the incident with the two women and the baby happened down the street. This subtly hints that Anna may be the mother that Megan saw.



Indeed, this passage confirms that the incident happened at number 23. The reader can thus infer that Anna was the woman begging for her baby back, and Rachel was likely the woman fighting with her. (The odd, stumbling behavior that Megan observed is consistent with an intoxicated person.) Hawkins shows that even as Megan takes a job as a nanny, she resists admitting to any maternal instincts and in fact wants to distance herself from the idea of motherhood as much as possible. The novel will continue to focus on the ways in which Megan, Rachel, and Anna each struggle with society’s ideas of how women should act—and of how motherhood should be a part of their lives.



Megan’s description of herself as a “mistress of self-reinvention” characterizes her as flighty and restless spirit. Her inability to play just one simple role makes her independent and unpredictable—and thus, by society’s standards of how women should be have, dangerous.



Hawkins begins delving more deeply into the source of Megan’s restlessness and the traumas she carries with her. Megan doesn’t want to be possessed or tied down, and there is a part of her that still longs for the total freedom that her late brother once promised her. Her dissatisfaction with her role as a housewife is something she keeps hidden, which doesn’t bode well for her relationship with Scott or for her own mental health.



After a long wait at the office, Megan finally meets with her new therapist: Dr. Kamal Abdic. Throughout the introductory appointment, Megan finds herself deeply attracted to the handsome therapist. As Abdic asks Megan about alcohol use and whether she abuses drugs, Megan slyly says that she has “other vices.” That evening, when she arrives home, Scott asks her how the appointment went and whether she talked to the therapist about Ben. Megan pities Scott, who foolishly believes that all her problems stem from her brother’s death.

Tuesday, September 25, 2012. Megan wakes up, having finally slept for a few hours. Feeling cooped up, she decides to go for a walk. As she walks through the streets of Witney, she feels out of place and judgmental about the sad suburban town and the “Pilates girls” who swarm the streets dressed head-to-toe in the same athleisure outfits. She walks past the space that used to be her gallery and feels sad. She is nervous about running into the Watsons—especially Anna, who still resents her for leaving the nanny job. As Megan approaches an underpass, she feels a little chill as she peers into the dark, but she steels herself and walks through.

Later that evening, Scott is late coming home from work. Megan begins feeling jittery and antsy waiting for him to arrive home, so she decides to go out for another walk down the street. As she approaches the underpass again, she hears the **train** run overhead. As she comes through the other side, she sees a man she knows pass her in his car. He smiles at her through the window.

RACHEL: TWO

Friday, July 12, 2013. Rachel, hungover and exhausted, rides the **train** to London. As the train stops at the signal, Rachel looks out the window for Jess and Jason. She is shocked when she sees Jess in the yard kissing another man. Rachel feels pained and disappointed, as if she’s the one who’s been cheated on—again. She remembers finding an illicit email on Tom’s computer from a woman named Anna, and discovering a cache of steamy love letters they’d been sending back and forth for months. Rachel wishes she could scratch Jess’s eyes out.

Megan is cagey and defensive with all the men in her life—she doesn’t want to tell her husband or her therapist about the true root of her problems. This passage suggests that the flightiness and restlessness she feels isn’t just a longing for the time she never got to have with her brother, but a deeper and more existential need within her.



Megan is dissatisfied with her life and all its trappings; she doesn’t want to become like the other women around her whom she views as superficial and conforming. She would rather stick out than fit in—and as this passage symbolically shows, she’d rather take the road less traveled, even when it’s clear that this impulse takes her down dark or even dangerous paths.



This passage suggests that Megan is easily tempted away from stability and safety by the promise of something new and thrilling, as symbolized by the train. It’s unclear who the man in the car is—but given Megan’s self-professed reputation as a “mistress of self-reinvention,” there’s likely more to their relationship than meets the eye.



Witnessing one half of the “golden” couple betray the other inspires a deep, primal anger within Rachel. Rachel’s own marriage didn’t work out due to infidelity—and now the marriage she idealized from afar is being impacted by the very same problem. This leaves Rachel feeling betrayed, abandoned, and even violent. Rachel perceives Jess’s failure to meet societal expectations for married women as a reminder of the ways in which Rachel herself doesn’t measure up to these expectations.



That evening, the 5:56 **train** is twice as full as it usually is. Rachel feels hot and sick. She reflects on her miserable day: after running into some of her old coworkers at a coffee shop and enduring their pitying looks, Rachel received an unexpected voicemail from Anna, begging her to stop calling the house at night. To cope with the shock, Rachel drank four gin and tonics in a row. She begins thinking terrible thoughts about Anna and Tom, who still live in the house that Tom and Rachel bought as newlyweds years ago. Rachel falls asleep—when she wakes up at the signal, she looks out the window for Jess and Jason but cannot see either of them.

Saturday, July 13, 2013. Rachel wakes to the sounds of Cathy cleaning the apartment, as she does each Saturday morning. Rachel dreads the day stretching ahead of her. She recalls how she used to spend Saturdays with Tom having lazy morning sex and making breakfast, and she feels pained. After wasting the day away in her bedroom, Rachel gets slightly buzzed in the evening and goes out to take the **train** to London and back just so she can try to spot Jason. As she passes number 15, she spies two figures on the porch but cannot make them out. She drunkenly decides to get off at the Witney stop. As she does, she notices a redheaded man smiling—or sneering—from the opposite end of the carriage.

Sunday, July 14, 2013. Rachel wakes up hungover and in pain. Her fingernails are dirty, and her mouth tastes like blood. She remembers that something bad happened at Blenheim Road but can't recall any specifics. When she gets out of bed and examines herself in the mirror, she finds that she is naked and covered in bruises and cuts. When she exits her bedroom, she finds that her jeans and underwear are on the floor; they smell of urine. Rachel becomes nauseated and vomits on the stairs.

Rachel retrieves her phone from her pocket, takes it up to her bedroom, and plugs it in. She has two voicemails: one from Cathy asking where she is, and another from Tom scolding her for frightening Anna and hanging around their home. Rachel has no idea what she did last night. As she gets back into bed and pulls the covers over her head, she has a mental image of jerking Anna to the floor by her long blond hair.

Rachel's day has gone from bad to worse, partly due to circumstances and coincidences beyond her control. This passage shows, however, that whenever Rachel feels pain, sadness, or discomfort, she turns to alcohol—a false crutch which only exacerbates her fragile emotional state and makes her problems worse.



This passage characterizes Cathy as productive, cheerful, and devoted to traditionally female pursuits like housework. Rachel, on the other hand, is slovenly and depressed, obsessed with the past, and barely able to get out of bed. Rachel's poor decision-making easily spirals out of control. The morning after Rachel disembarks from the train in Witney, she wakes up with no idea of what occurred. In this way, her alcohol dependency clearly impairs her judgment and memory.



This passage demonstrates how Rachel's alcoholism often functions as a gaslighting mechanism, divorcing Rachel from her memories and thus her core sense of self and leaving her completely unmoored. Her disoriented, injured state implies that she got into some kind of physical confrontation after getting off the train in Witney; whom she met or what she did remains to be seen.



Rachel must begin piecing together the puzzle of the previous night—and yet all she has to go on are strange, fragmented images and bits and pieces of a technological trail. Defeated, overwhelmed, and feeling like she has once again failed to live up to society's expectations of how women should behave, Rachel retreats from the world.



Rachel wakes to the sound of Cathy screaming at her for vomiting on the stairs. Rachel pulls on some clothes and goes downstairs to apologize, and Cathy is alarmed by Rachel's appearance. Rachel insists that she's been sick, but Cathy calls Rachel out for being drunk. Cathy tells Rachel that she has four weeks to find a new apartment, and then Cathy goes to her bedroom and slams the door. Rachel cleans up, goes back to her own room, and begins writing an email to Rachel's mother to ask for some financial help. Rachel notices a new message on her phone from Tom and listens to it: he apologizes for yelling in his previous message as well as for the night before, when things got "heated." Rachel, crying, crawls back into bed and goes to sleep once more.

Rachel's drinking has pushed everyone away—and now, she may lose her one place of refuge. Rachel has no core sense of self, of home, or of community—and yet her drinking and desire to live in the past only further isolate her from everyone in her life. Rachel's current mental state, which is fragmented, unreliable, and painful, mirrors the physical circumstances she is creating for herself through continued self-destructive behavior. The mystery deepens as Rachel loses touch with her own decision-making process, her memories, and her connection to anyone who might be able to help her reclaim those things.



MEGAN: TWO

Tuesday, October 2, 2012. Megan stands outside in the cold air, recalling the panic attack she had last night as she walked past a motorbike revving its engine on the street. She ran down the **train** tracks all the way home from the center of town, hoping to feel the rattle of the train whoosh past her—but none came. In the middle of the night, she left Scott alone in bed to call her therapist on the phone, but Abdic didn't answer. Now, Megan decides to go inside and get ready to go to a nearby forest, Corly Wood, to be alone and take some photographs. She needs to find something to fill her days—and soon.

Megan feels increasingly restless, unmoored, and unstable. Like Rachel, she turns to the train that runs through town as a symbol of how badly she wants to escape from the monotony of her life. Megan doesn't feel that she inhabits the standards of femininity that society expects of her, and this makes her feel shameful and embarrassed.



That evening, Megan comes home to find that Scott has been on her computer, no doubt searching through her browser history and emails. Dr. Abdic has suggested Megan keep a diary of her feelings—but she knows she can't, not without Scott looking at it. Megan doesn't blame Scott for going through her things—she is by no means a perfect wife.

This passage hints at just how possessive Scott is. He knows that Megan isn't fully happy—and he wants to find a way to restrain her and prevent her restless, wandering soul from taking flight. In other words, he wants Megan to be a domestic, submissive wife.



Saturday, October 13, 2012. Megan wakes up, having slept five hours after doing something risky the night before. After Pilates last week, Megan asked a friend from class, Tara, if she wanted to go to a movie one night—then asked if Tara would cover for Megan while Megan went somewhere else. Megan asked Tara to answer if Scott called her and say Megan was in the bathroom, and then let Megan know Scott that had called so that Megan could get in touch with him. Tara agreed—and last night, under the guise of attending the cinema with Tara, Megan met up with an unnamed lover at a hotel nearby. At the end of their rendezvous, Megan's lover told her that they couldn't meet again—but Megan knows they will, because she has an "intoxicating" kind of power over this man.

Hawkins doesn't reveal the name of Megan's lover in order to deepen and prolong the mystery of what was going on in Megan's life. The reader knows that Megan is attracted to Dr. Abdic, so he could be the man she's seeing. Tom is also a possibility, given that Megan worked for him (and he previously cheated on Rachel). In either situation, one thing is certain: Megan is playing with fire.



That evening, Scott asks Megan if she had fun with Tara the night before. Megan replies that she had a great time and tells Scott that she wants to have Tara over for dinner soon. The two of them go to sit outside, and Scott asks more questions about Tara—including if she has children. Megan wants to avoid the subject, so she invites Scott up to the bedroom. As they begin having sex, Megan thinks about someone else.

Megan begins the process of having an affair—and of lying to her husband. She is moving further and further away from Scott's ideal version of a wife and potential mother, yet she attempts to distract him from the truth the only way she knows how: through sex.



RACHEL: THREE

Monday, July 15, 2013. As Rachel gets up to leave for work, Cathy hands her a formal eviction notice and gives her a big, sad hug. Rachel waits to cry until she is on the **train**. She tries to think about where she took a wrong turn in life—she feels it must have been when, in her early days of marriage to Tom, she began wishing for a family. Once that happened, she believes, the two of them were never enough. At the signal, Rachel looks out at number 15 and sees Jason standing on the terrace, seemingly looking right at her. She feels afraid.

In this passage, Rachel connects her present state of disarray to an inciting event in her past: her failure to become pregnant while still married to Tom. Because Rachel felt that she failed to live up to society's expectations of womanhood and motherhood, she began destroying herself from the inside out. Now, she has lost the core of herself entirely and is unable to remake herself in a new image divorced from what society believes she should be.



Later that evening, Rachel is hit by a taxi while crossing the road. In an emergency room in London, as a doctor stitches up a cut from the collision, he notices a bump on Rachel's head. He asks her what happened. She says she hit her head the night before getting into a car, but the doctor explains that the bump looks more like someone hit Rachel with something sharp. Rachel suddenly experiences a flashback of ducking down to avoid a blow—but she is unsure if it is real or not.

As someone else sees Rachel's wounds for the first time, it becomes clear that there is more to the story of what happened on Saturday night than meets the eye. The suggestion that Rachel was bludgeoned triggers a revealing flashback in which she recalls trying to avoid being beaten. Hawkins deepens the mystery of what happened—yet because Rachel is an unreliable narrator, it is impossible for even her to tell if her memories are trustworthy.



Rachel asks the doctor to call Cathy for her. The doctor steps out to do so, and Rachel recalls how she got hit by the taxi: by running into the road after reading the news that Jess—whose real name is Megan Hipwell—is missing. Rachel recalls reading the news article on the computer at a London library—and glimpsing Megan's husband, whose name she now knows is Scott. As Rachel is lost in thought, the doctor returns to tell her that Cathy is here for her.

This passage shows that although Rachel was furious with "Jess" (Megan) for cheating on her husband, the discovery that Megan is missing sends Rachel into an emotional tailspin. The "golden" girl she admired from afar is now gone—and the loss hits Rachel hard.



MEGAN: THREE

Thursday, January 10, 2013. It is a dark, cold morning, and Megan wishes that she could stay home watching TV, having sex, and eating junk food with Scott forever. She is dreading having to go out to therapy later this afternoon. After talking with Dr. Abdic about her restlessness, her marriage, and the loss of her brother, Megan feels that she's getting close to "the whole truth" about her past—particularly what happened to her years ago when she was with a man named Mac, a friend of her Ben's. Megan admits to feeling relief that Abdic can never tell anyone about her secrets because of doctor-patient confidentiality. She feels badly telling Abdic—whom she's begun to call Kamal—things that she isn't comfortable telling Scott.

In therapy, Megan tells Kamal about how she met Mac while living in Ipswich as a runaway after Ben's death. She was just 15, and she and Mac started having sex when she turned 16. They lived together in an old cottage in the countryside, cut off from civilization—there was an old abandoned railway track by the house, and sometimes Megan would wake in the night thinking she could hear **trains**. Megan tells Kamal that she stayed with Mac until she was 19. Kamal asks what made her leave, and she tells Kamal that Mac broke her heart—though this is not the full truth. After returning home from therapy, Megan uses her computer to try to look Mac (whose full name is Craig McKenzie) up on the internet, but she can't find him.

Friday, February 8, 2013. Megan takes a morning walk through the woods and spies a flock of magpies. Scott is away taking a course in Sussex until tonight. Before he left, Megan told him that she was headed to the cinema with Tara again. In a recent therapy session, Megan told Kamal about Scott's need to keep tabs on her—and the fight he picked when he realized she'd been researching someone named Craig McKenzie on the internet. Kamal warned her that Scott's behavior was tantamount to emotional abuse. Megan laughed and shrugged it off, insisting that she didn't care about Scott's snooping on her computer.

At the end of the session with Kamal, Megan recalls, she asked him out for a drink. When he said it wouldn't be appropriate, she kissed him on the lips. Kamal begged her not to do something they'd both regret, so she left. Now, however, Megan fears that that she will never soothe her restlessness or find what she's looking for. On the way back home from the woods, Megan runs into Anna pushing her baby in a carriage.

Even though Megan is intensely restless and hungry for escape, there is also a part of her that wants to feel safe and settled. This profound tension within Megan is something that Hawkins will tease out as Megan's arc develops and Megan finds herself feeling and wanting contradictory things: to stay and to leave, to tell the truth and to continue hiding.



As Megan begins delving deeper into her past, trains symbolize Megan's restlessness and desire for escape as a young girl moving in with the friend of her older brother—the same feelings she's experiencing now. The closer Megan edges to honesty about her past, however, the more she tries to censor herself. It seems that the prospect of confronting her memories has become painful and dangerous to her over the years.



Scott's jealous, possessive nature to raises suspicions about his involvement in Megan's imminent disappearance. Megan, in spite of her wild and restless nature, doesn't see Scott's desire to control her and track her actions and whereabouts as a threat. This seems odd to Abdic, and Hawkins positions Megan's indifference as a missed warning sign about Scott's dark potential.



Megan is developing feelings for Kamal—but it is unclear even to her whether she genuinely cares for him or whether her attraction to him is just another symptom of her rootlessness and dissatisfaction. When Megan runs into Anna and her baby, she is reminded again of how her current problems prevent her from becoming the ideal wife and mother.



Megan takes a nap and wakes up in the middle of the afternoon feeling feverish and guilty. She remembers her lover leaving her bed in the middle of the night last night, insisting that this time was the last time. She recalls laughing, knowing again that it wasn't true. Now, Megan feels uneasy and unsettled. She wants Scott to come home—she feels that she needs him to ground her.

Megan doesn't fully want to escape her life—she just doesn't know how to exist within it. Megan seems to care for Scott, and there is perhaps part of her that does long to embody the characteristics that are expected of her as a wife. But at the same time, she longs to pull away from or even sabotage those simple comforts through infidelity and deception.



RACHEL: FOUR

Tuesday, July 16, 2013. Rachel is on the 8:04—but she is headed to Witney, not London. Megan has been missing since Saturday evening, and while Rachel doesn't want to run into Tom or Anna, she feels compelled to go to Witney. She has been reading articles about Megan's disappearance obsessively; she's learned that Megan and her husband Scott argued Saturday night. Megan left the house, and Scott has told reporters that he believed she went to stay with a friend, Tara Epstein—but Megan never arrived at Tara's house. Megan was last seen walking toward Witney station around 7:15. Rachel wonders if she is the only person in the world who knows that Megan was having an affair. Rachel's head throbs as she wonders what could have happened to Megan; she feels both excited and afraid.

Rachel has felt lonely, adrift, and purposeless for a long time; she finally finds meaning in the search for Megan. She perhaps feels that if she can get the "golden" girl back, she'll be able to move forward in her own life, recapturing the perfect standard of womanhood she has long admired from afar. Rachel looked to Megan as a faraway exemplar of femininity, and there is no doubt a part of her that's determined to get Megan back as a role model.



Later that day, as Rachel settles into her **train** seat to head on to London from Witney, she realizes that she has a voicemail from Cathy. In the message, Cathy, who feels badly about Rachel's taxi accident, tells Rachel that she can stay in the apartment for as long as she wants. Before hanging up, Cathy asks Rachel to come home tonight and skip the pub. As Rachel hangs up, she thinks about how she hasn't had a single drink today—she wants a clear head for the first time in ages.

Rachel is finally able to free herself—if only for just the time being—from the haze of alcoholism in order to focus on the tasks ahead of her. She actively wants to be sober for the first time in a long time—and she wants to try to behave in a societally-acceptable way. There is something exciting before her rather than the same crushing despair and monotony of the past.



Rachel recalls walking around the familiar town of Witney that morning feeling like a trespasser. While walking through the underpass toward the train station at the end of her jaunt, Rachel experienced a flashback—she remembered being slumped against the wall, covered in blood. She realized that the memory must have come from Saturday night—the night of Megan's disappearance and of her own blackout. Rachel hurried toward the platform, yet the flashback kept deepening, and she recalled being helped up by the strange redheaded man from the train.

As Rachel begins having flashbacks about the events of Saturday night, it becomes clear that something went terribly wrong. It can't possibly be a coincidence that on the night of Megan's disappearance, Rachel was in the area and in such distress. Rachel knows that if she wants to figure out what happened to Megan, she must first piece together what, exactly, happened to her.



Presently, in London, Rachel goes to a library and sits at a computer, obsessively reading stories about Megan's disappearance. After several hours, she decides to return home. She is determined to call the local police and inform them about Megan's affair. As the train pulls into the station at Ashbury, Rachel receives yet another phone call—it is Cathy. The police are at the house waiting to talk to Rachel.

Wednesday, July 17, 2013. In the morning, Rachel recalls the night before, when she met with—and lied to—the police. She finds the idea that she could have had something to do with Megan's death ridiculous. But Rachel also knows enough about blackouts to realize that because the brain stops making short-term memories in such a state, there is always the chance that one can harm themselves or others during that state of "deepest black."

When Rachel got home, she encountered two police officers: a man in his forties, Detective Inspector Gaskill, and a younger man whose name Rachel, in a state of panic, has since forgotten. Gaskill questioned Rachel about her whereabouts on Saturday night. She admits that she went to Witney to see Tom—but she decided this was a bad idea and returned home. Gaskill told Rachel that she was seen acting strangely on Blenheim Road around the time that Megan left home—investigators learned this when speaking with Anna Watson. Rachel felt embarrassed and nervous, recalling the flashback of sitting in the underpass covered in blood.

The detectives showed Rachel a picture of Megan and asked if she'd seen her. Rachel said that she hadn't. Gaskill gave Rachel his card and urged her to call him with any further information. Before leaving, Gaskill asked where Rachel worked. Because Cathy was in the room, Rachel lied about still being employed by the public relations firm she was fired from months ago. Now, looking back on the interview—and fearing that her lies will catch up with her—Rachel decides to go to the police station, come clean, and inform Gaskill about Megan's affair.

As Rachel gets the news that the police are waiting to speak to her at home, it is clear that her hunch about having been present the night of Megan's disappearance may be more than just a feeling. The extent to which Rachel's drinking played a role in her actions that night—as well as her ability to remember or willingness to admit what happened—remain to be seen.



Rachel doesn't want to believe that she could have had anything to do with Megan's disappearance. Yet at the same time, she knows that her drinking makes her unreliable and unpredictable, as it plunges her into a mental state of "deepest black." She's unable to account for actions that she may or may not have taken while blacked out.



As Gaskill interviews Rachel, she begins to see how the different parts of the night are connected: her impulse to go visit Tom placed her in Megan's proximity. And because Rachel can't account for what happened that night—she only vaguely remembers fear, violence, and isolation—it's not impossible that something went terribly wrong on Blenheim Road. Her unsteady demeanor, and police reports from Tom and Anna, no doubt make the detectives suspicious of Rachel—they see her as a deviant in terms of how women in society are expected to act.



Rachel is on thin ice, as her entire narrative is built upon secrets and lies. This only more secrets, more lies, and more situations in which Rachel must confront her own unreliability. She knows that she must put a stop to this vicious cycle before it's too late.



Hours later, in the evening, Rachel thinks about what happened when she'd visited the police station. After asking to speak to Gaskill, Rachel was taken to a room where she met with Gaskill and a female officer, Detective Sergeant Riley. Rachel described the redheaded man she saw at the **train** station and reported that he helped her up after she slipped on her way out of the station. She admitted to having been let go from her job. The detectives continued to press her about the events of Saturday night, but Rachel was evasive. The detectives told her that Anna informed them that Rachel once broke into the house and attempted to kidnap her baby, Evie. Rachel became upset and protested that no such thing is true. The detectives suggested that Rachel stretch her legs and get some food—then come back to finish her interview.

Rachel had gotten a sandwich and sat in the park to eat it. There, she reflected on her struggles with fertility—even after a round of in vitro fertilization, she could not get pregnant. The pain broke her—and in turn, she broke her marriage. Though Tom didn't need a child and insisted the two of them should focus on being happy, Rachel could not push away her feelings of shame, and loneliness as she watched friends and acquaintances rapidly start families of their own. As a result, she began drinking heavily.

Rachel had returned to the station and explained that she was drunk—and depressed by a Facebook post Tom made about the joys of new parenthood—when she went to his and Anna's house and picked their baby up out of her bassinet. She meant to simply go talk to Tom, but when she entered the house using a spare key, she found Anna sleeping on the sofa and the baby, Evie, crying. As she was telling this story, Rachel realized that she should have changed some details to make it more believable—implying that it is a lie. Gaskill and Riley continued badgering Rachel about the story, insisting that she wanted to harm the child and that she had been pestering Anna and Tom relentlessly. The detectives pointed out that Rachel has not changed her last name after the divorce—and that she was wearing her wedding ring on a chain around her neck.

Gaskill and Riley began to suggest that perhaps Rachel attacked Megan, believing that she was Anna—both women, they pointed out, are of similar build with blond hair. Rachel told the detectives that their idea was stupid. The detectives asked Rachel if she knew that Anna and Megan were acquainted—but the fact that Megan babysat for Anna came as a true shock to Rachel.

Rachel's meeting with the detectives doesn't go exactly as planned—it turns out that Anna and Tom have told them incriminating things about Rachel, things that the erratic, unreliable Rachel herself isn't able to refute. Hawkins employs a unique way of dispersing information about Rachel, revealing some of her darkest secrets through other people's accounts. This makes Rachel untrustworthy not just to the detectives in the story, but to readers.



As Rachel reflects upon her painful but futile attempts to have a child, it becomes clear that she feels a deficient as a woman because she's unable to be a mother. She resents herself and those around her, and she's turned to alcohol as a way to numb the pain, isolation, and worthlessness she feels.



In this passage, as Rachel tells a story to the police, she privately thinks about the fact that she's lying once again. This again exposes her desperation and untrustworthiness to the reader—she's using secrets and lies to protect herself from others perceiving her failure to be a proper woman. It seems that this ever-growing web of secrets and lies will never come to an end until Rachel makes a conscious decision to stop the deception. Just as Rachel's drinking problem perpetuates itself, so too do her lies.



Rachel is beginning to learn more about the unpredictable ways in which all these disparate threads of her life are connected. As such, she's becoming increasingly frightened that she did play a role in Megan's disappearance.



As Gaskill and Riley continued to press Rachel about her physical injuries and the taxi accident in London, Rachel decided to play her trump card. She pushed her chair back and said she was leaving—and that she assumed the police would be following up with Megan’s lover. The detectives asked Rachel what she meant, and she told them about seeing Megan kissing someone else from the train. The detectives, intrigued, asked Rachel to describe the man further. After getting what they needed from Rachel, the detectives dismissed her—and warned her to stay away from Blenheim Road.

Now, on the **train** home, Rachel feels excited. She has no desire to return home and pour herself a drink—she wants to stay on her toes. For the first time in a long time, Rachel says, she has a purpose—or at least a distraction.

Thursday, July 18, 2013. Rachel buys three newspapers for her morning train journey and reads the articles about Megan that they contain. Rachel learns from the articles several facts about Megan: she was born in 1983, her brother died when she was 15, and her parents are now dead as well. There are several quotes in the articles from friends and acquaintances of Megan’s, all of which describe her in lovingly. When it comes to facts about the investigation, though, the articles are sparse, and the quotes they feature from the detectives assigned to the case are vague. At the signal, Rachel notices two policemen in Scott’s garden. Rachel becomes determined to remember what happened on Saturday night—and to get in touch with Scott to tell him about Megan’s affair.

That evening, Rachel is back on the **train**. She was caught in a rainstorm on the way to the station, and her clothes are drenched. Earlier today, she sent Scott an email after finding his address on the website for his IT business. In the message, she introduced herself as an acquaintance of Megan’s and stated that she had some information about Megan that might help him. Now, however, as Rachel reads a new article about how a man is being questioned in connection with Megan’s murder, she fears that Scott is a suspect—and that he’ll never see her message. Rachel begins craving a drink.

As the train lurches to a stop at the Witney signal, Rachel catches sight of the red-haired man again. He smiles at her. Rachel again remembers him helping her up on the stairs at the Witney station. As the man stands and disembarks the train, Rachel regrets not following him. She fears that without questioning him about Saturday night, she’ll never figure out what happened.

Rachel doesn’t want to be a suspect in this case—and she knows that she has the perfect way to draw focus away from herself. By revealing to the detectives that Megan was having an affair, Rachel pulls a risky move—yet she feels it’s worth revealing the extent of her investment in Megan’s life in order to redirect the detectives to someone who could be a real suspect.



Rachel feels that for the time being, she doesn’t need to numb her emotional pain with alcohol. Now, Rachel has Megan’s case to engage with—a mystery that invigorates her and makes her feel connected to rather than separate from the rest of the world.



Rachel’s obsession with Megan’s disappearance is rooted in her desire to understand how she so completely misread Megan’s “golden” life. Rachel wants to unravel where Megan’s life went off the rails—just as she wishes she could pinpoint the exact moment at which she lost control of her own life. On some level Rachel seems to believe that if she can figure out Megan’s problems, she will be able to figure out her own.



This passage shows how as Rachel spreads more lies, she becomes more anxious and unrooted from herself. This leads her craving alcohol as a means of numbing the feelings that she herself creates. From this, readers can see that Rachel is trapped in a terrible and self-destructive cycle. For Rachel, lies and secrets only beget more and more lies.



Rachel believes that the red-haired man may hold a clue as to what happened to her on the night of Megan’s disappearance. She wants to know what he knows—even as she fears finding out the truth and having to confront the role that she may or may not have played that night.



MEGAN: FOUR

Thursday, March 7, 2013. Megan and her unnamed lover are in a hotel bed. They daydream aloud about taking a vacation together, and as the conversation shifts to more intimate discussions about family and relationships, Megan feels that she's getting somewhere new with this man. As he talks about his own feelings of emptiness, she considers her own hollowness. Soon, Megan realizes that her lover has fallen asleep.

Friday, March 8, 2013. Scott brings Megan coffee on the terrace. He kisses her neck and observes that she slept well the night before—a rarity. He asks her if therapy is working. Megan responds that therapy isn't as simple as getting “fixed”—it's a process. Scott asks Megan if she is going to continue with her sessions. Megan privately reflects on the restlessness that fills her days—she worries one day she'll “end up [...] by [the **train**] tracks, because there's nowhere left to go.” As Scott heads to work, he tells Megan that he loves her. Megan waits until the door closes to cry.

Hawkins continues to purposefully hold back the identity of Megan's lover in order to prolong and deepen the mystery of Megan's impending disappearance. Megan is stepping outside the bounds of society and keeping secrets from her husband—secrets that will likely only spiral out of control.



Megan feels continual, unrelenting pressure from Scott to embody his—and society's—ideals of how a woman should behave. Her emotional trauma and sense of restlessness run counter to those ideals, leading Megan to resent herself—and to long, at least in part, for her own destruction. Her worry about “ending up by the train tracks” is disturbing and prescient given that her disappearance is seemingly connected to Rachel's memories at the Witney station.



RACHEL: FIVE

Friday, July 19, 2013. Rachel rides the quiet 8:04 **train** feeling light, refreshed, and more like her old self than she has in a long time. She still hasn't had a drink in days, even though she's increasingly anxious about not having heard back from Scott. This morning, however, Gaskill called to ask Rachel to come to the station to answer some questions. Rachel is desperate to remember what happened on Saturday night before meeting with the police again—and she is so worried she won't be able to that she's considering having a drink.

That evening, Rachel gives in and buys a case of canned gin and tonics. Earlier, she met with Detective Gaskill, who showed her pictures of several men and asked her to identify the man she saw on the balcony with Megan just before Megan's disappearance. Rachel pointed to the picture of the man whom she believes Megan was kissing. As she was leaving the station, she passed Scott Hipwell in the corridor—the brush filled her with fear and excitement. Rachel is now treating herself to the drinks because she feels joyful about being so useful in the investigation—she feels she is going to be happy, fulfilled, and on her way to recovery very soon.

Rachel's alcoholism has deep roots in her self-loathing, which stems from being unable to live up to society's ideals of femininity and motherhood. As Rachel's problem has worsened and morphed, however, she has come to realize that she craves a drink whenever the world becomes too much to deal with. Rachel no longer wants to just numb herself—she wants to escape from the world entirely and ignore the pressing anxieties, mysteries, and dangers all around her.



Earlier, Rachel wanted to use drinking as an escape from her anxieties and fears or a kind of numbing agent—now, however, she uses excitement as an excuse to drink. This demonstrates that Rachel's alcoholism is no longer completely attached to any one desire or emotion: drinking is a habit, and one Rachel cannot shake.



Saturday, July 20, 2013. Rachel wakes up hungover again—she feels the familiar combination of disorientation, shame, and desperation to remember what she did the night before. As she opens her laptop, she remembers: last night, she emailed Tom. After a shower and a cup of tea, Rachel opens the email and faces her nasty words about Anna: in the email, she urged Tom to tell Anna to stop lying to the police and telling them that Rachel is “obsessed with her and her ugly brat.” Rachel is ashamed and angry with herself; Tom used to tell her that she can get cruel and nasty when she blacks out.

Rachel recalls the day last summer when she went to Tom and Anna’s and took their baby, Evie, out into the garden, down near the **train** tracks. She was drunk but not blacked out—and she knows she did not intend to hurt the baby. After Anna found Rachel in the garden, she took the baby back and called Tom, who drove Rachel home and squeezed her arm the whole way, threatening to kill her if she hurt his daughter. Remembering this incident—combined with the embarrassing email she sent last night—makes Rachel want to spend the whole day drinking.

Rachel realizes she has a new email—not from Tom, but from Scott. As Rachel scrolls through the email, she finds that she sent a second message to Scott after her first one. Scott agrees to meet with Rachel—but Rachel is mortified to have drawn him in under false pretenses. She feels that she has, once again, been “defeated by [...] the person [she is] when [drunk.]”

That evening, Rachel takes the **train** to Witney to meet with Scott. As she approaches the suburb, she feels as if she is “driving off a cliff”—it occurs to her for the first time that Scott is a murder suspect who has a potential motive for killing his wife. Rachel feels bad for getting wrapped up in the excitement of the investigation and forgetting that Megan is a real person: beloved yet flawed, imperfect as so many people are.

This passage shows that when Rachel drinks, she becomes a different version of herself. Rachel’s verbal attack on Anna and Evie—calling Evie an “ugly brat”—demonstrates her anger and shame at being unable to mother a child herself. Rachel who becomes aggressive and cruel when she drinks, and she may be responsible for additional mean, brutish actions that she hasn’t yet recalled. The reader is meant to cast doubt upon Rachel and think of her as unpredictable and unreliable, as this makes the story’s web of secrets and lies even more mysterious.



Rachel bringing Evie down to the train tracks while drunk seems, from the outside, like a dangerous or malicious act. But the reader knows that Rachel uses alcohol to numb the pain of being unable to conceive—and she sees trains as a symbol of escape, adventure, and a new life. It’s clear, then, that Rachel’s actions with Evie were rooted in a place of sadness and longing, not destruction or cruelty.



Rachel messaging Scott under the guise of being Megan’s acquaintance was a drunken bid for connection to the case. Now, however, Rachel will have to compound the lie she’s told with more lies in order to keep up the charade she’s created. Meanwhile, Rachel’s reflection that she was “defeated by the person she is when she’s drunk” further emphasizes the extent to which alcohol influences her thoughts and behavior. Rachel’s sober self and drunk self are so different that they seem like two different people to her.



Rachel realizes that she is getting in over her head, even as she deepens her own collection of secrets and lies. She finds herself frightened by what the secrets she’ll uncover at the Hipwell house will reveal to her about the “golden” couple she’s long watched from afar.



ANNA: ONE

Saturday, July 20, 2013. Anna wakes up early to feed Evie and quickly falls back asleep with the child beside her in bed. When she wakes again, Tom is singing to her—it is her birthday, which she completely forgot about. After breakfast in bed, Anna opens her presents and snuggles with Tom and Evie until Tom falls back asleep. Anna takes Evie downstairs to the patio to watch the **trains** go by. As Anna gets dressed and takes Evie out to the shops to buy some things for dinner, she reflects on the unlikely success of her relationship with Tom—a relationship that began while Tom was still married to another woman.

When Anna returns from the shops, she finds Tom on his laptop. He quickly closes it. Anna realizes that he is reading an email from Rachel. She asks what Rachel has written. Tom tells her it's the “usual [drunken] nonsense.” Anna asks when Rachel will leave them alone and let them be happy, but Tom insists that they *are* happy. Later that evening, after a big lunch and some playtime outside with Evie, Anna reflects on the happiness she does feel with Tom and Evie. As Anna tidies up the living room and reaches to pull the curtains shut, she sees a woman scampering across the sidewalk on the opposite side of the street. Tom comes in, finds Anna standing stock-still at the window, and asks what's wrong. Anna insists that everything is fine.

By introducing Anna as a narrator, Hawkins adds yet another facet and perspective to the mystery at the heart of the novel. Anna is a devoted wife and mother—so devoted, in fact, that she completely erases herself and her own needs without even realizing it. Anna knows that Tom cheated on Rachel with her. She is subconsciously preoccupied by the knowledge that her marriage, however picture-perfect it is now, was founded on a bed of secrets and lies. At the same time, she tries to tell herself that everything is fine.



Anna perceives Rachel as the most insidious, direct threat not just to her marriage but to her idyllic family life. In a society that teaches women to see other women as threats, Anna has failed to see the larger picture of what Rachel's continued presence on the edges of her otherwise perfect life means. Instead, she brushes Rachel off as someone who spews “drunken nonsense,” because this is how Tom wants to characterize Rachel. Meanwhile, given that Rachel is going to see Scott on this same day, she's likely the woman whom Anna sees on the other side of the street.



RACHEL: SIX

Sunday, July 21, 2013. Rachel wakes up and reflects on her meeting with Scott the day before. Yesterday, after getting off the **train** at Witney and making her way to Blenheim Road, Rachel rang Scott's doorbell, and he invited her in warmly. Rachel immediately felt dizzy and disoriented as she realized that Scott and Megan's house had the exact same layout as her and Tom's old house just down the road. Scott made tea and asked Rachel what she wanted to tell him about Megan. Rachel quickly blurted out that she'd seen Megan kissing someone from the train. Scott was a bit weirded out by Rachel's story—but he believed her and asked for more and more details about the tall, dark-skinned man Rachel spotted.

As Rachel finds herself entering Scott and Megan's house for the first time, she is flooded with memories of her own marriage and the life she and Tom created in a house that looks just like the Hipwells'. The uncanny mirroring between these two couples, these two houses, and these two lives deepens the sense of mystery and secrecy in the novel—and suggests that Rachel and Megan's stories are more intertwined than they might have initially seemed.



When Scott fixed himself a drink, Rachel began feeling badly about having been the bearer of such distressing news—and about lying her way into his house to do it. As Scott continued questioning Rachel about her connection to Megan and to Blenheim Road, he pieced together the fact that she was Tom Watson’s ex-wife. Rachel grew nervous and hurried to leave, but Scott insisted on showing her a picture of a former artist from the gallery, Rajesh Gujral. Rachel said Rajesh was not the man she saw. Scott then pulled up a picture of Kamal Abdic, Megan’s therapist, on his computer—and Rachel confirmed that Abdic was the man she saw with Megan. Scott, dismayed and angry, asked Rachel to leave.

Now, after a slightly boring lunch with Cathy, Rachel sits at home alone and begins itching for a drink. As she starts getting ready to go to the liquor store, her phone rings—assumes it’ll be Tom, but when she goes to answer it, she realizes it’s Scott. Scott thanks her for her help the day before. He tells Rachel that he mentioned the tip about Dr. Abdic to Riley—but he left Rachel’s name out of it. Scott seems to truly believe that Abdic has something to do with Megan’s disappearance—even though he can’t find any letters or emails from him in Megan’s things. Scott asks if Megan ever talked about her marriage to him with Rachel. Rachel says Megan didn’t talk about Scott much—but that when she did, she “lit up.” Privately, Rachel beats herself up for lying using such a clichéd term.

Scott confides in Rachel about the terrible fight he and Megan had the night of the disappearance. He admits that he simply let Megan go, believing that if she stayed away for the night, she might blow off some steam. Rachel recalls that even during her worst drunken fights with Tom, Tom always chased her down and calmed her. Scott admits that even in the morning, when Megan wasn’t home, he didn’t panic—it was only when he went over to Megan’s friend Tara’s and realized she wasn’t there that he got worried. Rachel wonders how much of what Scott is telling her is true.

Monday, July 22, 2013. Rachel wakes up feeling hot and stuffy in the warm morning air. She is sitting on the **train** when a man gets on and takes the seat next to her. He reads an article on his iPad about a man who was arrested in connection with Megan’s disappearance. Rachel apologizes for reading over his shoulder, but when she tells him that she knows Megan, he offers to let her read it. The article says only that “a man in his thirties” has been arrested, and Rachel anxiously wonders who it is. At the Witney stop, she disembarks and runs to number 15. She is afraid to knock at the door—but before she can make a decision about whether or not to do so, Scott opens the door, grabs her arm, and pulls her inside.

Rachel and Scott’s first meeting is complicated and fraught. Rachel knows that she’s there on false pretenses—yet she hasn’t created an identity removed enough from her true self to prevent Scott from filling in the blanks about who she actually is. Rachel wants to help Scott, but she’s also furthering her own agenda—thus, she feels that she has to remain secretive and cagey at all times. Rachel can be a more authentic version of herself around Scott in some ways, yet she must constantly repress a fundamental truth about herself: that she did not really know Megan.



Rachel continues lying to Scott in order to remain close to him. She feels connected to him in a way she can’t articulate—and she is desperate to insinuate herself into the lives of the “golden” couple she admired for so long. Rachel knows that the longer she stays in touch with Scott—and the more they discuss—the more outlandish her lies will have to become. Yet she isn’t willing to cut herself off from him just yet.



Just as Hawkins establishes Rachel as an unreliable narrator and encourages readers to question her perspective and her motivations, so too does Rachel find herself in the position of receiving information from a person she doesn’t fully trust. Meanwhile, Rachel’s reflections about Tom always chasing her down and calming her when she was drunk contradicts his stories about Rachel being out of control and violent while intoxicated. This subtly implies that perhaps Tom can’t be fully trusted either.



This chapter ends on a note of intense suspense as Rachel realizes that the wheels of Megan’s case are turning—possibly due to the information she’s given to both the authorities and to Scott himself. As Rachel arrives at Scott’s house to check in on him—and as he hurriedly pulls her inside—it is clear that her investment in him is deepening even as Megan’s case becomes more and more fraught.



MEGAN: FIVE

Thursday, March 21, 2013. Megan is angry—her lover has not called or texted her, and she is feeling both abandoned and indignant. She vows not to “go quietly.” At breakfast, Scott asks her to cancel her therapy session that afternoon so that they can go to dinner at a friend’s house, but Megan insists that she can’t. Before Scott walks out the door for work, he decisively tells her to cancel the appointment. Alone, Megan throws her coffee cup at the wall and watches it shatter.

Megan arrives at her therapy appointment agitated and out of breath, having ignored Scott’s calls all afternoon. When she walks into Kamal Abdic’s office, she puts her hands on his chest. The doctor tells her what she’s doing is not appropriate—he warns her that she’s experiencing a phenomenon known as transference, in which people in therapy develop feelings for their counselor. Megan asks Kamal if he feels anything for her or if she’s imagining what’s between them. Megan begins screaming at Kamal, and he shakes her to quiet her. Megan kisses him on the mouth, bites his lip hard enough to draw blood, and hurries home, trying to ignore the bruises blooming on her arms.

As Megan experiences rejection from her lover (and an increase in attention and control from Scott) she feels angry, isolated, and even violent. Megan feels that she’s doing her best to inhabit the ideas of womanhood and desirability others have about her, yet she’s still failing to get the things she wants.



Megan’s relationship with Kamal is becoming increasingly volatile. Megan is no longer restless simply because she’s unsure of what she wants—now, she has a clear goal, yet she is unable to attain it. Megan perhaps feels that her inability to make Kamal feel things for her—or admit to what he already feels—is a failure connected to the way she embodies a feminine identity. On another note, the way Kamal responds to Megan in this passage suggests that he isn’t the lover she’s been seeing—meaning that there is yet another man connected to Megan who could be a potential suspect in her disappearance.

**RACHEL: SEVEN**

Monday, July 22, 2013. Rachel recalls what happened after Scott pulled her inside. He’d chastised her for coming by when reporters and police have been swarming the area—but he confirmed that the police had arrested Dr. Abdic. Scott trembled as he confided in Rachel that he had been waiting by the phone for grim news about Megan. Rachel apologized for coming by, but she also said she didn’t want Scott to be alone. Scott said he wasn’t alone; he called Scott’s mother into the room to introduce Rachel to her as the woman who told him about Abdic. Scott’s mother thanked Rachel for her help—and then Scott coolly asked Rachel to leave. As soon as Rachel stepped onto the sidewalk, she found herself face to face with Tom, Evie, and Anna.

Rachel’s newfound attachment to Scott is complicated by the fact that they are observed on all sides: by the authorities, by Scott’s mother, and by Tom and Anna, who constantly suspect Rachel of being up to no good. Rachel knows that her sudden presence in Scott’s life must raise suspicion—yet she can’t stop herself from feeling repeatedly drawn back to him and the mystery he represents.

**ANNA: TWO**

Monday, July 22, 2013. Tom, Anna, and Evie go on for a family outing to a restaurant. Getting there requires them to walk past the Hipwell house, which makes Anna uncomfortable—but Anna is so happy to be out and about with her family that she doesn’t care. As they pass the house, however, Anna is astounded to see Rachel step out the front door of number 15. Anna instinctively reaches forward to pull Evie out of her buggy. Rachel turns and walks the other way. Evie begins wailing, and Tom tells Anna that they should just go back home.

This passage demonstrates yet again that Anna sees Rachel as a danger and a threat to her and her baby. By introducing a character who sees Rachel as not only unreliable but overtly suspect, Hawkins deepens her readers’ distrust of Rachel and further complicates Rachel’s web of secrets and lies.



That evening, Anna learns that someone has been arrested in connection with Megan's disappearance. Tom wants to discuss the news—but Anna is still focused on Rachel and whether she was perhaps in the Hipwells' house trying to gain access to the back garden of number 23. Tom, however, urges Anna not to worry—he promises to call Rachel and ask what's going on. Anna insists that they call the police. Tom, however, says such a measure is unnecessary. Anna remains perturbed by Rachel's presence on Blenheim Road and privately resolves to find a way to get away from the house—and from Rachel.

RACHEL: EIGHT

Tuesday, July 23, 2013. As soon as Rachel wakes up, she opens up her laptop to read the news. She is disappointed when there are no new articles about Megan's disappearance or about Kamal Abdic. Rachel knows from yesterday's news that there has been "evidence" discovered at Abdic's home. She eagerly awaits more news, yet throughout the day, none comes in. Tom calls her multiple times, but she doesn't pick up. As afternoon rolls around, Rachel's constant refreshing of the internet pays off: news outlets begin releasing details about Abdic, including his background as a Muslim refugee from Bosnia—and a domestic violence charge from his past. Rachel, excited, heads downstairs to watch the news on TV.

When more news fails to come in fast enough, Rachel gets bored and goes to the liquor store for two bottles of wine. She drinks a whole bottle in front of the TV before more news about Abdic comes in: he has been released without charge due to insufficient evidence. Rachel is shocked. She continues drinking heavily and heads up to bed. She feels ill and doesn't want to drink anymore—yet she can't bring herself to pour the rest of the wine down the sink. As Rachel falls into a drowsy sleep, she dreams of Scott angrily calling Megan's name.

Wednesday, July 24, 2013. Rachel wakes up to the sound of Cathy entering her bedroom. Cathy assesses the empty wine bottles, warning Rachel that she'll get fired if she keeps carrying on in such a way. Rachel considers telling Cathy that she's already been fired, but instead she opts for silence. After Cathy leaves, Rachel goes downstairs and watches a press conference featuring Gaskill and Scott as she eats breakfast. Rachel suddenly remembers calling Scott the day before. She retrieves her phone from bed and sees that she has missed calls from both Scott and Tom. After a shower, Rachel excitedly calls Scott back—but Scott darkly accuses her of lying to him. He says that the detectives have told him that Rachel is a deeply unstable alcoholic. Scott hangs up.

Again, this passage cements the fact that Anna sees Rachel as the most direct threat to her happiness. Megan's disappearance from just down the street doesn't alarm Anna nearly as much as Rachel's presence on Blenheim Road does. This suggests that women who seek to embody society's ideals of femininity are conditioned to see those who don't as dangerous.



Rachel badly wants to believe that she has been instrumental in the authorities nabbing Megan's abductor. She feels that if she can pin the crime on someone else, she won't have to examine her own potential involvement or dig any deeper into the lost memories of that fateful Saturday night. Meanwhile, that Tom calls Rachel several times contradicts his narrative that Rachel is dangerous and obsessed with contacting him—he doesn't seem afraid of Rachel at all.



Rachel drinks heavily to distract herself and numb her disappointment when things in the case don't go the way she hopes. Rachel is clearly consumed by Megan's case and by all the various players in it. She's pushing herself down an unhealthy road and failing to protect herself emotionally—or physically. Additionally, her dream about Scott yelling at Megan suggests that on some level, Rachel doubts Scott's innocence.



There are people in Rachel's life who want to help her escape the spiral she's in—yet she won't be truthful or open enough with them to get the assistance she truly needs. Instead of telling the truth about her circumstances and seeking a fresh start, Rachel mires herself deeper and deeper into a web of lies. This pattern begins to backfire in this passage as Scott finally calls Rachel out for being dishonest with him in the midst of the investigation.



Friday, July 26, 2013. Rachel has stopped pretending to commute to work and has instead been pretending to be sick all week. The weather is wet and rainy, and Rachel has been plagued by alcohol-fueled nightmares in which she's trapped beneath the underpass at Blenheim Road. She's begun to believe Megan will never be found. Earlier this week, Rachel sent a letter to Scott admitting her problem but promising that it is under control; he hasn't written her back yet.

After going out for liquor—and finding that her bank account is empty—Rachel wanders the streets of Ashbury in the pouring rain, waiting to sober up enough to call Tom. When she dials him, she tells him that she needs to talk to him about the night of Megan's disappearance. Tom warns Rachel to stay away from Scott, whom he believes is dangerous—but Rachel insists that Scott isn't responsible for Megan's disappearance. Rachel asks Tom what happened Saturday night, and if he knows how she ended up with a cut on her head. Tom accuses Rachel of suspecting Anna of doing something to her. He refutes the idea and insists that when he found Rachel in the street that night, she was already cut up and bruised from falling.

Rachel continues asking Tom for details about the night—but Tom ridicules her for being unable to remember what happened herself. He turns the questions around on Rachel and asks what she's been doing hanging around the Hipwells'. Rachel tells Tom that she informed Scott about Megan's affair with her therapist—but that as an unreliable witness, she was unable to convince the authorities of Abdic's involvement. Tom tells Rachel that she did the right thing in coming forward, and then he hangs up.

Monday, July 29, 2013. Rachel is on the **train** to London once again. Megan's disappearance has all but disappeared from the news. When the train stops at Witney, Rachel gets off—she decides to look for the redheaded man. After half an hour of waiting on the platform, however, she still hasn't spotted him. She begins to give up hope and heads for the opposite platform so she can return home. At the bottom of the steps, however, she sees Scott coming out of a convenience store across the street. She runs after him and stops him—but he is unhappy to see her. When it begins pouring, however, Scott invites Rachel to come over to his house to get dry.

Rachel was using her connection with Scott and her investigation into Megan's life to distract herself from the stagnancy of her own life and the severity of her substance abuse problems. Without that outlet, Rachel is floundering. That Rachel's dreams of being trapped beneath the underpass are couple with her worries about Megan's disappearance suggests that she feels kinship with her—like Megan, Rachel feels utterly lost, trapped, and overlooked by everyone in her life.



Something is not adding up about what happened to Rachel on Saturday night in Witney. She allegedly went to Blenheim Road to harass Tom and Anna—yet by the time she got there, Tom alleges, she was already beat up and bruised. Rachel's violent memories from the underpass don't make any sense, either. Rachel is trying desperately to piece together what happened to her—and how it might relate to what happened to Megan—but it seems she's more afraid of finding out a painful truth than of living in the dark.



Hawkins has created a novel in which every character's words, actions, and motivations must be carefully considered. As Tom berates Rachel for her failure to remember her own past—yet applauds her when she reveals that she offered up the name of a suspect in Megan's disappearance—Hawkins casts a shadow of doubt as to whose side Tom is truly on.



Rachel believes that she has ruined her chances at getting close to Scott of helping him figure out what happened to Megan—but when she spots him at the store, he reacts to her presence not with disgust, fear, or anger, but with sympathy and kindness. Rachel thus feels like she has a second chance at figuring out what was really going on in the lives of her favorite “golden” couple.



At the house, Scott makes tea while Rachel apologizes again for misleading him and expresses her condolences about Abdic not being charged. Scott insists that while authorities found evidence of Megan's presence in Abdic's house, there was not enough evidence to convict him of a crime. Scott is upset, however, because although Abdic swears he and Megan were not having an affair, detectives found a trace of blood in his car matching Megan's type. Scott also tells Rachel that Abdic told the authorities that Megan was unhappy with Scott.

Scott asks what happened between Rachel and her ex-husband. Rachel says that Tom cheated on her with Anna while they were still married—and that her drinking started while they were married and struggling to conceive. Scott admits that he and Megan often argued about whether or not to have children. Rachel asks if that is what they were arguing about on the day of her disappearance—but Scott says it wasn't.

When Rachel arrives home, Cathy confronts her about having lost her job months ago. Cathy says that her boyfriend, Damien, ran into one of Rachel's ex-coworkers in London today, and the coworker spilled the beans. Cathy asks why Rachel has been lying to her for months—and what she's been doing all day in London when she pretends to go into work. Rachel apologizes and begins sobbing. Cathy comforts Rachel, makes her a cup of tea, and tells her that it's time to stop drinking and look for a new job.

Thursday, August 1, 2013. Rachel wakes from a nightmare in which something unseen is covering her face. She jolts upright in bed, crying and gasping for air. Rachel, desperate to calm herself, remembers that she has a little bit of wine stashed in a hall closet: she goes downstairs, pours it into a mug, and hides the bottle again. She sits in front of the TV and flips absentmindedly through the channels until she sees a news report from Corly Wood—a forest near Witney. The body of a young woman has been found submerged in floodwater at the bottom of a field there—less than five miles from the Hipwell home. Rachel runs upstairs to vomit.

MEGAN: SIX

Thursday, June 13, 2013. Megan awakes from a fitful half-sleep feeling hot and suffocated. She resents Scott's presence in her bed—and how small her life has become. She is unable to sleep at night. She feels that dead ends are closing in all around her, and she wants to run away. Though therapy helped for a little while, her old flightiness has returned. She is determined to talk to her lover and make him listen to her once and for all.

From the sections narrated by Megan, readers can infer that the blood in the car Scott refers to is Abdic's—traces from when Megan bit his lip—and that it is just a coincidence that he and Megan share a blood type. Hawkins uses dramatic irony and the withholding of information in order to fill in some blanks while leaving other questions wide open.



Both the Watsons' and the Hipwells' marriages were impacted by questions of whether the wives in each couple were capable of becoming good mothers. This speaks to society's strong emphasis on women fulfilling their roles in society only through motherhood—and the disastrous consequences that can arise from this pressure.



Though Cathy responded to some of Rachel's earlier infractions with strictness and judgement, she now accepts the news of Rachel hiding her unemployment with compassion and empathy. Cathy genuinely wants to help Rachel get her life back in order—and she knows that being further alienated from a support system will only push her in the opposite direction.



In this passage, as Rachel realizes that Megan is dead, her nightmares coincide with reality. Rachel is terrified by things she doesn't even remember. She is unsure of what her role in all this truly is, yet as the stakes grow higher and higher, she worries that any involvement she may have had some involvement in Megan's death. Just as Hawkins is readers to second-guess Rachel, Rachel's circumstances lead her to distrust herself.



Megan believes that she is running out of options; she feels trapped in her relationship with Scott. She knows that unless she becomes a mother, she won't fulfill his hopes and expectations for her—and if she can't escape with her lover, she'll have to sacrifice what she really wants in life in order to keep her husband.



That evening, while Scott thinks that Megan is at the movies with Tara, Megan goes to Kamal's house and knocks on the door. He is surprised but not unhappy to see her, and he invites her in. Megan apologizes for her behavior the last time they saw each other and says that she has something to tell Kamal. Kamal says that he can't counsel her anymore, but Megan asks him to listen to her one last time—as a friend. Kamal agrees. He pours Megan some wine and they sit together at his kitchen table. Megan begins pouring out the truth about her past.

Megan tells Kamal about moving into Mac's isolated cottage near the sea. Days would go by without the two of them seeing another soul. Megan was happy—she was 17 and free. Then, she got pregnant. When she realized she was expecting, it was already too late for an abortion. Though neither Megan nor Mac wanted a child, Megan “just carried on” with life. She didn't go to a doctor or take prenatal vitamins. Both of them ignored the pregnancy almost entirely until the child arrived, delivered at home by a friend with some nursing training. Megan named the child Libby and loved her instantly.

One day, when Libby was just a few months old, Megan and Mac got into a horrible fight. Mac left the house. Megan was freezing in the unheated cabin and decided to take a bath to warm up. She brought Libby into the tub with her. Megan fell asleep—and when she woke up, Libby was face-down in the water, dead. Having confessed her darkest secret, Megan waits for Kamal to react adversely; instead, he pulls Megan into his arms. She realizes that she is safe with Kamal. Megan's phone begins ringing: it is Tara, reporting that Scott has called her four times looking for Megan. Megan thanks Tara for the warning and hangs up. She tells Kamal that she doesn't want to leave. Kamal tells her to come back any time, and Megan kisses Kamal—this time, he does not pull away from her.

RACHEL: NINE

Saturday, August 3, 2013. Rachel wakes from a dream in which she is being pursued through the woods. She can hear Cathy cleaning. Rachel has not left her room since Thursday—yet she vows that, starting tomorrow, she'll get herself together and stop drinking. She has a voicemail from Rachel's mother offering to give her some money and asking if she wants to meet for lunch in London. Rachel feels that she needs a drink before she calls her mother back to talk. As Rachel is about to put her phone down, she sees she has another message: it's from Scott, left at nearly one in the morning.

Though Megan has pushed Kamal away through her inappropriate behavior toward him, it seems that he cannot turn her away in a moment of need. Megan is clearly at a breaking point—she feels that if she doesn't confront the truth about herself, she will not be able to survive her current circumstances.



Megan was already a mother once—and she clearly lost or abandoned the baby, given that the child is no longer around. This revelation explains her aversion to having more children, as she likely feels she can't live up to societal ideals of how a mother should be. Megan clearly carries the scars of trauma from whatever happened between her, Mac, and Libby—and as she reveals the story to Kamal, she begins to dismantle the secrets she's kept hidden for so long.



Megan reveals the horrible secret she's been guarding for years: she was responsible for the death of her first child. Megan has carried this pain and shame without confiding in anyone, likely fearing both criminal punishment and social ostracization. With Kamal, however, Megan begins to see that her mistakes do not define her—and that to be free of secrets is to be unburdened and able to start over. Megan has been gaslighting herself into believing that she is a bad person because of one terrible mistake—and now she sees that she no longer has to hurt herself.



Rachel hasn't been getting any worse since the news about Megan came out—but she certainly hasn't been getting any better. She's still trying to numb herself with alcohol, and she's still experiencing frightening and mysterious dreams that may or may not offer clues as to what happened on that fateful Saturday night. Rachel, however, doesn't want to truly confront anything in her life, past or present.



Rachel has a drink before she gets on the **train** to go into London. Once on the train, she sees pictures of Megan on discarded newspaper and every open iPad and computer: Megan is, as Rachel knew she would be, the girl found in the woods. Rachel closes her eyes at the signal, too sad even to look out at the houses. Just then, a man sits down beside her—the redheaded man from the Saturday of Megan’s disappearance. He greets Rachel and asks if she remembers him from a few weeks ago, even though she was “a bit wasted.” As the man spies a newspaper with Megan’s face on it, he remarks upon how sad and strange it is that the two of them were in Witney the night of her disappearance. The man asks Rachel if she remembers anything.

Suddenly, Rachel does remember something: a fist coming toward her. Rachel panics, stands up, and hurries to the other end of the carriage. She still can’t remember exactly what happened—but she is full of the same confusion and terror that she felt that night. She closes her eyes and remembers more: a blonde woman in a blue dress walking away from her. She realizes that the figure must be Anna.

ANNA: THREE

Saturday, August 3, 2013. Anna sits alone in the kitchen. Tom is out with some old army buddies, and Evie is sleeping. Anna is bored, but she refuses to turn on the TV or go on the internet—she doesn’t want to see Megan’s face. Anna tries not to think of Rachel, either—though the authorities have confirmed that Rachel isn’t connected to Megan’s disappearance, Anna still fears Rachel coming around to take Evie. Anna feels that Rachel is much more dangerous than the authorities give her credit for.

RACHEL: TEN

Sunday, August 4, 2013. Rachel wakes from yet another nightmare, one in which she has the feeling of having done something terribly wrong and drawn the ire of everyone in her life. Last night, when Rachel got home, she drank a bit and then called Scott back—he insisted, however, that he’d called her by mistake. Rachel could hear Scott’s mother pattering around in the background. Rachel asked if they could meet soon to talk about Anna Watson, so Scott asked Rachel to come over the next day.

Rachel encounters the redheaded man again for the first time since the night of Megan’s disappearance—now, she has a chance to figure out if he has a role in all of this. However, Rachel knows that to carry on a conversation with this man would mean potentially uncovering memories that she doesn’t actually want to confront yet.



Rachel fears that the redheaded man is perhaps the figure who attacked her and inspired so much terror and pain in her that fateful night—yet the memory of Anna seems to suggest otherwise, as the man seemingly wasn’t even there. Rachel’s memories are so fragmented that she can’t possibly interpret them in this piecemeal fashion—she needs more concrete information, yet getting it terrifies her.



Rachel’s bombshell memory of seeing Anna near the underpass is followed up by this a brief piece of narration from Anna in which Anna asserts that Rachel is the dangerous one. Hawkins thus keeps readers guessing as to which people—and what information—can be trusted. Meanwhile, Anna’s boredom subtly implies that she isn’t as happy in her role as a wife and mother as she lets on—she seems lonely and under-stimulated rather than happy.



Through her alcoholism—and now, through her involvement with Scott—Rachel has put herself in several positions over the year in which she feels ashamed of her actions. These feelings clearly haunt Rachel, though they don’t deter her from continuing the vicious cycles she’s created for herself.



Now, when Rachel arrives at Scott's house, she finds him looking disheveled and defeated. When she asks Scott about Megan's relationship with Anna, Scott says that there was nothing remarkable between the women. Rachel confesses that she thinks she saw Anna the night Megan went missing. She admits that she was drinking. Scott tells Rachel to stop bringing her "bullshit" problems to him—he has real issues, and he's still being treated as a suspect because Abdic told authorities that Scott was emotionally abusive. Scott kicks a chair in anger as he tells Rachel that he believes he will be convicted of murdering Megan.

As Scott collapses, sobbing, Rachel puts her hand on his neck to comfort him. She assures him that things will be okay, but Scott reveals that he sent a cruel text message to Megan on the night of her disappearance. Scott begs Rachel to tell the police that Scott loved Megan and that they were happy. Rachel, however, says that the police won't believe her because they think of her as an unreliable alcoholic.

Scott's mood changes quickly. He rounds on Rachel and orders her to remember something, anything, from the drunken haze of the Saturday Megan went missing. But Rachel can remember only bits and pieces: falling in the underpass, finding blood on her hands, feeling afraid. Scott begs Rachel to let him know if she remembers anything. On the **train** home, Rachel realizes that perhaps with the help of a therapist—like Kamal Abdic—she could recover her memories.

Thursday, August 6, 2013. Rachel has an appointment this afternoon at 4:30 to see Kamal Abdic. She was so excited last night that she could barely sleep. Rachel is desperate to see Abdic not just because she wants to recover her lost memories—but because she is convinced that Scott is innocent, and she is determined to help him clear his name.

Later, as Rachel prepares to board the **train** home, she reflects on her afternoon at Abdic's office. She recalls the fear and anxiety she felt as she entered the practice—she was worried that someone would know who she was. But as Abdic summoned her into his office and began talking to her, Rachel realized that he thought she was just any other patient. Rachel decided to use the session to be honest about her problems, and she began telling Abdic about her alcoholism and her blackouts. She wanted to figure out why she often feels she that would never do the terrible things others have told her she's done while drunk.

Scott clearly feels trapped by Abdic's accusations, and Rachel's uncertainty about what she saw on the night of Megan's disappearance only adds to Scott's frustration. Rachel's desire to figure out what happened on Saturday night and clear her own conscience runs counter to Scott's desire to prove himself innocent in the face of mounting suspicions from the authorities. He cannot help her while trying to help himself.



Scott wants Rachel to vouch for him—but his desperation makes him forget the fact that Rachel is, to the authorities, completely untrustworthy because of the things that Tom and Anna have told them about her. The web of lies and secrets grows more and more complicated each day.



When Scott fears for his life and his freedom, he becomes violent and vindictive. He wants Rachel to find a way to save him and clear his name—but Rachel can barely do those things for herself, and she fears that she is running out of time to find the answers she needs.



Rachel makes an appointment with Abdic, further deepening the parallel between her and Megan. Rachel is winding herself even deeper into the complicated web of mysterious individuals circling Megan's disappearance.



Rachel has come to Abdic's office in search of information about him—and clues to the things she can't remember about her own life. As their conversation unfolds, however, she finds herself with the unique opportunity to tell someone the truth about herself. Rachel hasn't confided in anyone about her feelings surrounding her divorce and her alcohol dependency—now, she has the chance.



As the session continued, Rachel delved into the trauma of her husband's affair but insisted that her drinking was what drove him away. Rachel began crying, but she refused to talk with Abdic about her struggles with infertility. Abdic suggested that they discuss more next time. Rachel left the session feeling horribly guilty for letting herself open up to Abdic—and for wanting to go back soon.

Wednesday, August 7, 2013. Rachel wakes from yet another dream in which she feels inexplicably guilty and ashamed—in the dream, everyone in her life sided with Tom against her. As she stirs, she recalls a time when Tom told her there was no money for another round of IVF—yet soon after, he booked an extravagant trip with some friends. The two had a horrible fight, and Rachel got drunk. The next morning, Tom told Rachel that she'd violently smashed their wedding photographs and called him horrible names.

To push the memory from her head, Rachel decides to go on a walk. She tries to pretend she is a normal woman out for a casual stroll. She gets lost in thought about the reality of her life—her entanglements with Scott and Kamal, her struggles to get sober—when suddenly, she spots a paper at a newsstand whose headline reads “WAS MEGAN A CHILD KILLER?”

ANNA: FOUR

Wednesday, August 7, 2013. Anna is at a meeting for new mothers at her local Starbucks when one of the women in the meet-up group enters holding a newspaper bearing the headline “WAS MEGAN A CHILD KILLER?” Anna stares at the headline for a moment before bursting into tears. Evie immediately starts crying too. After freshening up in the bathroom, Anna takes Evie and hurries home, afraid the other mothers will judge her for having hired a potential “child killer” as a nanny. Anna tries to call Tom as she hurries home, but his phone goes straight to voicemail.

At home, Anna cannot resist the temptation to read the story in full online. She is relieved to find that it is sensationalistic and highly vague, though it does suggest that Megan may have killed her own child 10 years ago—and that this murder could be a motive for someone killing her in return. Tom calls Anna back and urges her not to believe what she reads in the papers. Anna wants to believe Tom is right, yet she cannot help but feel that she always knew something was “off” about Megan.

Rachel still can't open all the way up to Abdic—many of the issues that plague her are too raw to talk about. Still, Rachel feels better after the session—she's perhaps beginning to see that the only way to put an end to the gauntlet of secrets and lies that have come to define her life is to free herself from each one.



Rachel believes that during her marriage to Tom, she took out her frustration and anger on him. Because of this, she believes that something violent could have transpired during the hours she cannot recall on the night of Megan's disappearance. Yet Tom's behavior—going on an expensive vacation after denying her another round of IVF—suggests that Tom was manipulative, if not outright abusive. It remains to be seen whether he told Rachel the truth about her actions, or if lying about her behavior was another way of exerting control within their relationship.



A new wrinkle in Megan's case develops: the truth about Libby has seemingly come out. Rachel finds herself forced to confront yet again how the “golden” woman whom she imagined Megan to be doesn't match up with who Megan actually was.



For Anna—a woman whose life revolves entirely around her identity as a mother—having her former nanny exposed as a potential “child killer” isn't just frightening—it's shameful and embarrassing, a marker of her insufficiency as a mother. Not only is Anna dealing with the tragedy of Megan's disappearance, but now she must also confront her own lapses in judgment—and how they reflect upon her.



This passage demonstrates that Anna and Tom are not necessarily a united front. Despite their idyllic-seeming life, Anna is unable to make Tom see the validity of her fears: first about Rachel, and now about Megan.



That evening, when Tom gets home, Anna confronts him angrily about needing to leave Blenheim Road. Between the passing **trains**, Rachel snooping around, and Megan’s disappearance, Anna has had enough. She gives Tom an ultimatum: she needs to leave. Tom insists that they won’t be able to afford to live anywhere else. Anna suggests Tom ask his parents for help, but Tom says that he’s not speaking to them because of how they treated him when he left Rachel for Anna. Anna feels guilty for starting a fight with Tom—but she cannot erase her desperation to get away from Witney.

Anna wants to get out of Witney, but she and Tom are definitely not on the same page about leaving. Though Anna is being perfectly reasonable given what’s happened, she somehow still ends up feeling badly about raising the concerns she has. This illustrates how profoundly women are conditioned to consider everyone else’s needs before their own and to squash their intuition at every turn.



RACHEL: ELEVEN

Wednesday, August 7, 2013. Rachel is taking a shower when her phone begins ringing incessantly. As she steps out of the shower, she answers and finds a frantic Scott on the other end, complaining about how he cannot go home because of all the reporters waiting for him there. Scott asks if he can come over, and Rachel says that he’s welcome to. Ten minutes later, Scott arrives looking pale and shaky. He laments that every time he thinks things are as bad as they could possibly get, they get even worse. Today, Scott says, he got the news that Megan was pregnant when she was killed. Scott begins crying, and Rachel soon begins sobbing too.

Rachel continues inviting Scott more deeply into her life, knowing all the while that she’s playing with fire. Scott is not just a suspect in his pregnant wife’s murder but the subject of a press frenzy. Rachel, however, is so hungry for human connection—and so desperate to find a way of proving both herself and Scott innocent—that she disregards the potential risks he poses.



Rachel hears Cathy coming and hurries Scott into her bedroom—she explains that Cathy might ask questions about his being here. Scott tells Rachel how hard things have been since the story about Megan’s first child broke. Detectives believe the deceased baby’s father may have killed Megan. Gaskill and Riley have questioned Scott about the story—but Scott knows very little about Megan’s past. He believes the “disturbed” Abdic leaked the story to keep the heat off of himself.

Rachel knows that the people in her life will be put off—even worried—by her association with Scott, yet she feels somehow responsible for Scott’s misery. The investigation is taking a profound psychological toll on Scott. He is reaching out to Rachel so frequently because he has nowhere else to turn—and because he has been conditioned to see women as emotional support systems.



Rachel wants to discuss the case—including Megan’s pregnancy—further, but Scott is exhausted. Rachel urges him to stay at her place for the night and try to get some sleep. Scott falls asleep quickly, and Rachel lies down next to him. When she wakes up several hours later, he is already gone.

Scott falls asleep in Rachel’s bed, but he leaves in the middle of the night. This suggests that he knows they are getting too close too quickly—and that he needs to lie to himself about what’s happening between them.



Thursday, August 8, 2013. In the morning, Rachel goes to yet another appointment at Abdic’s office. On her way, she vows to be honest with him. During the session she tells him the truth about her infertility: it’s the catalyst for her drinking problem and her depression. Abdic comforts Rachel and reminds her that there is still hope for her to be able to have a child one day. As Rachel leaves Abdic’s office, she contrasts his gentle demeanor against Scott’s rough, ragged personality.

Rachel spent so long thinking of Kamal as a suspect—now that she knows him, however, she has come to believe that he is incapable of the things the detectives have suspected him of doing. Rachel feels safe with Abdic—and thus she’s able to tell him more about her life and her pain that she’s ever told anyone. Importantly, Rachel outright confirms that her infertility is what’s driving her mental health issues and alcohol abuse.



Friday, August 9, 2013. The next evening, Rachel is drinking on the **train** on her way to see Scott—he has asked her to come over. Last night, authorities recovered the remains of Megan's first child buried on the East Anglian coast. Rachel gets off at Witney and makes her way to Blenheim Road, forgetting about the possibility of encountering Tom, or Anna, or a crowd of reporters. She doesn't feel guilty about seeing Scott anymore because it turns out that Megan was never what Rachel thought she was. Rachel now knows that Megan was a killer.

Rachel has decided that it is easier to conceive of Megan as the villain in her own story than to confront the possibility that one of the men she knows—Scott, Tom, or Kamal—is responsible for Megan's death. Rachel has been conditioned to view other women as more suspect and dangerous than men—much like Anna views Rachel as her foremost threat.



MEGAN: SEVEN

Thursday, June 20, 2013. Megan is back at Kamal's house. He pours her a glass of wine, snuggles against her, and asks her to finish her story. Megan picks up where she left off and describes Mac coming home to find her still in the bath. When he turned the light on, Megan screamed—she didn't want to see her dead child. Megan ran, naked, out of the house and down to the beach. Eventually, Mac came for her and wordlessly led her back to the house. The next morning, the two of them buried Libby near the abandoned **train** tracks and marked the grave with some stones. That night, Mac went out—and never came home.

The horrific details of Libby's death continue to unravel as Megan confesses the full truth to Kamal. Judging by Megan's reaction upon finding Libby dead, it seems that her immediate impulse was to deny and escape from the tragedy. Indeed, the tragic story features the mention of train tracks—a recurring symbol of the desire for escape that both Megan and Mac felt in the wake of such a tragic loss. This explains why, so many years later, Megan still feels restless and eager to constantly reinvent herself: she's running away from her failures as a mother and her grief.



After 10 days, Megan says, she packed her things and left the cottage in the woods. She never saw Mac again, and she never returned. Megan admits that she believes Mac is dead—she has a strange sense that he's not around anymore. Kamal suggests Megan try to contact him to find out if he's alive—and if he can offer her some closure. Megan says that she believes Mac hates her. Kamal, however, suggests that Mac is probably feeling just as afraid, guilty, and pained as Megan is. Kamal points out that Mac abandoned Megan—the one person who was supposed to help her left her alone in her moment of need.

For so many years, Megan has convinced herself that she is the villain in her own story. She believes that she is an untrustworthy murderer and that she is unworthy of love, happiness, or a second shot at motherhood. Kamal is the first person in Megan's life to learn the truth—and thus the first person given the opportunity to point out the ways in which Mac failed Megan.



The conversation finished, Megan prepares to head home. On her way out the door, Megan asks Kamal if she can see him again. Kamal, however, insists that they must do the right thing and stop seeing each other. He urges her to go home to Scott. As Megan walks home, a male jogger with headphones on bumps into her and knocks her down. He doesn't stop to apologize or help her up but instead keeps running. When Megan arrives home, she finds that her hand is cut and her mouth, which she rubbed on the way home, is smeared with blood.

This passage shows just how easy it is for women to suffer violence unnoticed. If a male jogger could knock Megan down without apologizing or facing consequences, Hawkins suggests, there are many other acts of violence that could be perpetrated with similar ease and stealth.



RACHEL: TWELVE

Saturday, August 10, 2013. Rachel wakes early in the morning. She believes that she is in bed with Tom. She wriggles her hips against his—but when Scott speaks up and asks her to stop, Rachel is horrified. She apologizes hurriedly, and Scott rushes to the bathroom. Rachel tries to recall the previous night: the two of them got drunk on the patio and watched **trains** go by. She remembers Scott touching her hair and smiling—she realizes that last night, the two of them had sex.

Later, Rachel heads downstairs. Scott has made coffee. As she walks through the house, she notices that all traces of Megan's presence are gone. She wonders if Scott or Scott's mother got rid of her things—or if Megan got rid of them herself. Repulsed by herself and Scott both, Rachel leaves hurriedly. Out on the street, Rachel sees Anna standing on the sidewalk, her hands on her hips. When Anna sees Rachel spot her, she turns and hurries back to number 15. Rachel senses fear in Anna's gait.

Scott and Rachel have made a huge mistake in sleeping together, as this adds yet another layer of complication to the investigation of Megan's disappearance. But Scott and Rachel's shared desire for escape, symbolized by their drunken trainspotting, was strong enough to pull them together in spite of all the chaos happening in both their lives.



Anna is highly suspicious of Rachel's actions—and Rachel herself can no longer defend her frequent presence at the Hipwell house now that she and Scott have crossed a serious boundary.

**ANNA: FIVE**

Saturday, August 10, 2013. After a morning of spin class and shopping, Anna returns to Blenheim road to find photographers swarming the Hipwell house. To her great shock, she watches as Rachel emerges from the house. After returning home, Anna urges Tom to figure out what's going on with Rachel—whether she's sleeping with Scott or using him to get closer to Anna, Tom, and Evie. Tom assures Anna that everything is probably fine. Anna, however, feels sick of being told not to worry. She is determined to take matters into her own hands—and call the police so that they can finally deal with Rachel.

Again, Hawkins uses Anna's instinctive distrust of Rachel to cast Rachel's actions in a devious light. Through Rachel's narration, readers see the nuance and confusion behind her actions—but from Anna's point of view, Rachel is a one-dimensional danger who must be dealt with. The truth, Hawkins seems to suggest, is somewhere in the middle.

**RACHEL: THIRTEEN**

Monday, August 12, 2013. Rachel is with Tom in his car, parked at a local lake. Last night, he called and asked if they could meet. Rachel knows that his phone call has something to do with Anna spotting her on Blenheim Road. Now that Rachel is with Tom, she feels especially guilty for having sex with Scott. When Tom asks Rachel about her involvement with Scott, she assures him that they're simply friendly. Tom tells Rachel that he's concerned for her—after all, Scott is a murder suspect. Tom tells Rachel that he still cares for her, and Rachel begins to cry. Tom offers her money, but Rachel insists that she's all right. Tom begs her to promise him that she'll stay away from Scott, and Rachel agrees. She is full of joy—she believes that Tom is actually jealous.

In this passage, as Tom shows Rachel his sensitive side, Rachel begins to believe that there is a part of him that still wants her—or at least a part of him that doesn't want her to be with anyone else. Rachel doesn't realize that Tom is psychologically and emotionally manipulating her, echoing the patterns that seemingly defined their relationship while they were still married to each other.



Tuesday, August 13, 2013. The following night, Rachel has a nightmare: she sees another pile of clothes by the train tracks as she rides into London. She sees “Jess” and “Jason” on the terrace of number 15, chatting happily. Rachel anticipates moving forward, past number 23, where she believes that Tom will be waiting outside to wave to her—but the train won’t start again. Rachel screams in horror as Jason starts violently attacking Jess. The redheaded man approaches Rachel and urges her to calm down—it’s already too late to do anything.

The nightmare bothers Rachel all morning as she rides the **train** into Witney for her appointment with Abdic. Rachel wishes that she could tell him about her dream, but she’s afraid of revealing too much. Instead, she asks him about whether hypnosis can recover memories. Abdic, however, suggests that there are other ways to recall lost memories: talking about them, listening to music, or retracing one’s steps.

Abdic asks if there’s a specific memory Rachel wants to recall. She tells him about a night when she attacked Tom with a golf club; she woke in the morning unable to remember what had happened. Tom had to fill in the blanks for her. Rachel tells Abdic that weeks later, she was looking at the hole she’d allegedly left in the wall when she had a strange flashback of cowering on the floor as *Tom* stood over *her* with the golf club. Rachel says that she wants to uncover more memories like this one because the feelings she recalls—like fear—don’t fit with Tom’s version of what happened.

After therapy, Rachel returns to the underpass at Witney to try to jog her memory. As she spots a woman in a blue trench coat walking farther down the road, she remembers seeing Anna wearing a blue dress and walking hurriedly away from her toward a waiting car—Tom’s car. Rachel realizes that this memory doesn’t make sense. According to Tom, he drove around looking for Rachel after she made a drunken scene on Blenheim Road—but Anna stayed home with Evie. Rachel walks to Blenheim Road and stands across from her old house, wishing she could ask Tom the truth about what happened.

This frightening dream speaks to many of Rachel’s greatest desires and terrors alike: she fears that Scott is violent and untrustworthy—and that there is something deficient within her that causes her to latch onto him so thoughtlessly. Rachel also longs for Tom’s attention and acknowledgement. Furthermore, she is plagued by who the redheaded man could be, and she wishes that she could figure out what role he plays in all of this.



The source of Rachel’s anxiety and fear seems to be coming from deep within her and is seemingly tied to her past. She is determined to uncover the secrets of her own life and figure out which memories she can trust—and which ones she can’t.



As Rachel begins talking about her past with Abdic, it becomes clear that Rachel’s lived experiences don’t line up with the things she’s been told about herself. It seems obvious that Rachel has suffered some kind of abuse—whether physical, emotional, or psychological—at the hands of Tom. Rachel, however, is not fully ready to confront that reality yet.



Rachel continues uncovering memories of things that have happened to her while drunk—yet she feels completely detached from the narratives Tom has given her. Tom’s account of the night Megan disappeared doesn’t match up with Rachel’s memories. If Rachel wants to uncover the truth, she’ll have to confront the inconsistencies in her life—and try to find their roots.



ANNA: SIX

Tuesday, August 13, 2013. As Anna watches Tom get ready for work, she misses the days when she, too, used to go to her job as a real estate agent. She wishes she could go back to work so the two of them could make more money. After Tom leaves for work, Anna stresses herself out making Evie the perfect breakfast—the fussy Evie is in a picky phase. Anna resists the urge to cry. She realizes that it isn't just work she misses: it's the feeling of "being a mistress." She was always turned on by the idea of being the irresistible other woman; she and Tom would often rendezvous at a house Anna was in the process of selling. When Evie smiles at Anna, however, Anna knows that if she did go back to work—to life before motherhood—she'd miss Evie more than she misses her freedom now.

That evening, Tom texts Anna to tell her he's going to be late coming home—he's having drinks with a client. Anna is getting Evie ready for her evening walk when she spies Rachel standing across the street, looking at the house. As soon as the curtains part, Rachel runs off. Anna is full of fury—Tom told her that he met up with Rachel and sorted things out. Anna begins to wonder if there is a part of Tom that likes the fact that Rachel won't leave them alone—or let him go. Anna picks up the phone and calls Detective Riley.

Wednesday, August 14, 2013. Anna and Tom have sleepy morning sex. Tom says that he wants the two of them to take an extravagant vacation to Bali and focus on each other. Anna points out that it's odd Tom thinks they don't have enough money to move—but they have enough money for a lavish holiday. Evie begins crying, and Tom hurriedly goes to get her. Later, as Tom and Anna feed the fussy Evie breakfast, Anna mentions that Rachel was hanging around the house last night. Tom, furious, says there's nothing more he can do. When he saw Rachel the other day, he says, she looked fine. Anna is shocked—she thought that Tom only spoke to Rachel on the phone. Tom admits having lied to Anna to make things easier for himself. He apologizes and embraces Anna. She decides to let him get away with this one thing.

After Tom leaves for work, Anna takes Evie for a walk. As she passes the house where she and Tom conducted their affair, she feels a small thrill. She remembers that when she used to express fears about getting caught together, Tom would always tell her what a good liar he was. As Anna continues waking, she recalls late nights early on in their marriage when she'd wake up and hear Tom on the phone calming Rachel down. She begins to wonder if he's actually having an affair with Rachel.

In this passage, Hawkins shows that even as Anna strains herself to be the perfect mother and to place her child's needs above her own, there is a part of her that misses the independence and excitement of her life before motherhood. Hawkins wants to demonstrate how women often find themselves pushed to the breaking point by societal expectations to be completely selfless as wives and mothers.



Anna continues to see Rachel's presence as a threat to her marriage—but she perceives Rachel this way for the wrong reasons. Anna knows that her relationship with Tom began as an affair, which raises Anna's suspicions of him committing adultery again. Because of her distrust of Tom, Anna wants Rachel as far away from him as possible. Anna, has been conditioned to view other women as threats—when in reality, Tom is a greater threat to her happiness and peace of mind.



In this passage, Anna begins to realize that her husband is not entirely truthful with her—and he hasn't been for a while. Tom defends his secrets and lies as necessary in order to keep the peace—but by insinuating that Anna isn't mature enough to handle the truth or to have a say in their finances, Tom is gaslighting her into thinking less of herself. While Anna spins her wheels trying to be the perfect wife and mother—and to keep her husband from wandering away—Tom does as he pleases.



Even though Anna knows that Tom used to brag about being a great liar earlier on in the relationship, she has trouble believing that he would deceive her. In this passage, she begins to fear—for the first time—that she is not immune to Tom's craftiness.



For the rest of the day, Anna is plagued with thoughts about whether Tom has been lying to her all along. She is afraid that she'll end up just like Rachel if she gives into her doubts—yet she cannot stop herself from grabbing a bottle of wine and Tom's computer and trying to guess his password. She is unable to crack it—and when she hears Tom coming in the door, she stashes the computer and pretends to be busy with other things. When she catches sight of herself in the hall mirror, she sees that her lips are stained wine-red.

What Anna fears most in the world is becoming like Rachel: drunken, desperate, and sad. As Anna confronts the fear that Tom may be lying to her, she begins to see that it is Tom who made Rachel into what she is now.



RACHEL: FOURTEEN

Thursday, August 15, 2013. Rachel is preparing for a job interview that Cathy has set up for her when Scott calls her to talk about what happened between them. Rachel says that they made a mistake. Scott, however, says he wants to talk in person. Rachel is hesitant, but Scott talks her into coming over. Earlier, Rachel read a story in the newspaper about the deceased father of Megan's dead child—his death rules him out as a suspect and brings Scott back to the forefront of the investigation.

Rachel knows that she made a grave mistake in sleeping with Scott—and that if she isn't careful about damage control, that mistake could come back to bite her in a major way. Even as Rachel knows that seeing Scott again is rocking the boat, she finds herself tempted by her desire for human connection.



Rachel arrives Scott's house to find him drunk and in a state of disarray. The house smells terrible. Scott offers Rachel a drink, but she refuses. Scott tells her that the DNA tests done on Megan's fetus have come back: the child was neither Scott's nor Kamal's, meaning that Megan was seeing someone else. Scott angrily asks if Megan confided in Rachel about an affair with an unknown man. When Rachel says that Megan didn't, Scott becomes angry and shoves Rachel into a chair. He yells at Rachel, pointing out that as Megan's good friend, she must have known everything about Megan's private life. When Rachel is silent, Scott reveals that he knows Rachel never even met Megan.

Scott has lured Rachel to his house under false pretenses. He knows she is a liar—and he is not planning on letting her off the hook for her deceptions easily. Scott sees Rachel's actions as exceptionally egregious because she is a woman, and he seemingly expects women to behave in certain ways. While in the most fragile, vulnerable state of his life, Scott let someone new in—and he perceives Rachel's betrayal as an affront to both his grief and to his manhood.



Rachel and Scott begin arguing. Rachel insists she only wanted to help the bereaved Scott by informing him about Kamal, but Scott accuses Rachel of being "insane." He says that Riley asked him if he and Rachel are in a relationship—and that he answered her by saying he has higher "standards" than that. Riley told him that Rachel was "a sad little liar" who didn't know Megan at all. Rachel's phone beeps, and she moves toward her purse. Scott, however, grabs Rachel's bag and dumps out its contents. He opens up her phone and reads a notification about her upcoming appointment with Dr. Abdic. Scott becomes even angrier and more frightened. He advances on Rachel and pushes her up against a wall, squeezing her throat with both hands.

In this passage, as Scott exposes Rachel's lies, he seeks to use words—and, later, actions—to wound her as deeply as he can. He feels there is no excuse for her lie, which made him feel comfortable enough around her to surrender his secrets, his fears, and his intimacy. Now, he wants to punish her for wounding him in a time of great uncertainty and sadness.



Scott accuses Rachel of bringing information about him to Abdic and the authorities. Rachel insists, again, that she wants only to help Scott. She begs him to let her go. Scott releases his grip on Rachel's throat but begins dragging her upstairs by the hair. He shoves her into a room, closes the door, and locks it. Rachel throws up on the carpet. After she finds a smashed picture of Scott and Megan in the corner of the room, she runs to the window, throws it open, and screams for help. Scott opens the door and shows Rachel a notepad he found in her purse: it is full of notes about Scott, Megan, and Abdic. Scott tells Rachel that she's too pathetic for him to waste his time on, and he orders her out of the house. Rachel runs for the front door.

Friday, August 16, 2013. Rachel has barely slept after a drunken, terror-filled night trying to escape memories of her harrowing encounter with Scott. After leaving Scott's house, she left Tom a note in the mailbox of number 23 and called the police to tell them that Scott beat and imprisoned her. The detectives, however, only asked what Rachel was doing at Scott's house. They ordered her to stay away from him, warning her that she was jeopardizing their progress. Now, Rachel showers and dresses: she is going to stop at the station and give an official report before going to her job interview.

That afternoon, after her interview, Rachel is on her way to the train when the redheaded man grabs her arm and apologizes for his behavior on the train the other day. He introduces himself as Andy and invites Rachel for a drink, and she accepts. At the pub, she asks him what happened on that Saturday night at the underpass, when he helped her up off the road. Andy tells her that he found her beneath the underpass, cut up and upset. Andy assumed she'd had a fight with a boyfriend, because a man and a woman were walking away from Rachel toward their car. Even after hearing another person's account of the events of the night—which seem fairly ordinary—Rachel feels unsettled. She doesn't remember seeing Anna with a baby in her arms; she wonders where Evie could have been.

Saturday, August 17, 2013. Rachel calls Tom and asks why he didn't respond to her note. Tom says that he didn't get a note—but that if Rachel left one, it would explain why Anna has been mad at him. Tom angrily asks Rachel what she wants. Rachel asks him for details about their encounter on the night of Megan's disappearance—and whether Anna was with him when he came out looking for her in the car. Tom says that she wasn't—and that he regrets wasting his time trying to help the “filthy, stinking drunk,” Rachel. He tells her to stop calling, stop visiting, and stop leaving notes; then, he hangs up abruptly.

Rachel cannot explain to Scott what her motivations were in continuing to see him and help him. Not even she is certain of what her ultimate aims were in getting close to Scott, other than to remind herself of the “golden” ideal of love that she lost when Megan disappeared. Scott's fury and violence in this passage seem to suggest to Rachel that Scott must have been responsible for Megan's death—but there is, of course, more to human behavior than meets the eye.



This passage demonstrates how society often blames women for putting themselves in dangerous situations. The men who are actually responsible for causing them harm, however, aren't held accountable. This shows the extent to which women tend to be manipulated and gaslighted—not just by men whom they know personally, but by society as a whole.



As Rachel finally has a conversation with the redheaded man, she finds herself perturbed by Andy's inability to give her much more information than she already has. Rachel is desperate to figure out what happened on the night Megan went missing—but it's becoming clear that the truth about what happened isn't necessarily the truth she wants to hear.



Rachel continues to beg Tom to help her understand the truth of what happened on the night Megan disappeared. But Tom becomes more and more defensive—eventually turning the tables on Rachel and insisting that her inability to remember what happened is a worse offense than anything else that took place that night. Tom is still gaslighting and emotionally abusing Rachel.



Sunday, August 18, 2013. Rachel sits at home in front of the TV, feeling lonely and stupid for believing that either Tom or Scott had feelings for her. She is determined, however, not to drink in an attempt to numb the pain she feels—she wants to experience everything. As Tom’s words run through her head, however, she recalls one time when she woke up hungover and in pain, covered in blood. Tom showed her the bruises she’d inflicted upon him—though Rachel swore she never would have hit him, Tom insisted she did. After a while, Rachel says, she learned to just apologize whenever she woke up uncertain of what happened the night before. She is determined to remain strong and sober and to avoid something like that happening again.

As Rachel falls asleep to the sound of the TV, she experiences yet another sudden flashback—she remembers being in the underpass and seeing Tom come toward her. He slapped her across the mouth, she remembers—and then he punched her with his keys still in his hand, bringing the serrated metal down on her head.

ANNA: SEVEN

Saturday, August 17, 2013. Anna is crying—she and Tom have just had yet another fight about Rachel. Anna believes there’s something going on between Tom and Rachel—and she is furious at the idea that Tom would ever pick Rachel over her. Anna recalls hiding the note that Rachel left for Tom—and how when Tom found out that Anna had kept it from him, he accused her of acting like Rachel. The comment, Anna, says, made her burst into tears. Rather than comforting her, Tom announced that he was going to the gym.

Now, Anna cries and drinks as she works to crack Tom’s laptop password. Once she figures it out, she hunts through his emails, but she finds no incriminating messages. Feeling guilty, she decides to change the sheets and make the bedroom nice for Tom so that when he comes home, they can have sex. As Anna readies the bed, however, she feels something beneath the frame: Tom’s gym bag. She thinks it’s odd that he wouldn’t have come back for it if he forgot it—and she starts to believe all over again that he is out having an affair with Rachel.

Rachel begins to see that drinking is not a defense mechanism—in fact, it makes her more vulnerable. Rachel is starting to piece together disparate memories and hazy information about her past, and she now sees alcohol as a liability she can’t afford. Rachel is in the midst of a dangerous and precarious situation, and she must keep a level head if she plans on figuring out the truth and extricating herself from the web she’s gotten herself entangled within.



Rachel’s flashback in this passage seems to confirm that no matter what Tom says about what happened the night Megan disappeared, he was present—and he was violent toward Rachel.



Anna struggles to keep up with the web of secrets and lies that she’s spinning in order to prevent Tom’s attentions from wandering—but as she does so, she finds herself pushing him further away. This passage shows how difficult it is for women to thrive in a society which seeks to punish them both for lying and for seeking the truth in uncomfortable or dangerous situations.



As Anna stumbles upon a cache of Tom’s secret things, she fears that Tom is having an affair; her mind cannot even allow for the possibility that Tom is embroiled in something even worse than infidelity. Anna has been conditioned to examine her own transgressions and mistakes much more carefully than she considers those of her husband.



Anna goes through the bag and discovers a cell phone she's never seen before. The phone is dead, so Anna hurries downstairs to find a charger for it. When the phone finally turns on, Anna finds several messages from an unknown number discussing meeting times. The meetings, Anna finds, go back almost a year—to when Evie was just months old. Anna has been keeping a written log of Rachel's calls and visits to the house. She checks it against the messages and finds that many dates don't line up. Anna returns the phone to the bag and shoves it back under the bed. She drinks some wine while she waits for Tom to come home. When he arrives, he is drunk. He says he decided to go the pub. He asks what Anna has been up to. She kisses him to silence his questions.

Anna realizes that she has been deceived—but because the messages on the phone don't line up with Rachel's calls and visit, she is not able to blame everything (as she usually does) on Rachel's presence. Anna must confront that something different—and more sinister—might be taking place. Tom's actions are made even more egregious by the fact that he is a father. He should be more giving, more responsible, and more grounded than he is—yet the characters of the novel don't seem to hold fathers to the same standards as mothers.



Sunday, August 18, 2013. Anna wakes in the early morning darkness. She retrieves the phone and brings it downstairs with her, then takes it outside to investigate its contents further. There are no voicemails on the phone—but when Anna listens to the outgoing greeting, she is shocked and terrified as she realizes that she recognizes the female voice on the voicemail box. She is startled as a light upstairs flicks on.

Here, Anna finally solves the mystery of who Tom has been communicating with. While Hawkins purposefully ends the chapter on a cliffhanger to maintain suspense, it is almost certain that Anna has pinned Megan as the owner of the mysterious cell phone.



RACHEL: FIFTEEN

Sunday, August 18, 2013. After remembering the violence in the underpass, Rachel has some kind of breakthrough. She is able to reflect on memories she's had while drunk—memories Tom always told her weren't true—and reevaluate them. Though Rachel is exhilarated and vindicated by the realization that Tom has been gaslighting her for years, she is unsure of what to do with this realization. She calls Tom's house but then hangs up. She calls Riley's office and hangs up again. Rachel is sure that no one will believe her. She hurries to the **train** and, as she stands on the platform waiting, continues to go over the memory of that fateful Saturday night. She has yet another revelation just before the train pulls in: the woman in the blue dress she saw wasn't Anna, but Megan.

As Rachel experiences a breakthrough, she finds herself feeling free and vindicated. She can at last perceive and confront the years of abuse and gaslighting she suffered at Tom's hands—and as more and more memories flood back to her, she begins to accept the terrible truth that Tom, who portrayed himself as the victim all along, may in fact be Megan's murderer.



ANNA: EIGHT

Anna hurls the cell phone over the fence, down toward the **train** tracks, and heads back up to the house. She meets Tom at the bottom of the stairs. He asks what's going on, and she replies that she thought she heard someone outside. Tom says that the phone rang and woke him up; he wants Anna to come back to bed with him. Anna says she wants to get up and have coffee instead. Tom, however, puts his hand on the back of Anna's neck and says he won't take no for an answer.

Anna throwing the phone toward the train symbolizes her desire to escape from the information she's just learned. Anna cannot process the fact that Tom was having an affair with Megan—a woman who is now dead. Tom's actions toward Anna now appear in a new, threatening light: he is not the man she thought he was.



RACHEL: SIXTEEN

Sunday, August 18, 2013. Rachel arrives at number 23 and rings the doorbell. She feels hysterical and uncertain of what she's doing. When no one answers the door, Rachel walks around the back of the house and hops over the fence. Anna and Evie are together in the backyard—but Anna hardly even looks surprised to see Rachel standing before her. Anna pulls Evie onto her lap. Rachel asks where Tom is, and Anna replies that he's out with his army buddies. Rachel says they need to leave the house right away, but Anna simply laughs.

Rachel returns to number 23—but this time, she's not looking for Tom. She knows that given what she's realized, it is her duty to share the truth with Anna—it is the only thing that stands to protect Anna and Evie from Tom's lies and abuse.

**ANNA: NINE**

Sunday, August 18, 2013. Anna tells Rachel that she's not going anywhere with her. When Rachel asks when Tom will be back, Anna says she doesn't know. What she does know is that Tom has taken his gym bag with him—and that he'll likely soon discover the phone is missing from it. Rachel asks Anna if she's ever met any of Tom's army friends. She says she hasn't—but that they're part of "another life" of Tom's.

Rachel has come here to help Anna see the things that she herself has only very recently come to understand. Rachel knows it will be hard to convince Anna that Tom isn't the man she thought he was, as Tom seems to have manipulated Anna into accepting that he has "another life" outside of their family. But Rachel also knows that her, Anna's, and Evie's lives all hanging in the balance of what happens next.



Anna asks what Rachel is doing here, but Rachel that says Anna knows full well that something is going on. Rachel asks if Anna has ever met Tom's parents. Anna says that they stopped talking to him when he divorced Rachel. Rachel shakes her head and says that isn't true—she never met Tom's parents, either. And if she never met them, they wouldn't care if he left her. Anna says that she doesn't believe Rachel—but a darkness begins to unfold in her mind.

Rachel is trying to expose the lies that Anna already knows are present—but Anna is resistant to having her picture-perfect marriage ripped apart. She has been so thoroughly gaslit and manipulated that it is nearly impossible for her to acknowledge Tom's faults.



Rachel asks if Anna knows about Megan. Anna says that she knows Tom and Megan were having an affair—and that she doesn't really care, because Megan is gone. Rachel suggests that Tom killed Megan, but Anna just hurries Evie inside to feed her a snack. Rachel stays outside, watching the **trains** go by. Soon, Anna rejoins her. The two of them begin going over the many lies Tom has told, small and large, over the years. Rachel asks Anna if she thinks that Megan's baby was Tom's. Anna doesn't know what Rachel is talking about. Rachel tells Anna that Megan was pregnant when she died. Anna looks down at Evie, feeling a crushing sadness for Evie's lost brother or sister. She begins to cry.

As Rachel begins exposing to Anna the full truth of what is going on, Anna slowly opens up to the realization that she's married to someone who has done terrible things—not just to her, but to other women. Hawkins uses Anna and Rachel's connection in this scene to show how painful, cathartic, and counterintuitive it can feel for women to resist what society demands of them and stand up firmly for what's best for them as individuals.



Rachel gently suggests that Anna pack some things for herself and Evie and come stay with her. Anna says staunchly that she's not leaving Tom over something as silly as an affair. Rachel says Anna must know there's more to the picture. She tells Anna that she saw Tom with Megan the night of Megan's disappearance. Anna says that she always knew that Tom was attracted to Megan—but she refuses to believe that he could have murdered her. She tells Rachel that she cannot accept that they could both love a man who would do such a thing. Rachel doesn't respond. Her face has gone white and she is looking over Anna's shoulder. When Anna turns around, she sees that Tom is at the window.

Rachel is on the verge of getting Anna to understand the magnitude of Tom's actions. But when Tom returns to the house, his presence—and the male societal gaze he represents—threatens the newfound autonomy that both Rachel and Anna are seeking.



MEGAN: EIGHT

Friday, July 12, 2013. Megan is pregnant. Though she believed that if she ever got pregnant again she'd want to get rid of the child, she is shocked to find that she wants to keep this baby and love it. She is scared of the baby, but she wants it all the same—even though she's frightened that Scott will guess that the child isn't his. Megan is standing in the kitchen with Kamal, the only person she's told about the pregnancy. She confides that she is afraid something will go wrong again and that she'll end up on her own. Kamal, however, insists that Megan is strong enough to handle whatever comes her way.

All along, Megan has felt resistant to motherhood because of her mistakes with Libby. This passage makes clear, however, that Megan has wanted to be a mother more than anything since losing Libby—she's just been too afraid to admit her deepest desire to herself, for fear of ruining everything again.



Megan goes outside to the terrace, and Kamal brings her a coffee and kisses her as a **train** rumbles up to the signal. Megan asks if they can run away together, but Kamal laughs and says that Megan doesn't need him—she and her baby will be fine with or without Scott, whatever Megan decides to do.

This is the moment that Rachel spied from the train at the beginning of the novel. Rachel, of course, could not understand the nuance of what she was seeing when she witnessed Megan kissing Kamal. This moment, in which the book comes full circle, demonstrates the ways secrets and lies can spin out of control because of a simple misunderstanding or misinterpretation.



Saturday, July 13, 2013. Megan knows that she must tell Scott the truth. This time, she thinks, she wants to do everything right. When she does so, however, Scott reacts violently, pushing her against the wall and crushing her throat with his forearm. As Megan begins to cry, Scott lets her go. Megan can see shame and pain on his face. He begins apologizing profusely. Megan springs into action and packs a bag to leave. Scott sobs at the door, begging Megan to forgive him. Instead, Megan pulls out an old mobile phone and switches it on, determined to get in touch with Tom, the father of her child. She sends him a text—the first communication she's had with him since April. Several minutes go by without an answer. Megan leaves a voicemail threatening to come over if he doesn't call her.

Megan knows that telling Scott about her betrayal will be hard—but she also knows that if he can't love her alongside her flaws, she needs to be on her own. When Scott reacts cruelly rather than empathetically, Megan feels betrayed and lonely. She reaches out to Tom out of desperation, not realizing how profound the consequences could be for her and her unborn child.



Megan pushes her way out of the bedroom and hurries downstairs to the front door. Scott begs Megan to stay, but she warns him that if he tries to follow her, she will never come home. Megan walks down to number 23, but at the front door, she loses her nerve. She walks to a nearby park and sends a text to Tom to tell him that she is waiting for him. She feels deeply depressed: she thought telling the truth would be the right thing to do, but now she has done irreparable damage to her marriage.

Feeling restless, Megan gets up and walks toward the Witney station. As she approaches the underpass, she sees Tom emerging from it. He has rage on his face, but he calls out for Megan. He urges her to come toward his car—he tells her they can't talk here. As Megan gets into the car and glances over her shoulder, she senses someone watching her from the dark underpass.

RACHEL: SEVENTEEN

Sunday, August 18, 2013. Rachel watches Anna hurry into the house and embrace Tom, with Evie between them. As they break apart, Tom smiles and asks if Anna and Rachel are sitting around “gossiping.” When Rachel doesn't laugh, Tom asks if she's drunk. Rachel pulls out her phone and tells Tom that she saw him with Megan the evening Megan went missing—and that she remembers him hitting Rachel herself. Tom turns to Anna, grasps her arm, and tells her not to believe Rachel. He urges Anna to go upstairs so that he can make sure Rachel never bothers them again.

Rachel calls out to Anna and begs her to see that Tom is lying. She reminds Anna that Tom was sleeping with Megan. Tom insists that there was nothing between him and Megan, but Anna says that she found Megan's phone—she knows everything. Evie begins to cry. Tom takes her from Anna's arms and rocks her. Tom explains that he started seeing Megan because Anna was tired and consumed with motherhood, whereas Megan was “available.” Anna seems hurt. Tom insists he's giving her what she wants: the truth.

Tom says that it is exasperating to put up with women like Rachel and Anna. He blames Rachel for growing depressed, heavy, and slovenly, and driving him away—then turns to Anna and insists that he just wanted to have some fun with Megan. Anna is furious that Tom would sleep with someone who was looking after their child. She demands that Tom give Evie back to her. Tom, however, continues rocking and hushing Evie. Anna begins screaming.

Megan is lost, confused, and alone. Kamal told her that he believed she was strong enough to take care of herself and her child no matter what, but Megan doesn't seem to believe this about herself. Society has convinced her that she needs the attention, validation, and permission of men, which is why she takes the risk of telling Scott and Tom the truth.



This passage makes clear that the memory Rachel has of seeing a man and women in the underpass is correct: she saw Megan getting into Tom's car. This confirms that Tom was almost certainly the last person to see Megan alive—and given his track record of violence, he was likely her killer.



The confrontation in this passage comes down to a battle of words: Anna has to decide whether to believe Tom or Rachel. Whereas Tom is clearly a prolific liar, Rachel is also untrustworthy to Anna because Tom's abuse has made Rachel drink to excess and behave erratically. Believing Rachel means that Anna must give up her picture-perfect life—but believing Tom means pushing aside the evidence of all his misdeeds.



Tom is such a prolific liar that he's willing to lie about something that all three of them know to be true. Having created a vast web of secrets and lies in order to control the women around him, Tom believes that he can simply tell more lies to get out of his earlier ones—but that strategy is put to the test here, as Rachel and Anna confront him. Tom doesn't know how to tell the truth—only how to weaponize it.



This passage demonstrates how Tom sees women as the source of all his problems. He can't accept responsibility for anything he does, instead blaming even the most heinous acts on the provocations of the women he's abused. He tries to convince the women in his life that they are the source of his problems—and often, he succeeds.



Rachel drags Anna outside and begs her to calm down and distract Tom while she herself calls the police. Anna agrees. Rachel takes out her phone and struggles to unlock the keypad with shaky hands. By the time she gets the number dialed, Tom is behind her. He kicks her, sending her to the ground and taking her phone while she struggles to regain her breath. Tom takes Rachel by the arm and leads her inside. Rachel is unsure whether Anna betrayed her. Anna begins nonchalantly making lunch for Evie. Tom places his hand on Rachel's neck and asks her what he should do with her.

The mystery Hawkins creates in this passage heightens the reader's suspense by showing that Anna is perhaps as untrustworthy as Tom is. After all, she stands by idly as Tom attacks Rachel. Rachel now realizes that she can't truly rely on anyone but herself to get out of this mess and save herself from Tom's clutches once and for all.



MEGAN: NINE

Saturday, July 13, 2013. As Tom drives Megan to the woods, she notices that he has blood on his hand. He blames the injury on “problems with the ex.” As the two pull into the parking lot at the trailhead and begin walking into the forest, Tom asks what’s going on. Megan doesn’t answer right away. Tom asks if she wants to have sex. Megan tells him that she’s pregnant—and that it’s possible, even probable, that the child is his. Tom urges her to have an abortion, reminding her she’s not “motherhood material.” He begins walking back to the car.

Tom attempts to gaslight Megan into believing that she isn't “motherhood material.” Megan, however, has been on a journey of forgiveness and self-respect—and she is not about to let him psychologically torment her any longer. She is learning to stand up for herself—but this behavior makes her a danger to Tom, as it challenges the web of lies he's constructed.



Megan, incensed, follows Tom and begins hitting him and screaming insults at him. She tells him that she’s not going away—she’s going to make in pay. Tom turns around and comes toward Megan with something in his hand. Suddenly, Megan is on the ground. She believes she must have slipped; her head feels thick, and her mouth is full of blood. She can hear magpies cawing and someone saying, over and over again, “Now look what you made me do.”

Even as Tom murders Megan in cold blood, he is unable to take responsibility for his actions. Tom's hatred of women—and his belief that the women in his life make him do terrible things—reflects society's treatment of women more broadly. Much like how society overlooks or shames women like Rachel, who are clearly suffering, women like Megan tend to be blamed for their own issues without any consideration for the structural, systemic problems they face.



RACHEL: EIGHTEEN

Sunday, August 18, 2013. Rachel, Tom, and Anna sit in the living room of number 23. Tom begins talking to Rachel, taunting her by unspooling memories of their relationship. When Evie begins to cry, Anna picks her up to change her. Tom insists that Anna change the baby in the room. Rachel asks why Tom killed Megan, and Tom responds that Megan was a lot like Rachel—she couldn't let go of things. Tom reminds Rachel of the night Megan disappeared—under the underpass, he says, Rachel tried to kiss him and begged him to take her back.

Though Tom has managed to exert complete control over Rachel and Anna, this passage makes it clear that he is afraid of what the women in his life could potentially do to him. Tom relies on a very careful calibration of psychological manipulation to maintain the control he has—and he seems to recognize that that is falling apart.



Tom turns to Anna and tells her that he never meant to kill Megan—but when she started talking about making him pay for her baby, he needed her to stop, so he began hitting her with a rock. After she was dead, he says, he drove her further into the woods, dug a grave, and buried her. He was counting on the police pinning the murder on Scott. Tom stands, walks over to Anna, and kisses her on the head. He picks Evie up from her lap and cuddles her.

Rachel seizes the moment to run for the door—but halfway there, she feels a horrible pain as Tom hits her in the head and drags her by her hair back to the living room. As Rachel begins losing consciousness, she hears Tom order Anna upstairs. He says he doesn't want things to get nasty.

Tom is confident enough in the psychological hold he's attained over both Rachel and Anna to nonchalantly confess to murder in front of them. Tom believes that he has successfully gaslit both women into siding with him no matter what—but he has perhaps overestimated his hold on the situation.



The physical fight with Tom mirrors the ideological fight Rachel and Anna are going through. Tom continues ordering the women around and dragging them around the house, providing a physical manifestation of the psychological and emotional work both women are doing to extricate themselves from his clutches.



ANNA: TEN

Sunday, August 18, 2013. Upstairs, Anna puts Evie down and tries to ignore the sounds of Tom beating Rachel. She tries to remind herself that what she wants, after all, is Rachel gone from their lives. After a few moments, Anna realizes that she can't let Tom hurt Rachel anymore—she must do the right thing. She leaves Evie upstairs and returns to the kitchen, where Tom is at the table drinking a beer. Rachel is unconscious but alive on the floor. Anna sits with Tom. He promises her that they'll move away when this is all over, and then he orders her back upstairs. Anna takes the portable phone from the hallway and sits at the bottom of the stairs, listening and waiting for the right moment. She hears Rachel stir and begin to cry.

Anna is faced with a tremendous and terrible choice here. She knows that Tom is responsible for Megan's murder—and that he has ruined Rachel's life as well. She must decide whether she is going to let Tom continue to jeopardize her and Evie's safety because maintaining her marriage holds up the illusion of a perfect life—or whether she is going to resist Tom and stand up for herself, her daughter, and even Rachel.



RACHEL: NINETEEN

Sunday, August 18, 2013. Rachel awakens to the sound of rain and thunder. Her head throbs as she raises it to look at Tom, who is sitting at the table, drinking a beer. He asks her, once again, what he should do with her. Rachel is determined to get herself out of this situation—she knows now that she can't rely on Anna. Tom tells Rachel that she's brought this upon herself, and he suggests that she's responsible for Megan's murder, since she riled him up before he met Megan that night. But Rachel recognizes that Tom is bending the truth and manipulating her like he always does.

Rachel feels that she is utterly alone against Anna and Tom—but as Tom tries to isolate Rachel further by preying upon her weakness and low self-esteem, Rachel recognizes what is happening and finds the strength within to resist it. Rachel has spent a long time letting Tom blame her for his own cruelties—now, she is stronger than his lies.



Tom pulls Rachel to her feet. She promises that she still loves him—and that because of that, she won't tell anyone about what he's done. Tom, however, doesn't believe her. He calls her a kicked dog, and then he kisses her. As he pushes her against the counter, Rachel slips her hand into a drawer. Tom pulls away. Rachel feels what she has been looking for in the drawer. She lunges forward, throwing Tom off balance and stomping on his foot as hard as she can. She pulls his hair and drives her knee into his head, then flees out the back door.

Rachel runs for the fence separating the yard from the **train** tracks, but she slips and falls. Tom follows her and throws his weight on her. She manages to wriggle away and call out for help—but a train is approaching, and she knows that no one will hear her. As Tom approaches her once again, Rachel draws back and plunges the item she pulled from the kitchen drawer—a corkscrew—into his neck. Tom falls to the ground. Rachel watches as the train goes by, ferrying passengers safely home.

Tuesday, September 10, 2013. As Rachel rides the **train** into London, she notices that she's not the only one looking at number 15 and number 23 when the train stops at the signal any longer. Other passengers point at the now-empty homes and whisper about what happened in them. Rachel tries not to think about the night of her encounter with Tom—but she can't help it.

Rachel recalls how Anna called the ambulance that night—it arrived too late to save Tom. The police and detectives Gaskill and Riley showed up, and Anna answered all their initial questions as Rachel sat in shock on the couch. Anna vouched that Rachel had acted in self-defense when Tom went for her with the corkscrew. The authorities took Anna and Rachel to the police station and questioned them separately; afterwards, they let both women leave.

In the wake of Tom's death, Rachel and Anna have learned that Tom was never in the army at all. He cut ties with his parents after he stole money from them and lost it. Tom, both women now understand, lied compulsively, all the time. Rachel now feels that she never knew Tom at all.

In this passage, Rachel keeps a cool head and uses Tom's own arrogance against him in order to free herself from his clutches. Rachel knows that Tom uses not just physical but psychological manipulation to keep the women around him down—but she is not falling for his psychotic mind games any longer.



As Rachel stabs the corkscrew into Tom's neck, she defeats him at last and ends his reign of terror over her and Anna. The use of a corkscrew—an item so closely associated with alcohol—to kill Tom represents Rachel's triumph not over just the man who subjugated her for so long, but over her alcohol dependency. Rachel takes back her life in one decisive moment.



Rachel is not the only one who's been impacted by the terrible things that happened on Blenheim Road any longer. She isn't isolated in her pain or in a web of secrets and lies: everything is, at last, out in the open.



Rachel feared that Anna would turn against her at every point in their climactic and violent final encounter with Tom—she knows how insidiously society pits women against one another. In the end, though, Anna chose the truth over ignorance and decided to stand with Rachel in solidarity against a man who betrayed them both.



Tom deceived everyone around him, and he got away with it for a long time. Now that Rachel and Anna both know the truth, they must confront how secrets and lies have shaped their lives—and how they will stop the vicious cycle of deception that has underpinned their lives.



Rachel's **train** ride takes her from London to a coastal town. Tomorrow, she plans to ride farther north, perhaps all the way to Scotland. She isn't sure where she's going, but with the help of a loan from Rachel's mother, she feels free to figure out where she wants to be. She drives out to Holkham, Megan's hometown, and visits the place where Megan and Libby are buried. At the gravesite, she thinks about Scott and worries that he will never find peace. She wrote him an email a while ago to apologize for her lies—but she has not heard back. Rachel hasn't had a drink in exactly three weeks. Back in town, she takes a walk around the harbor and down to the dark, chilly beach. Something there frightens her, so she hurries back to her hotel room.

Safe inside, Rachel recalls one more detail about the night of Tom's death. After she pushed the corkscrew into his neck, Anna ran out to the garden, fell to her knees, and put her hand to Tom's throat. Rather than trying to stop the bleeding, however, Anna twisted the corkscrew further into his neck to make sure that he would die. Rachel has not seen Anna since that night—but she feels that they are now tied together forever. As Rachel turns off the light and gets to bed, she anticipates a restless night, yet she knows she must at least try to fall asleep. She has to get up early in the morning—she has a **train** to catch.

Now, as Rachel rides the train north, she is not escaping from her life but instead investing more deeply in it. She wants to understand what has happened to her and reckon with it fully—she's no longer denying or numbing herself to her traumas. Instead, she's finding ways to face them head-on—even when they still frighten her. In visiting Megan's graveside, she symbolically begins to forgive herself for her own perceived failures as a woman by empathizing with Megan's struggles with womanhood and motherhood as well.



In the novel's final lines, Hawkins reveals Anna and Rachel's triumphant collective defeat of Tom and all that he represents. Rachel remains drawn to trains and the potential for escape they represent—but now, she is not escaping to drown out the past but rather to invest in her own future.





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